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# Recent Critiques and Defenses of Ethical Intuitionism

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

RECENT CRITIQUES AND DEFENSES OF ETHICAL INTUITIONISM

By

Noel Alphonse

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty  
of the University of Miami  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

May 2014

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Recent Critiques and Defenses of Ethical Intuitionism

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The theory of moral intuition advanced and defended here is based on the largely unexplored possibility of combining: a) the idea that moral intuitions are justified on the basis of distinctive non-doxastic seemings (i.e., perceptualism) and b) the claim that a non-doxastic state also makes you aware of facts that are accessible in other ways through empirical observation and theorizing. Thus, the perceptualist is able to point to the phenomenology of intuition experience as important not along epistemic dimensions, but which have significant explanatory advantages over competing skeptical and non-skeptical approaches to moral knowledge and justification.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Preliminaries and the Field of Meta-Ethics**

My objectives in this chapter are threefold. In the first, largely exegetical section, I locate the present inquiry within the broader field of meta-ethics. Next, I develop a taxonomy of meta-ethical theories in the second section. While the taxonomy of ethical theories presented in this chapter is not intended to be exhaustive, my primary objective is to point to some fundamental differences between the account of moral knowledge I develop later and competing approaches in moral epistemology. Third, and finally, I present the initial outlines of the theory of moral knowledge I will articulate and defend in the closing chapters of this work and present an overview of some of the key arguments I will present in each chapter. I now turn to locating the account of moral knowledge I develop here within the broader field of meta-ethics.

#### **1.1. Levels of Ethical Thinking**

It is an indisputable fact about our moral experience that we make judgments of right and wrong. We also judge things to be morally good or bad. The following scenario demonstrates the character of our moral judgments. Imagine that you are strolling across a beach. As you continue to walk, you notice a small black shape lying on the sand. As you move closer you become aware that you are looking at a sea bird covered in oil. A recent oil spill by a multi-national conglomerate has ruined the natural environs in which the creature once thrived. The bird has clearly suffered an agonizing death in a futile struggle to escape the viscous substance.

In considering the preceding scenario, we might wonder whether it is morally permissible to allow companies to drill for oil in areas where there is potential to harm sentient beings. We might also be interested in the question of whether corporations should be held morally responsible for the damage they cause to the environment in the pursuit of profit. Broadly conceived, these types of questions belong to the field of *applied ethics*. Questions related to what sorts of actions to perform in specific cases, however, do not exhaust to the totality of our ethical thought.

The field of *applied ethics* is concerned with the application of ethical theory to a specific set of issues. However, we might also inquire into what types of normative theories offer guidance in categorizing types of action as good, bad, right or wrong. For example, when considering performing a given action we might claim that an action of this sort is wrong if it does not lead to the greatest good for the greatest number. Or we might offer another account that does not consider the consequences of our actions. We might claim that our action is justified based upon its conformity to the dictates of reason or whether a given action falls under a universally binding set of moral imperatives. We thus might hold that it is only the nature of the action itself that determines the rightness or wrongness of actions quite apart from the consequences. When we turn to determining the correct normative framework that should guide our moral judgments, we are operating at the level of *normative theory*. The focal point for this dissertation, however, is another aspect of ethical inquiry that we should now consider. When surveying the field of ethics there are also questions which center on the *ultimate* nature and scope of our evaluative judgments. If confronted with the type of suffering described at the beginning of this section it seems that we do not need to infer from observation that the

painful death of the seagull is bad. We seem to intuit *directly* that such suffering is intrinsically bad. Importantly, it also seems that when we say things like ‘causing unnecessary suffering is wrong’, we might think—at least pre-reflectively—that these judgments apply to a set of belief-independent facts. We might also believe that “causing unnecessary suffering is wrong” and also non-inferentially believe that the scenario described above is an instance of moral wrongness. Yet, upon further reflection we might wonder whether there is such a property as objective moral wrongness. In examining the moral judgments we make every day we might come to see our moral judgments as driven purely by subjective impulses. We might think that there is a fundamental difference between claiming that “molecules are the cause of Brownian motion” and “causing unnecessary suffering is wrong”. We might also think that the difference between the two preceding claims might be found in the nature of moral properties. Pursuing our investigation further, we might argue that moral properties do not have a causal role to play in our moral judgments while other sorts of properties or facts can indeed be implicated in a causal chain from observation to judgments. It is the pursuit of these *ultimate* questions about the nature of moral properties and moral knowledge that leads us to another level of ethical inquiry. When we reason about the ultimate semantic, metaphysical or epistemic foundations of our ethical theory, we are pursuing a set of questions that are distinct from the types of questions that are addressed within the confines of our normative theory. *Meta-ethics*, or the investigation into the foundations of normative theory, is the highest, or most general investigation into the nature of ethics. As evinced above, the field of meta-ethics also encompasses a broad set of questions about how we can *know* a moral claim to be true.

Of course, the preceding overview of the levels of ethical thinking is not intended as a full accounting of other deep and interesting questions regarding the relationship between moral motivation and moral facts, whether moral facts are reason giving and other lines of inquiry which are beyond the scope of this work. Rather, my sole purpose here has been to locate the present inquiry within the field of meta-ethics. Accordingly, I will first identify some broad lines of division amongst competing theories of moral judgment in order to better locate the intuitionistic theory I defend here within the broader field of meta-ethics.

## **1.2 A Partial Taxonomy of Meta-Ethical Theories**

While not intended to be exhaustive, the following taxonomy evinces some of the key semantic, metaphysical and epistemological commitments of recent theories of moral judgment. We can begin to taxonomize some of the key views discussed in this section via the following definitions:

### **A Partial Taxonomy of Meta-ethical Positions**

1. Cognitivism= the view that moral judgments are truth evaluable.
2. Realism= the view that true moral judgments are made true by facts that obtain independently of our beliefs.
3. Naturalism = the view that true moral judgments are made true by the same facts that are truth makers for true non-moral, non-normative judgments.
4. Inferentialism= the view that justified moral judgments are always justified in part on the basis of other justified beliefs.
5. Doxasticism=The view that moral judgments are not justified by more basic non-doxastic mental states.

With the preceding definitions before us we are now better positioned to identify some of the core commitments of each of the theories of moral judgment I will critique and defend in this dissertation. One of the key points of divergence or commonality among meta-ethical theories centers on the question of whether moral judgments are apt for evaluation in terms of truth or falsity. For example, we might ask "what do we mean when we say that an action is morally wrong?" or we might ask "is it true that murder is wrong?" Questions of semantics, or the investigation into the meaning of our moral terms is a key area of meta-ethical investigation. *Cognitivist* theories in meta-ethics rest on the claim that moral judgments *are truth evaluable*.

### **1.3 Cognitivist Theories of Moral Judgment**

The cognitivist holds the semantic thesis that it is part of the meaning of moral terms that they map on to facts, states of affairs or relations that are constitutively independent of our moral theorizing. While there are many competing theories of truth-evaluability we can broadly identify the cognitivist as holding that moral judgments and their doxastic counterparts are apt for evaluation in terms of truth and falsity. Cornell Moral Realism, for example, is one recent account of moral judgment that is cognitivist in orientation. The Cornell Moral Realist maintains that when we judge "causing unnecessary suffering is wrong" we are doing much more than merely expressing an attitude or sentiment regarding the subject of our moral evaluation. Rather, the cognitivist in ethics holds that much like the claim "there is a proton in the cloud chamber" the truth makers for such a claim are facts that hold independently of our attitudes and beliefs. This brings to the fore another key aspect of recent theories of moral judgment. Moral realists of various stripes

argue that moral facts and properties have explanatory relevance beyond our subjective beliefs. We can broadly characterize a commitment to belief-independence in the moral domain as the idea that there are moral properties, relations and states of affairs whose existence does not depend upon our moral beliefs or theorizing.

#### **1.4 Belief-Independence and Moral Judgment**

In this dissertation, the claim that moral properties or facts are independent of our moral beliefs will play a key role in assessing debates over the explanatory power of moral properties. Specifically, I will critically assess the claims made by strains of moral realism (i.e., Cornell Moral Realism) which hold that the best evidence we have for thinking that belief-independent moral facts and properties exist is via observation and inference. The Cornell Moral Realist holds that we can conceive of moral properties along the lines of other properties or facts in the special sciences. To see what the Cornell theorist has in mind, consider that we are able to know that the claim “the Pax-6 is the master control gene for eye development” is true through detecting (as mediated by scientific instrumentation) the characteristic effects of the Pax-6 gene in regulating eye development across a range of organisms.

In the same way, the Cornell Moral Realist (CMR) holds that the claim that a given society is unjust will have explanatory power across a range of contexts. This is so because just as an explanation of the development of eyes in organisms on the basis of concepts which do not invoke genes would leave out certain regularities that are explanatorily useful (e.g. transmission of phenotypes), in much the same way an attempt to explain a set of moral judgments (e.g., the injustice of a given society) *without*

reference to belief-independent moral properties will also leave out patterns in nature which are explanatorily useful. The preceding brief overview of the Cornell Moral Realist's account of belief-independence brings to the fore another central feature of contemporary meta-ethical theories. Some recent theories in meta-ethics hold that the best overall account of moral judgment should adhere to a naturalistic worldview.

### **1.5 Ethical Naturalism**

Broadly construed, naturalists wish to countenance only those entities, properties or relations that figure in an overall best scientific theory of the world. Some philosophers maintain that an endorsement of ethical naturalism requires a commitment to the existence of belief-independent moral facts. For example, the scientific realism advanced by the CMR theorist is based on the claim that patterns of observation and inference provide evidence of a moral reality which exists independently of our moral beliefs and attitudes. However, naturalists who reject moral realism, such as Gilbert Harman (1977) and W.V.O. Quine (1981), contend that no reference to objective moral facts is required to explain moral judgment. These skeptical views regarding the explanatory power of moral facts fall under the banner of *explanationist skepticism*. The explanationist skeptic rejects the CMR theorist's account of moral judgments and argues that the judgment that an act is morally reprehensible (e.g., the burning of a cat for fun) will depend solely on our holding of a moral principle that we implicitly apply to our observations.

Accordingly, we might believe that the burning of cats is wrong because we can infer that dousing a living being with gasoline is wrong. The justification of these beliefs in turn will depend on inference derived from other implicitly held moral principles.

It is important to notice that this form of skepticism rests on the claim that reference to a set of belief-independent moral properties is not required at any point in the causal chain from observation to judgment. With the essence of explanationist skepticism before us, we are now in better positioned to consider two other views in our partial survey of some widely held positions in contemporary meta-ethics.

### **1.6 Quasi Realism and Error Theory**

Some naturalistically-minded philosophers argue that while it is implausible to think that there are objective moral properties we are nonetheless justified in talking "as if" our moral judgments are objective in character. Broadly conceived, the preceding claim rests on the notion that in an *ultimate sense* moral judgments merely capture certain contingent facts about our moral sensibilities. These irrealist views of moral judgment fall under the banner of recent forms of quasi-realism endorsed by Simon Blackburn (2002) and Alan Gibbard (1990). The quasi-realist shares a common commitment with the explanationist skeptic in holding that, while moral judgments cannot be justified on the basis of intuition, there is a role for justified inferences from moral beliefs we already hold. This ersatz form of realism allows the irrealist to preserve many aspects of their inferential account of moral judgment because while there is no room for objective moral properties in their austere ontology there is a place for inferences derived from *moral beliefs*. To better understand how the taxonomy in the preceding section is to be employed, we should briefly consider the points of commonality and difference between J.L. Mackie's advancement of error theoretic views in *Inventing Right and Wrong* and Simon Blackburn's projectivist view of moral discourse presented in his *Spreading the Word*.

These accounts differ over the cognitive standing of moral claims. Mackie contends that all of our moral judgments which impute objective right-making and wrong making feature to objects, relations and states of affairs are strictly speaking false. Mackie's theory of moral judgment is error theoretic in orientation because it is based on the claim that the common sense position that there some actions, states and affairs that are objectively good or bad are in error. Mackie also alleges that moral properties are unacceptably "queer".<sup>1</sup> In line with his espousal of error theory, Mackie holds that if moral properties were to exist they would have to possess motivational force independently of human attitudes and opinions. Since no such properties exist it follows that any judgments that seem to be related to the instantiation of a belief-independent moral property are in *error*. Thus, the error theorist claims that it does not make sense to talk of "objective" moral judgments in the sense that moral judgments possess motivational force or exist independently of our contingent beliefs and desires. Quasi-realists agree with the error theorist in denying the existence of belief-independent moral properties. However, the quasi-realist denies that moral judgments are cognitively evaluable. Thus, they part ways with the error theory over the question of whether moral judgments are true or false.

As evinced in Blackburn's form of quasi-realism, the quasi-realist holds that our moral judgments are reflective of moral sentiments of approval or disapproval that we project onto purely descriptive properties, relations and states of affairs. The quasi-realist project is then best understood as an effort to re-translate the seemingly objective surface of moral discourse into a semantics that does not require moral discourse to be descriptive in any way. To put the differences between the quasi-realist and the error

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<sup>1</sup> Mackie (1977), p.38.

theorist into sharper relief, we should see that the quasi-realist's ambitious re-translation of moral discourse features both ontological and semantic claims. Along the ontological dimension, the quasi-realist, much like the error theorist, holds that belief-independent moral properties are ontologically suspect because there are no properties that exist independently of our attitudes or beliefs. In line with a commitment to projectivism, the quasi-realist thinks they have shown how to eliminate belief-independent moral properties without a loss of explanatory power. The quasi-realist maintains that the best explanation of why things seem right or wrong to us need only invoke the beliefs or attitudes we hold about morality. We then project those attitudes onto the world "as if" a given moral property was really present. While the quasi-realist shares a skepticism regarding the existence of belief-independent moral properties with the error theorist, it is important to point out that the two meta-ethical theories differ on semantic grounds. Unlike the error theorist, the quasi-realist does not think that that all moral judgments are strictly speaking false. Instead of holding that all moral sentences are false, quasi-realists claim to have found a way to get around the requirement that moral discourse must be fact-stating or descriptive in order license certain inferences. To see what the quasi-realist has in mind regarding moral discourse, we should briefly examine the quasi-realist treatment of conditionals:

A Quasi-Realist Account of Conditionals:

(P1) If (B!) on (x) then (B!) on (Y)

(P2) (B!) on (x)

(C) (B!) on (Y)

As evinced above, the quasi-realist holds that by employing rules of inference (e.g., modus ponens) together with the idea that moral propositions refer to attitudes, they have an account of truth conditional semantics that does not require any descriptive elements in moral discourse. In the preceding quasi-realist account of conditionals, we are to read the (B!) operator as standing in for the state of mind expressing disapproval of a given action. Replacing the propositional variables with statements that are reflective of attitudes yields a conditional claim of the following kind: "if you disapprove of torturing cats, then you disapprove of making your little brother torture cats." Notice that it is no longer the fact stating character of moral discourse that drives the inference from antecedent to consequent. For instance, in the conditional claim above, the quasi-realist will claim that if you hold a given attitude in the antecedent you should (if you are rational) hold the same attitude constant in the consequent. The quasi-realist adopts a similar retranslation strategy for conjunction, disjunction and other fundamental logical operators. Thus, the key claim advanced by the quasi-realist is that we can make all the inferences we usually would without a commitment to cognitivism. If the quasi-realist is correct, moral discourse becomes a way of ordering our moral beliefs and judgments in a moral rational manner as opposed to thinking that the role of our moral discourse is to state facts or to describe the world in any way. Quasi-realism thus retains the "realist seeming surface" of moral discourse, while simultaneously showing that moral propositions are expressions of attitudes.

Importantly, since all three meta-ethical theories discussed above (i.e., explanationist skepticism, error theory and quasi-realism) rest on differing semantic and epistemic claims, it is the issue of belief-independence which best carves up the meta-

ethical space between the moral realist and the anti-realist. At this juncture, we should also notice that there is another view that is of central importance in understanding some broad lines of division that further demarcate the meta-ethical views discussed thus far. As evinced in the preceding definitional taxonomy of ethical theories, *inferentialists* maintain that justified moral beliefs must be justified via inferential links to other justified beliefs we might hold.

### **1.7 Inferentialism and Moral Judgment**

Inferentialists hold that we are only justified in believing a moral claim on the basis of inference from other justified moral beliefs and inferences derived from non-moral beliefs. While there are many interesting forms of inferentialism which could be considered, my target here will be the type of coherentism advanced by Brink, McCord and other naturalists of the Cornell School in their defense of moral realism. Brink identifies the core features of an inferentialist account of justification via a contrast with competing non-inferential conceptions of justification and warrant. He writes:

Coherentism, by contrast, holds that no beliefs are non-inferentially justified. One's belief *p* is justified according to coherentism, insofar as *p* is part of a coherent system of beliefs and *p*'s coherence at least partially explains why one holds *p*. The degree of one's justification in holding *p* varies directly with the degree of coherence exhibited by the belief set of which *p* is a member...The degree of a belief system's coherence is a function of the comprehensiveness of the system and of the logical, probabilistic, and explanatory relations obtaining among members of the belief system.<sup>2</sup>

In essence, as evinced above, the coherentist theorist thinks that the only justification that can be had for a belief is derived from its membership in a system of beliefs. The positive aspects of a coherentist account of justification yields a negative claim as well. As noted

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<sup>2</sup> Brink, (1989), p.103.

above, the coherentist denies that beliefs can be justified independently of their support from other beliefs. Thus, the coherentist contends that it is *only* relations of mutual support and *inference* that justify the deliverances of the senses or any other beliefs that I may hold. The preceding claims support the coherentist's contention that *no belief is non-inferentially justified*. In order to complete our partial taxonomy of meta-ethical theories, there is a penultimate view which now must be discussed.

### **1.8 Doxasticist Theories of Moral Judgment**

Doxasticists hold that we are justified in believing an ethical claim only on the basis of beliefs. The doxasticist also maintains that no non-doxastic mental state can justify or warrant belief. For example, the doxastic account of intuition advanced by and Hilary Kornblith (2002), David Copp (2007), Russ Shafer-Landau (2003) and others is based on the claim that intuitions are best conceived of as a non-inferentially justified type of *belief*. The doxasticist parts ways with competing theories of moral judgment over the question of whether there is anything else beyond understanding which justifies our intuitive moral beliefs. There are two aspects to the preceding claim. First, the doxasticist denies the claim that a belief in a self-evident proposition must be accompanied by a set of positive phenomenological characteristics. And second, the doxasticist maintains that a believer is justified merely in "adequately understanding" the propositional contents of putatively self-evident propositions.<sup>3</sup> Some moral theorists, however, deny the doxasticist charge that moral judgments must be justified by more fundamental doxastic states and hold that we can be justified on the basis of perception-like seemings.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Shafer-Landau (2003), 248-256 and Audi (2004), 49-53.

The view that a moral claim can be known to be true on a *non-doxastic basis* rests on an analogy with other modalities in which the truth of a given claim is presented to us *directly*. Perceptualism, the final view to be discussed here, is the theory of moral judgment I will advance and defend in the last sections of this dissertation. Importantly, the perceptualist theory I will develop later will be based on the claim that non-doxastic states can serve as justifiers for ethical belief without a need for inference.

### 1.9 Perceptualist Theories of Moral Judgment

Very often we believe that an object or state of affairs has a certain quality. In many cases, our judgment will not be a result of inference. Rather, a judgment can be a result of a direct unmediated apprehension that a state of affairs, object or relation has a certain property. In the moral realm these spontaneous, non-inferential judgments are identified as ethical intuitions.<sup>4</sup> Ethical intuitionism rests on the claim that our moral intuitions serve as a source of justification and moral knowledge. The *classical form of intuitionism* adumbrated by G.E. Moore, Henry Sidgwick, W.D. Ross and other thinkers of the intuitionistic school, turned on a view of moral knowledge in which moral judgments are justified in relation to intellectual apprehensions. Under the intuitionistic view of moral knowledge, moral judgments are confirmed in the same way as the axioms of geometry, which are intuitively certain upon reflection. *Perceptualism* is a contemporary variant of classical intuitionism. Perceptualism is based on two essential claims regarding the nature of justification and moral knowledge. First, the perceptualist maintains that there

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<sup>4</sup> However, as I will argue in chapter five there are other aspects of intuitions which must be present to justify an ethical belief. Specifically, I will argue that there are non-doxastic aspects of intuition experience which when possessed of certain phenomenological characteristics are sufficient to justify an ethical claim.

are initial intellectual appearances or seemings that serve as the source of warrant for believing a foundational ethical claim. It is in virtue of these seemings that we form judgments. By analogy with geometrical judgments, the perceptualist claims that both the content of our judgment (e.g., that x is wrong) and the state of our believing that x is wrong are best explained by a type of initial grasping or seeming that a proposition is true. Second, the perceptualist holds that basic beliefs of morality are justified independently of other beliefs. This is so because basic moral beliefs, according to the perceptualist, are justified on the basis of *intuition experiences or seemings*. Thus, the perceptualist theory is a non-doxastic account of moral judgment.

With the partial taxonomy of meta-ethical positions now in place, we are better positioned to understand the nature and scope of the questions I will focus on in this dissertation. In the terminology set out above, the view I will defend will combine the realist metaphysical commitments of ethical naturalism while endorsing key aspects of the non-inferentialism and non-doxastic accounts of moral judgments largely associated with perceptualist schools of ethical intuition. In essence, the novel theory of moral judgment advanced and defended here is based on the largely unexplored possibility of combining two of the views of moral judgment laid out in the preceding taxonomy: a) the idea that moral judgments are justified on the basis of distinctive perception-like seemings (i.e., non-doxasticism) and b) the claim that a non-doxastic state also makes one aware of facts that are accessible in other ways through empirical observation and theorizing.

Ultimately, I will also argue that the failure of the defenses of contemporary forms of moral intuitionism presented here require moral intuitionists to adopt a

perceptualist approach to rebuff the arguments of the explanationist skeptic. In what follows, I will identify some central features of the intuition driven account moral knowledge I will present in each chapter of this work.

### **1.10 A Realist Theory of Moral Intuition**

In this dissertation, I defend a broadly realist theory of moral intuition which preserves many key features of the perceptualism sketched out above. However, there are some essential differences between realist theories of moral knowledge that we must now consider. Scientific realists maintain that we are justified in believing in the existence of certain unobservables through a type of inference to the best explanation. Similarly, Cornell Moral Realists maintain that moral judgments are justified empirically through inference to the best explanation. CMR theorists claim that just as in instances of inference to the best explanation (abduction) in non-moral domains, in which we make a set of observations and then postulate a set of theoretical concepts which unify our observations, there is an analogous abductive process which gives us knowledge of the nature of mind-independent ethical properties.

I will argue that the CMR *inferentialist* account of moral judgment is wrong and we need to rely on moral intuition if a commitment to moral realism is to be preserved. I also claim that recent attempts to demonstrate that moral judgments are warranted by intuition also fail. In the final chapter, I present a novel account of moral intuitionism which builds on the perceptualist account of non-moral intuitions advanced by recent defenders of intuitive seemings. In essence, I aim to show that intuition experience

imakes us aware of belief-independent moral properties that are truth makers for an intuitively believed proposition. I now turn to identifying the central claims which I will advance and defend in subsequent chapters.

### **1.11 Chapter Summaries and Objectives**

The first chapter of this dissertation has centered on providing a partial taxonomy of meta-ethical theories. In the second chapter of this work, I plan to discuss a recent skeptical challenge to realist theories of moral judgment. The skeptical challenge that I will discuss in this chapter is importantly different from the types of claims encompassed by the error theoretic and projectivist views of moral discourse discussed above. Both the error theorist and the projectivist launch a range of challenges to the cognitive standing of moral claims. However, the issue I am concerned with in chapter two should be conceived of as a direct challenge to *explanationist moral realism*. In essence, the skeptic argues that moral properties are explanatorily inert because they do not admit of empirical confirmation. If sound, the skeptic's arguments show that both of the realist's non-inferential and abductive accounts of moral knowledge are fatally flawed. The skeptic contends that our claims to moral knowledge only capture a "realist seeming" surface of moral discourse and practice. In chapter two, I argue that accounts that attempt to vindicate an explanatory role for belief-independent moral properties on the grounds of inference to the best explanation and coherentism grounds ultimately fail. Cornell Moral Realists have attempted to respond to the claims of the skeptic by maintaining that moral judgments do make contact with a belief-independent reality through coherence with

those facts countenanced by the special sciences and other naturalistically respectable domains of inquiry. In short, Cornell realists are coherentists when it comes to the justification of moral beliefs. Importantly, CMR theorists deny a role for intuition. I will show that the CMR theorist's endorsement of coherentism when coupled with their disavowal of non-inferential sources of justification leaves CMR badly exposed to the arguments of the skeptic.

This is so for two reasons. First, the CMR theorist's appeal to explanatory integration of moral facts encounters difficulty in relation to the skeptic's charge that a competing non-moral explanation is always to be preferred on grounds of parsimony. Second, I will argue that a non-inferential grasping that a certain action or state of affairs is an instance of a certain kind is essential to moral judgment. Since CMR theorists disavow appeal to intuition their view ultimately falls prey to the arguments of the skeptic.

In chapter three, I will evaluate arguments that purport to show that intuitions are not reliable evidential sources. Recent research centering on the role of intuitions in moral belief indicates that conscious deliberations play little role in moral judgments. In these studies, research subjects often could not articulate the reasons for moral judgments in scenarios involving moral deliberation. Functional imaging studies seem to show that there are consistent networks of brain regions (prefrontal cortex, medial and lateral) involved in intuitive moral judgment. In essence, these studies demonstrate that the primary role of moral reasoning is to generate post-hoc explanations for the automatic cognitive processes that generate moral judgments. Such findings further support the form of explanationist skepticism discussed in chapter two, because the reasons that

respondents cite for their moral judgments fail to be objective in the sense that the moral realist requires. Rather, moral judgments only capture tacitly held psychological assumptions about right and wrong that are generated independently of the (putatively objective) reasons that subjects cite for holding a particular belief. Accordingly, the skeptical contention that the moral realist is not justified in appealing to intuitions as basic evidential sources seems to be further strengthened by the above-cited research findings. As a reply to these skeptical charges, I will argue that while recent empirical work on the relationship between neuroscience and ethical intuition does seem to show that our innate drives to engage in moral evaluation can be error prone this does not demonstrate that we can dispense with an appeal to moral intuitions across the board. The above mentioned empirical research shows *only* that we now have some evidence which is of considerable importance in showing under which conditions intuitions are reliable or subject to error. My essential point is that recent empirical findings when considered as a whole should imply that the overall best account of our moral competence may have to include some appeal to realist considerations. Identifying some of the ways that empirically based attacks on non-inferential moral judgment fail provides further grounds for accepting the theory of moral intuition presented here.

In the fourth chapter, I discuss some recent defenses of moral intuition that take as their starting point the claim that ethical intuition serves as a basic source of justification for moral judgments of both a general and particular nature. In this section, I will largely focus on the theory of ethical intuition adumbrated by Michael Huemer. Assessing potential challenges to Huemer's theory will lay the groundwork for some of the central criticisms of recent defenses of moral intuition. There is a central problem which evolves

from a commitment to the type of phenomenal conservatism about moral judgment that Huemer and contemporary intuitionists endorse. In essence, Phenomenal conservatism is the idea that it is some phenomenal feature of intuition which warrants us in believing that things are as they initially intellectually appear to us. Under phenomenal conservatism a believer is justified via some characteristic of intuition experience (i.e., if the intuition is clear, consistent and determinate).<sup>5</sup> In essence, the challenge I will pose is that the phenomenal conservative cannot overcome the difficulty presented by the fact of moral disagreement. Importantly, it is not merely the fact that there are cases of moral disagreement that serves as a defeater for recent defenses of ethical intuition. Any realist theory of moral judgment is faced with the task of resolving cases of moral disagreement and error.

Rather, what is a problem for accounts that rely on principles analogous to phenomenal conservatism, is that the intuitionist must point to something beyond the phenomenal character of non-doxastic seemings to show why one set of moral seemings should be preferred over another. For Huemer and other phenomenal conservatists it is some characteristic of intuition experience itself together with the possession of moral concepts that yield justification in believing an ethical claim.

I will argue that the account on offer from Huemer and other phenomenal conservatives is largely correct. However, I maintain there are some pressing challenges to conservatism which need to be addressed. To see why this is the case, consider an instance of ethical disagreement between a consequentialist and his deontologist opponent. Both the consequentialist and the deontologist, if they are familiar with each of their respective moral theories, will have a clear, consistent and determinate intuition that

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<sup>5</sup> Huemer (2005), p.125.

some action is wrong (or right) in accordance with the moral theory they hold. With key features of phenomenal conservatism before us, there is a dilemma which now comes to the fore.

On the one hand, if it is to be something about the phenomenal character of intuition experience *itself* that justifies then it seems that the phenomenal conservative ends up endorsing all sorts of incompatible moral judgments (i.e., the competing intuitions of the deontologist and the consequentialist). Perhaps the phenomenal conservative might appeal to some master principle to adjudicate between clashing intuitions. Such a principle will have to tell us when an appeal to the phenomenal character of intuition is or is not warranted. Yet, we can find no such principle within phenomenal conservatism. This is so because, as Huemer argues, the justificatory force of intuition is to be located in the phenomenology of moral judgment and not in any principle from which we can infer that the deliverances of intuition are warranted.

On the other hand, perhaps the phenomenal conservative can appeal to other principles to adjudicate among self-evident propositions. When faced with the conflict of initial judgment affirmed in intuition, phenomenal conservative theorists might maintain that our initial intuitions should be abandoned in favor of other judgments that cohere with a wider set of principles. However, if this is the tactic employed by phenomenal conservatism one might wonder what is gained by an appeal to a distinctive phenomenology for ethical intuition in the first place. Thus, the problem for the phenomenal conservative is that: (a) the phenomenal conservative cannot point to intuitions as playing a systematizing role in ethical thinking via the characteristics of intuition experience itself or (b) what actually justifies a believer in believing an ethical

proposition will be distinct from and external to the phenomenal characteristics of intuition experience. Either way, I will argue that phenomenal conservatism encounters some difficult explanationist challenges. However, I maintain that the phenomenologically-based approach adopted by Huemer and other recent defenders of ethical intuition should be preferred to competing doxastic and inferentialist accounts of moral knowledge. Accordingly, I suggest some emendations to perceptualism as a means to rebut pressing skeptical arguments. I turn to a discussion of this possibility in the final chapter of this work.

The central positive thesis of my dissertation is that our moral intuitions are caused by objective belief-independent properties. Importantly, the novel account of moral intuition sketched out in this section builds on contemporary theories of intuition advanced by Elijah Chudnoff (2010), David Copp (2005) and others who hold that intuitions provide a foundational source of moral justification and knowledge. However, the theory advanced in the final chapter is importantly different from contemporary intuitionistic accounts. There are two key components in my defense of intuitions in moral judgment.

First, I argue that there is a distinctive phenomenology associated with moral judgment. Second, I hold that our intuitive moral judgments reflect features of a belief-independent reality. The “grasping” of the truth of a self-evident moral proposition is itself based on two further perceptualist tenets. First, our self-evident moral judgments are reflective of our grasp of concepts. It is plausible to think that we come to acquire moral concepts through being taught paradigm examples of rightness and wrongness.

Second, we grasp the self-evidentness of these propositions through being

intellectually aware of their truth. It is in the preceding sense that moral properties can be invoked in the "best explanation of experience". As I will argue, intuition can be plausibly described as an experience if our explanatory aim is to account for those properties directly responsible for an intellectual seeming.

The skeptic attempts to assimilate all modes of knowledge gathering to direct observation. However, if I am correct, the skeptic's attempted explanatory reduction is in error. I contend that if we come to view intuitions as a set of distinctive moral seemings, possessed of their own distinctive phenomenology, we can agree that while there are no experiences that correspond directly to theory laden observations in non-moral domains, the occurrence of an intuition (e.g., that x is wrong) constitutes a spontaneous non-inferential judgment which is not dependent on any species of direct non-moral observations for its occurrence.

In line with the perceptualist theory I will advance and defend in the final chapter, there is a straightforward way to think of intellectual apprehensions which accompany the seeming truth of a basic moral proposition as a type of "experience". Thus, I aim to show that the explanatory breach pointed to by the skeptic can be closed by showing that there is a distinctive experience which accompanies the making of a moral judgment

## Chapter Two

### Competing Inferentialist Theories of Moral Realism

In this chapter, I examine and criticize the inferentialist theory of moral knowledge and justification endorsed by many strains of contemporary ethical naturalism. Although I focus on the naturalistic moral realism endorsed by Cornell Moral Realists (CMR) and other recent moral epistemologies, the failure of the type of meta-ethical theory considered here has broad implications for combining inferentialism with realist forms of ethical naturalism. As evinced in the taxonomy presented in the first chapter, inferentialists maintain that moral beliefs *must be justified* via inferential links to other justified beliefs we might hold. The inferentialism which CMR theorists endorse takes the form of a coherentist theory of justification and knowledge, under which a moral belief is justified via its coherence with other beliefs. In further adumbrating their coherentist moral epistemology, CMR theorists also maintain that there can be no non-inferential sources of justification or warrant. In the following sections, I will present three key critiques of the central theses that CMR theorists advance in support of inferentialism. First, I claim that the coherentism that CMR theorists subscribe to is subject to a dilemma. I aim to show that the CMR theorist must either: (a) endorse a form of non-inferentially justified basic belief or (b) succumb to a skeptical argument regarding the explanatory power of moral facts. The preceding dilemma leads to an assessment of another thesis advanced under CMR. Many forms of Cornell Moral

Realism are based on the claim that patterns of observation and inference provide evidence of a moral reality which exists independently of our moral beliefs and attitudes.<sup>6</sup>

In my second critique of the inferentialism endorsed by CMR, I argue that we cannot be justified in thinking that patterns of observation and inference *alone* justify us in thinking that our moral judgments are objective in the sense of tracking a set of belief-independent moral properties. Simply put, I argue that the CMR theorist's reliance on inference to the best explanation does not provide us with evidence that the truth-makers for our beliefs are properties, facts or relations that exist independently of our conception of them.

Third, after raising some additional challenges to the inferentialism which the CMR theorist endorses, I discuss some problems which are generated via a reliance on inference to the best explanation. Specifically, I maintain that the CMR theorist's disavowal of non-inferential seemings is especially problematic given a commitment to parsimony in explanation. While the discussion in this chapter will call into question several of the key semantic and ontological claims endorsed by CMR theorists, my primary aim is to show there are some severe epistemic challenges which confront the CMR theorist.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, I will argue that a commitment to inferentialism leaves the ethical naturalist of the unwelcome prospect of either: (a) dropping a commitment to moral realism or (b) endorsing a form of ethical intuitionism. Accordingly, the arguments here give further plausibility to the intuitionistic theory of moral judgment and knowledge I will develop in the final chapter. However, before presenting some

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<sup>6</sup> The notion of belief independence invoked here refers to the idea that moral properties are appropriately belief-independent because the instantiation of a moral property has explanatory relevance beyond our subjective beliefs. I will criticize the CMR theorists' account of belief-independence in chapter five.

<sup>7</sup> It is important to point out that some CMR theorists do not explicitly endorse coherentism. However, the critiques I raise in this chapter challenge the Cornell Realist's core contention that inferences derived from observation provide the best explanation of moral knowledge.

objections to coherentism in meta-ethics, we should first consider some key points of commonality and difference between a coherentist *moral epistemology* and coherentism in *mainstream epistemology*. In what follows, I will identify and discuss the positive and negative aspects of epistemic coherentism. I will also discuss some initial challenges and responses to the coherentist account of moral knowledge and justification.

## 2.1 An Overview of a Coherentist Theory of Justification

Broadly conceived, coherentism is the view that what it is for a belief to be justified is for it to be a member of a coherent system of beliefs.<sup>8</sup> While there are many interesting forms of coherentism which could be evaluated, my critique will center on the type of coherentist theory advanced by Brink, McCord and other naturalists in their defense of moral realism. The form of coherentism to be considered here rests on the claim that the only justification that can be had for a belief is derived from that belief's membership in a system of beliefs. Importantly, the coherentist *is not claiming* that a believer must have access to all of the justifiers for belief. Rather, a believer must only have *some access* to warranted inferences which are part of a coherent system of beliefs.

The positive aspects of a coherentist account of justification yields a negative claim as well. The coherentist denies that beliefs can be justified independently of their support from other beliefs. The negative claims of the coherentist are perhaps best understood by considering the broad outlines of a competing foundationalist theory of justification. There are two key aspects of a foundationalist account of justification and knowledge which are most relevant to our present inquiry. First, there are a set of

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<sup>8</sup> See Bonjour (1985), p.93.

fundamental beliefs that serve as a basic source of justification for other beliefs further down the inferential chain. The second aspect of a foundationalist theory of justification and warrant is that certain self-evident beliefs are justified independently of other beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

Coherentists deny both these foundationalist claims and argue that no belief is warranted independently of its support from other beliefs. According to the coherentist, in order to know that I am now sitting in my office typing on a computer, I must have access to some of my other beliefs that offer support to my belief. For example, I must have some inferential warrant for believing that the stimulation of my sensory receptors reliably tracks an objective reality.

In examples like the preceding, the coherentist contends that it is *only* relations of mutual support and inference that justify the deliverances of the senses or any other beliefs which I may hold. The preceding claims support the coherentist's contention that *no belief is non-inferentially justified*. And it follows that the higher the degree of coherence a belief with an overall system of beliefs the more likely it is that a belief will be true.

As we will now see, however, the idea that that a coherent belief system is more likely to be true will pose some key challenges for the coherentist when it comes to the essential connection between warrant for believing a claim and the truth of that claim. In what follows, I will present a pressing objection to epistemic coherentism. The discussion in the next section will set the stage for my critique of coherentism in the domain of ethics.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bonjour (1988), pp.26- 27; Audi (2003), p. 194; O'Brien (2006), pp. 61-62

## 2.2 The Isolation Objection and Epistemic Coherentism

Critics of epistemic coherentism maintain that there is no way to show that a system of beliefs (regardless of its degree of coherence) has inputs which make contact with a belief-independent world. Further, the critic maintains that if the coherentist cannot show that a system of beliefs makes contact with anything external to the system of beliefs itself, regardless of the degree of coherence among the beliefs in the system, it follows that the coherentist cannot show that a system of beliefs is connected to the truth. In essence, the coherentist's system of beliefs will be *isolated* from contact with a belief-independent world.

The critic contends that the coherentist must show there is some point of connection between our “web of beliefs” and an external world. Laurence Bonjour (1985) captures the essence of the isolation objection as follows:

[i]f, as a coherence theory claims, coherence is the sole basis for empirical justification, it follows that a system of empirical beliefs might be adequately justified, indeed might constitute empirical knowledge, in spite of being utterly out of contact with the world that it purports to describe. Nothing about any requirement of coherence dictates that a coherent system of beliefs need receive any sort of input from the world or be in any way causally influenced by the world.<sup>10</sup>

The preceding (highly schematic) overview of some of the key implications of the isolation objection brings a central challenge to coherentism to the fore. In essence, as Bonjour rightly points out above, if the isolation objection is on target, *no set of inferential relationships*, regardless of their mutual support, can provide justification for believing a proposition absent some non-inferential contact with a belief-independent world.

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<sup>10</sup> Bonjour (1985), p.180.

The preceding worry over the seeming lack of connection between justification and truth in a coherentist moral epistemology forms the core of the isolation objection to epistemic coherentism. In order to count as a successful theory of justification for *empirical* belief, the coherentist must be able to show that there is a perceptual process which purports to represent a reality which is external to my system of beliefs.

However, if the isolation objection is on target both: (a) the truthmaker for my belief and (b) the mechanism which generates the beliefs must be observationally sensitive to belief-independent fact. Accordingly, *whether or not I am justified* in believing that there is a palm tree before me is thus external to the system of beliefs itself.

And, since coherentism makes justification solely a matter of inferential relations among beliefs, the isolation objection seems to entail the conclusion that coherentism cannot be the correct account of the justification of empirical belief. The critic maintains that under the coherentist's account of justification all of my beliefs could be justifiably held even though the inputs to the system of beliefs are all false.

In essence, the critic argues that the coherentist account of justification floats free of its moorings in the facts which ground the truth of our system of beliefs. In lodging the isolation objection, the critic maintains that the coherentist just has it wrong when it comes to showing that our system of beliefs *connects to a belief-independent world*. Despite the severe challenges to coherentism posed by the isolation objection coherentists have attempted to respond by incorporating a role for belief-independent facts into a coherent system of beliefs. I discuss these rejoinders to the isolation objection in the following section.

### 2.3 A Coherentist Response to the Isolation Objection

In attempting to respond to isolation-objection style critiques of coherentism, defenders of inferentially-based accounts of justification have offered the following rejoinder. First, as evinced in Laurence Bonjour (1985) and Keith Lehrer (1974) the coherentist will maintain that among the inputs to a system of beliefs are a class of beliefs which are *cognitively spontaneous*. The coherentist claims that the notion that some of our beliefs are cognitively spontaneous accounts for the crucial role that experience plays in connecting the intra-mental world of beliefs with an external reality. There are two important aspects to the claim that there are certain beliefs which are cognitively spontaneous. First, as is readily apparent from the invocation of the term "spontaneous" these beliefs enter our system of beliefs immediately without the need for inference. In advancing the notion of cognitive spontaneity, Bonjour contends there is no need to infer these beliefs from other beliefs we hold. To better understand the role that cognitively spontaneous belief plays in fixing the content of our system of beliefs firmly in a belief-independent world, consider the following scenario. As you drive down a rural highway you suddenly notice a red object half-hidden by a low-hanging tree branch. Immediately, and without inference, you apply the brakes just in time to avoid crossing into an intersection. Notice in the preceding example you did not have to deliberate to apply the brakes just in time. You also did not have to run through an inferential process.

Importantly, cognitively spontaneous beliefs of the sort described in the preceding example also have propositional content. The belief "there is now a stop sign in front of me" arrives in your system of beliefs *spontaneously*. So, examples like the preceding

reveal that there are often beliefs which we come to without the need for inference. Note that it is no objection to cognitive spontaneity to point out that we had to initially arrive at the belief that certain red objects are stop signs or that we should apply the brakes when we see those objects on an inferential basis. Rather, in line with the notion of cognitive spontaneity there are some beliefs that arrive in our system of beliefs with an immediacy built into them, *even if* those beliefs are first acquired on an inferential basis. However, where responses to the isolation objection are concerned, there is much more to the notion of cognitive spontaneity than merely pointing out that some of our beliefs are arrived at on a non-inferential basis. It would be mistaken to think that it is solely the *etiology* of cognitively spontaneous beliefs that provides warrant in believing a claim. Rather, the coherentist is claiming that these beliefs, while entering our body of beliefs “spontaneously”, are justified via their role in increasing the overall coherence of a system of beliefs.

The preceding point brings the second important feature of cognitive spontaneity to the fore. Cognitively spontaneous beliefs, it is claimed, make contact with a belief-independent world. The notion that cognitively spontaneous beliefs make contact with a belief-independent reality is key if the coherentist is to offer a viable reply to the isolation objection. Bonjour argues that the appearance of a cognitively spontaneous belief in a system ensures the likelihood of truth by offering detailed propositional knowledge of an external world.<sup>11</sup> In discussing the importance of cognitively spontaneous beliefs to the coherentist Bonjour characterizes the relationship between cognitive spontaneity and justification as a tripartite relation which takes the following form:

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<sup>11</sup> Bonjour (1985), p.117.

I have a cognitively spontaneous belief that P which is of kind K. (2) Conditions C obtain. (3) Cognitively spontaneous beliefs of kind K in conditions C are very likely to be true. Therefore, my belief that P is very likely to be true. Therefore, (probably) P. <sup>12</sup>

In line with the three-part relation presented above, if the coherentist is correct, there will be some appropriate connection between the degree of coherence exhibited by a system of beliefs and the truth. Of course, the coherentist contends that it will not be merely the appearance of a cognitively spontaneous belief in a system of beliefs which confers warrant or justification. Rather, it is the fact that cognitively spontaneous beliefs of kind (K) occur in conditions (C) which confers warrant. So, in advancing the notion of cognitively spontaneous beliefs the coherentist maintains that they can show that there is a role for observation in our system of beliefs.

To see what the coherentist has in mind regarding the initial epistemic credibility of cognitively spontaneous beliefs, we should see that when I place a copy of Bonjour's The Structure of Empirical Knowledge before me it is the reliable functioning of my perceptual apparatus that yields the true belief that there is a book of a certain size, shape and color before me. This belief in turn meshes with other beliefs I may hold. Notice that it is not just the high degree of coherence with other beliefs I hold that yields a higher probability of truth.

For instance, I am not justified in thinking that the stimulation of my sensory receptors is being caused by magic book shaped goblins that have the ability to form themselves into books of various configurations.

Simply put, we can reject such outlandish explanations on the grounds that the best explanation of our beliefs is that our perceptual apparatus is tracking an object

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.123.

which is external to our system of beliefs. Thus, we have some *evidence* that our faculties are tracking an external reality. In short, the coherentist maintains that cognitively spontaneous beliefs are “observationally sensitive”. Accordingly, if the coherentist rejoinder to the isolation objection is sound, the coherentist has presented some compelling reasons to think that contact with an external world is secured via the constraint imposed by the presence of cognitively spontaneous beliefs in a cognizer’s belief system. As evinced above, the notion that there are cognitively spontaneous beliefs allows coherentists to show that there are certain cognitive states which make contact with a belief-independent world.

While there are a wide array of rejoinders to the claim that cognitively spontaneous belief ensures that a coherent system of beliefs is likely to be true, the preceding discussion should at least indicate the importance of cognitively spontaneous beliefs to the coherentist in mainstream epistemology. I will now attempt to show that although cognitively spontaneous beliefs may be of assistance to the coherentist in mainstream epistemology there are severe problems which confront the epistemologist who argues that cognitive spontaneity can ground the objective truth of an *ethical* belief.

As I will now argue, recent attempts to secure a role for cognitive spontaneity in the moral domain fail. Accordingly, I maintain that a coherentist epistemology for ethical belief should be rejected or modified in important ways. However, before we evaluate the role of cognitively spontaneous belief as a response to skeptical challenges in ethics it is important to present some essential features of a coherentist theory of justification and knowledge in *moral epistemology*.

## 2.4 What is Coherentism in Moral Epistemology?

There are some close parallels between the epistemic coherentism we discussed in the preceding section and a coherence theory of justification in ethics. In the moral domain, the coherentist also endorses a negative and a positive thesis regarding justification. The negative thesis that the coherentist advances is that that we are justified in believing a moral principle *only* on the basis of coherence with moral beliefs we already hold. So, once again, we find the coherentist rejecting all forms of non-inferential warrant, this time in the domain of ethics. In essence, the coherentist thinks that the *only* justification that can be had for an ethical belief is inferential. The coherentist's thoroughgoing rejection of non-inferential justification is captured by the following claim advanced by Brink. He writes:

“[j]ustification cannot be non-inferential. To be justified in holding a belief *p* to be true, one must base *p* upon some second-order beliefs about what kind of belief *p* is and why *p*-type beliefs should be true. Of course if these second order beliefs are to help in the justification of *p*, then they must not merely be held but be reasonably or justifiably held. Thus, justified beliefs must be inferentially connected with, among other things, second order beliefs that are themselves well supported.”<sup>13</sup>

As evinced in the preceding passage from Brink's Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics, the coherentist in moral epistemology follows their counterparts in other domains by denying any justificatory role for non-inferential belief. For the coherentist in meta-ethics, the only beliefs which are justified in our best overall system of moral discourse and practice are justified via their linkages with second order realist beliefs. In line with their espousal of a coherentist moral epistemology the coherentist denies a role for

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<sup>13</sup> Brink (1989), p.124.

intuition based accounts of moral knowledge. As opposed to the non-inferential account of warrant proposed by foundationalists, coherentists maintain that just as in instances of inference to the best explanation (i.e., abduction) in non-moral domains, in which we make a set of observations and then postulate a set of theoretical concepts which unify our observations, there is an analogous abductive process which gives us knowledge of the nature of mind-independent ethical properties.<sup>14</sup> Considering the relationship between coherentism and inference to the best explanation brings the positive aspects of coherentism to the fore. The positive claims of coherentism are perhaps given the most thorough exposition and defense in the meta-ethical theories of the Cornell Realist School. In moral epistemology, Cornell Moral Realism subscribes to a form of scientific realism. In tandem with their denial of non-inferentialism and espousal of inference to the best explanation, realists of the Cornell School maintain that we are only justified in believing an ethical claim based on certain bridge laws or principles which establish identity relations between moral facts and a set of non-moral facts. CMR centers on the claim that moral properties should be conceived of along the lines of entities in the biological and other special science disciplines.<sup>15</sup> If the CMR theorist's analogy holds good, as outlined above, it should be possible to establish a set of nomological connections between the descriptive and the evaluative.

It is these "bridge premises" that justify the belief that a moral property is present whenever a certain set of non-moral properties are present. Under the CMR theorist's account of moral knowledge, the claim that Wrong=N, where N is a term referring to a

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<sup>14</sup> The Cornell Realist invokes the canons of abductive inference (i.e. simplicity, fecundity and explanatory power) in order to demonstrate that the overall "best explanation" of our moral beliefs must be objective in character.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 157.

natural property (or properties), should be knowable along the lines of the assertion that water=H<sub>2</sub>O. Thus, we should see that an action is wrong because we observe that such an action leads to a greater balance of pain over pleasure. We might then hold, as Brink does, that our judgment that a given action is wrong is justified in relation to a utilitarian theory which bridges a set of non-moral terms with a set of moral terms. Accordingly, it should seem evident that there is a close conceptual connection between: (1) our observation of descriptive properties and (2) a set of bridge premises or principles which connect the descriptive and evaluative terms. Thus, coherentists hold that our moral beliefs are justified through explanatory integration with other non-moral facts. For example, the CMR theorist holds that our moral belief that a given society has the property of being unjust is warranted through a relation of coherence with other non-moral facts (e.g, the presence of high unemployment). As evinced in the recent coherentist theories advanced by Railton, Brink and McCord it seems that coherentists stand on strong conceptual ground in holding that the establishment of bridge principles allows for a close connection between a given descriptive state and a set of theoretical posits, without the requirement that the inference patterns established under a bridge law make sole reference to the lower level properties.

With the preceding overview of coherentism in moral epistemology before us, I will argue that coherentists must either accept a thoroughgoing form of skepticism or accept a form of non-inferentialism. Either way, I will show that coherentism's standing as a viable form of moral epistemology is compromised. I turn now to a discussion of the first problem which confronts the coherentist in meta-ethics.

### 2.4.1 The Challenge of Explanationist Skepticism

As outlined above, many contemporary ethical naturalists think that a coherentist moral epistemology, when suitably reinforced by a set of bridge principles, provides grounds for thinking that our moral system tracks a belief-independent reality. However, there are ethical naturalists who maintain that there is no role for belief-independence in explaining our moral judgments.

Skeptical naturalists (i.e., the explanationist skeptics) contend that the best overall naturalistic explanation of experience will only require reference to: (1) a set of descriptive natural properties and (2) an antecedently held moral theory which is responsible for our judgment that (for example) an action is morally wrong. A distinguishing mark of naturalistic ontological theories is that the scope of our metaphysical investigations should be delimited by the natural sciences. In the naturalist's austere system, objects are auxiliaries (posits) which are required only in relation to their contribution to the simplicity and elegance of our best theory of the world.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, where matters ontological are concerned, naturalism centers on the claim that any answer to the question "what exists?" must be framed in concordance with our overall best scientific theory of the world. The question which arises for the *ethical* naturalist is where to place belief independent moral properties in a naturalistic theory of the world? In reply, Harman and other naturalists who are explanationist skeptics claim that our overall best scientific theory has *no room* for an objective morality. The naturalistic principle which drives the explanationist skeptic's attack on the explanatory power of belief-independent moral properties rests on the claim that when we

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Hylton, (2007), p. 319.

postulate the existence of objects, we should minimize mutilation to our overall best scientific theory of the world. Thus, electrons, protons, frictionless planes, and other posits required for the predictive statements of science to come out true gain admittance into our ontology. Since moral facts are in no way required to make the predictive statements of science come out true, the skeptic maintains that we can dispense with belief-independent moral facts as *entia non-gratia*. The following scenario from Gilbert Harman's The Nature of Morality demonstrates the skeptical stance which some naturalists take toward the explanatory role of belief-independent moral properties.

Harman asks us to imagine that we round a corner and witness a group of hoodlums setting a cat on fire. The hoodlums are deriving obvious pleasure from this wanton act of cruelty. Upon viewing the intense suffering of the animal, Harman claims that we might arrive at the spontaneous non-inferential judgment that the hoodlums' activity is wrong. Harman argues that our immediate judgment that the young ruffians' act of wanton cruelty is wrong is entirely subjective in character. He contends that the causal and explanatory work in the preceding example is done solely by reference to psychological facts about agents. According to Harman, it is our deeply held beliefs about wanton cruelty that best explains our judgment.

Harman finds it exceedingly puzzling how one could hold that moral facts could feature in any causal explanation of the path from observation to belief. For example, Harman holds that when a physicist views a proton in a cloud chamber there is something about the world that causes her belief that there is a proton in the cloud chamber. However, he holds that there is a fundamental difference between the moral "facts" which are the target of moral judgments and those phenomena studied by the physical

sciences. The difference is that the best explanation of our beliefs about the physical realm must assume the existence of an “independent world of objects external to ourselves, objects we perceive and manipulate.”<sup>17</sup> However, the best explanation of the occurrence of our moral intuitions is those tacitly held assumptions about the rightness or wrongness of certain acts in the psychological makeup of believers. It is important to notice that the skeptic claims that reference to a set of mind-independent moral properties is not required at any point in the causal chain from observation to judgment. In short, there simply is no explanatory work for objective moral properties to do in our judgments of right and wrong.

Before moving forward, we need to stress where the dispute lies between the realist and his explanationist skeptic opponent. The explanationist skeptic holds that they have all the necessary conceptual resources in place to demonstrate that moral properties cannot figure in the best explanation of experience. The preceding contention rests on the following claim: if moral properties are to be countenanced as a set of mind-independent properties it must be the case that objective moral properties have a role to play in the causal order. We can consider the explanationist skeptic’s claim to rest on the general notion of ontological commitment that informs ethical naturalism. While there are many different ways of characterizing the naturalist’s criterion of ontological commitment we can plausibly read the naturalist’s account as flowing from the claim that a given property (P) is a real property if and only if P figures ineliminably in the best explanation of experience.<sup>18</sup> Moving from left to right across the preceding bi-conditional unveils the essential division between the realist ethical naturalist and his skeptical opponent. In

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<sup>17</sup> Harman (1984), p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Miller (2003), p.140.

essence, the skeptical naturalist holds that objective moral properties can play *no role in the best explanation of experience*. The reason that the explanationist skeptic holds that objective moral facts are barred from admittance in a best overall naturalistic theory of the world hinges on the claim that moral properties resist “precise reduction” to a set of properties which do explain observations. As Harman points out:

We are willing to suppose that there are facts about the average American citizen despite our never using such an assumption to explain observations, because we can precisely reduce these facts to facts of a sort that can help explain observations...since moral facts seem to be neither precisely reducible nor even useful in practice in our explanations of observations it remains problematic whether we have any reason to suppose that there are any moral facts...<sup>19</sup>

As outlined above, explanationist skeptics maintain that when an explanatory reduction is carried out there will be no need to appeal to mind-independent moral properties. We have now arrived at a key component of the explanationist’s skeptic’s case against the ethical naturalist’s account of moral knowledge outlined in the introduction. This claim is as follows: If the preceding argument is on target, the explanationist skeptic will have shown that our judgment that  $\Phi$ ’ing is wrong cannot be an objective judgment. This is so because the causal relation between moral judgment and observation is better explained as one which is entirely subjective in character.

Accordingly, appeal to mind-independent moral properties cannot figure in the best overall explanation of experience, precisely because there are no objective moral properties which survive reductionist analyses. In short, there simply is no explanatory work for objective moral properties to do in our judgments of right and wrong. The arguments of the explanationist skeptic pose a clear challenge to realist theories of moral

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<sup>19</sup> Harman (1977), p.23.

knowledge. This is so because if there are no objective moral facts, as the skeptic argues, it follows rather straightforwardly that one cannot be justified or cannot know a proposition to be true or false in the way that the realist view of moral judgment demands.

Ethical naturalists respond to the skeptic by arguing that moral beliefs make contact with a mind-independent reality through explanatory coherence with those facts countenanced by the special sciences and other naturalistically respectable domains of inquiry. I will now aim to show that the ethical naturalist's endorsement of coherentism when coupled with their disavowal of non-inferential sources of justification leaves CMR badly exposed to the arguments of the skeptic. I also consider some of the CMR theorist's other responses to the skeptic's challenge.

#### **2.4.2 Horn One: Explanationist Skepticism and the Failure of Bridge Laws**

The explanationist skeptic's claim which we discussed in the preceding section (i.e. that moral properties cannot play a role in the best explanation of experience) now has particular salience. For if it is the case that: (1) moral properties cannot play a role in the best explanation of experience it will also follow that (2) moral properties cannot play any role in a set of bridge principles. Now, it is important to stress that the bridge principles that the CMR theorist appeals to do capture a set of causal relations between experiences and judgments. The central importance of bridge premises in the CMR theorist's coherentist moral epistemology is stressed by Brink. Brink maintains that:

Belief that a set of natural facts realizes some particular moral fact is justified just in case it coheres in the appropriate way with our other beliefs, both moral and non-moral.<sup>20</sup>

Accordingly, we should see, in line with Brink's observations regarding coherentism, that the bridge principles are supposed to justify us in believing that our moral judgments are tracking a set of objective moral facts. However, I will now argue that if the normative terms which appear in the bridge principles which the naturalist appeals to are eliminable, the best naturalistic explanation of our moral judgment will not require appeal to mind-independent moral properties. It is important to realize that the skeptical naturalist is making a particularly strong reductivist claim regarding the explanatory efficacy of the moral. The skeptic's claim that mind-independent moral properties cannot play a role in the best explanation of experience rests on a particular explanatory strategy.

As outlined above, explanationist skeptics maintain that when an explanatory reduction is carried out there will be no need to appeal to mind-independent moral properties. The reductionism presented in its broad outlines is one of the more powerful devices in the explanationist skeptic's arsenal. The preceding claim is the case because the skeptical naturalist contends that it there will always be another set of properties that can be appealed to in explaining the making of a moral judgment. If the explanationist skeptic is right, however, the realist's account of moral judgment is fundamentally flawed. In the same way that pain experiences can be reduced to a set of neuro-physiological events or the geometry of space-time can be explained entirely via reference to mass-points, the explanationist skeptic holds that the best explanation of the making of a moral judgment will make reference only to an implicitly held moral theory. The skeptic holds that any

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<sup>20</sup> Brink (1989), p.181.

reference to objective moral properties in a cause and effect chain from observation to judgment can be replaced solely by reference to an implicitly held moral theory in a believer's psychological make-up. Simply put, the explanationist skeptic is claiming to have demonstrated that our belief that an action is morally wrong is best explained as a matter of unconsciously applying implicitly held moral principles to a given non-moral observation.

In essence, the skeptic's critique of the CMR theorists position is the analog of the isolation objection discussed in § 2.2. The critic contends that the CMR theorist's endorsement of coherentism gives us no reason think that any system of beliefs regardless of the degree of coherence exhibited by the system hooks up to a set of belief-independent moral properties.

Importantly, the skeptic maintains that there is a close evidential connection between a belief in an individual's mind and the formation of a given moral judgment. At the level of particular beliefs, for example, the fact that some act is intuited to be wrong or right is taken to carry evidential weight for or against the holding of a particular belief. For example, the torturing of an innocent child may be believed to be wrong because such an act violates certain deeply held beliefs regarding the intrinsic value of human life. However, notice that the skeptic can still hold that it is not the fact that causing intense suffering is wrong that generates our judgment that an act is morally wrong. Rather, it is a set of facts about our psychology which cause us to non-inferentially judge that an act is wrong.

What we actually experience via observation, if the explanationist skeptic is correct, are not a set of mind-independent properties but our own subjective projections

onto a world devoid of value. Accordingly, under the naturalist's commitment to inference to the best explanation there will be no need to invoke a set of mind-independent properties as playing an ineliminable role why we take our moral judgments to be true.

The explanationist skeptic maintains that objective moral properties cannot feature in any naturalistic explanation of why an event occurred because there are no "precise" reductions to properties which can be legitimately be pointed to as playing a causal role. If the skeptic's argument is sound, moral properties are epiphenomenal because they can play no role in the best explanation of experience. Thus, since there is no role for mind-independent ethical properties in the best explanation of observation it follows that the CMR theorist cannot show that any of the bridge laws make contact with belief-independent moral properties.

### **2.4.3 The Failure of Coherentism in Moral Epistemology**

With key features of the explanationist skeptic's argument before us we are now better positioned to see why the ethical naturalist's account of moral knowledge fails. The point of emphasis in the preceding arguments is the CMR theorist's claim that the relations countenanced in a set of bridge principles track a set of objective mind-independent moral properties. Harman holds that moral facts are epiphenomenal (i.e., are mere by-products of non-moral facts which do play a legitimate causal role). Harman's argument is that we should prefer the concepts and properties of empirical psychology because these properties can be shown to play a legitimate causal role in the path from moral

observation to judgment. It is on these grounds that Harman holds that moral properties should be considered to be epiphenomena.

This view of causality and explanation has important implications for moral theory for it is clear that if moral facts and properties cannot play a causal role, then it seems evident that moral principles cannot be confirmed along the lines of scientific theory. Since the explanationist skeptic holds that there is no need to refer to a set of mind-independent moral facts in explaining the making of a moral judgment, relations of coherence, bridge principles or other inferential relations can do no work for coherentists who make a case for realism because the skeptic has shown us how mind-independent moral properties can be eliminated across the board.

To see why this is so, recall that naturalists who are skeptical about moral facts contend that the best explanation of moral judgments are the values we hold as a result of our contingent psychological makeup and upbringing. The problem for the ethical naturalist is that, again, a simpler explanation of our judgments, at least on naturalistic grounds, is that we judge something to be right or wrong, good or bad, because of moral beliefs we already hold. Simply put, the skeptic has shown that it only *seems* that our moral judgments (both inferential and non-inferential) track a set of properties which exist independently of our conceptions of them. Thus, as I have argued, neither of the CMR theorist's attempts to show that: (1) moral facts are indispensable to the best explanation of experience and (2) moral knowledge can be conceived of along the lines of knowledge claims in the special sciences succeed. It is for the preceding reason that I maintain that the coherentism espoused by the ethical naturalist ultimately fails to support a realist account of moral judgment.

Importantly, in an attempt to evade the first horn of the dilemma presented here, the ethical naturalist turns to cognitively spontaneous ethical beliefs as providing a link to a belief-independent moral reality.

However, I will now argue that if the ethical naturalist appeals to the notion of cognitively spontaneous ethical beliefs they face the charge that the only way to save their position from the claims of the skeptic requires a commitment to foundationalism which undercuts any justification for proposing coherentism in the first place. I now turn to a presentation of the second horn of the dilemma.

### **2.5 Horn Two: Why the Appeal to Cognitively Spontaneous Belief fails as a Defense of Ethical Naturalism**

In endorsing cognitively spontaneous beliefs, the coherentist thinks that there is a class of experiences which links our system of beliefs with an external world. Importantly, the coherentist also maintains that cognitively spontaneous beliefs are also more likely to be true. For example, Geoffery Sayre McCord in his "Coherentism and Moral Theory" contends that cognitively spontaneous beliefs allow coherentists to avoid isolation-style objections to coherentism in ethics. The notion at work in McCord's endorsement of cognitively spontaneous beliefs is that cognitively spontaneous beliefs are more likely to be true. In discussing the importance of cognitively spontaneous beliefs as providing a means to bring the chain of justification to close in on observationally warranted ethical beliefs, McCord comments that:

[B]ecause the coherence theory treats as evidence only what we already believe, it might seem to ignore a crucial impetus for change: experience...the theory may seem unable even to accommodate experiential input and observation. It's true, coherentism doesn't allow experience as relevant to justification unless and until the experience comes into the person's cognitive economy. Yet, especially in its recognition of

cognitively spontaneous beliefs, coherentism leaves room for experiences to enter that cognitive economy unbidden, either thanks to the experiences themselves having a cognitive content (in which case it is the content of the experience that serves as evidence) or by their being the content of an appropriate cognitive attitude (in which case it is the fact that such an experience occurred that serves as evidence).<sup>21</sup>

As evinced in the preceding passage, McCord maintains that cognitively spontaneous beliefs: (a) allow experience to play a role in the justification of a moral belief by generating beliefs with a determinate cognitive content and (b) enable the coherentist to show that some of our beliefs are justified on a non-inferential basis. I will now argue that the coherentist *cannot* plausibly turn to cognitively spontaneous beliefs without undermining key tenets of coherentism or ethical naturalism. There are four problems with CMR's endorsement of cognitively spontaneous beliefs.

### **2.5.1 Cognitive Spontaneity and Belief Independence**

First, we can agree with the coherentist that the content of beliefs derived from experience, such as the claim "I now see a computer screen before me" is yielded non-inferentially via the stimulation of our sensory receptors. Accordingly, a believer might be justified via the direct links between experience and belief. And this is precisely what coherentists like Brink and McCord have in mind in claiming that cognitive spontaneous beliefs make contact with a belief-independent reality. In considering the justificatory role that cognitively spontaneous beliefs are to play in our systems of ethical beliefs we must bear in mind that the content of *ethical* beliefs must be importantly different from other types of non-inferential belief. The problem which now comes to the fore is that if

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<sup>21</sup> McCord, (1996), p.187.

my belief system contains only justified non-moral *beliefs based on observation* then I have done nothing to show that any of my distinctively moral beliefs are justified. Simply put, it cannot be merely the occurrence of any sort of experience which justifies us in believing an ethical claim. For example, while I might spontaneously come to believe that "some young hoodlums have set a cat on fire" it does not follow that I am justified in believing that "it is wrong to intentionally cause pain to another living being". The reason I am not yet justified in believing the claim about causing pain to living beings is due to the fact that my non-inferential observational beliefs are completely devoid of *normative content*.

Considering an analogy with visual experience will help to identify the nature of the problem I am raising for the ethical naturalist. We trust the deliverances of our senses in large measure because of the reliable functioning of our perceptual apparatus. Can the ethical naturalist make a similar move? The answer seems to be no. Recall that the ethical naturalist denies any appeal to intuition. So, for the naturalist, there is no faculty analogous to that which produces cognitively spontaneous non-moral beliefs (e.g., cognitively spontaneous perceptual beliefs). Accordingly, ethical naturalists cannot appeal to a faculty which reliably produces *cognitively spontaneous beliefs in ethics*. To better understand the force of the preceding objection, we should briefly re-examine the claim that some of our beliefs are cognitively spontaneous. The idea that some beliefs are cognitively spontaneous is supposed to rescue the moral realist from the arguments of the skeptic. And, at least initially, there seem to be some parallels between anti-skeptical strategies in meta-ethics and those in other domains of philosophy. The key claim to focus on is that there is a close connection between the appearance of a cognitively

spontaneous belief in our system of beliefs and the truth. And it is easy to see how spontaneous beliefs of kind "k" are justified in non-moral domains. For instance, spontaneous beliefs of kind "k" derived from perception are very likely to be true because of the functioning of our perceptual apparatus. Is there a parallel move that can be made concerning ethical beliefs that can extricate the coherentist from the difficulties I have raised here? The answer once again seems to be no.

In ethics, cognitively spontaneous beliefs are most plausibly thought of as coming in one of two forms. First, they can be beliefs that have a definite normative cognitive content. However, as I will argue in the following section, if this is the case then these beliefs *must be the foundational beliefs* taken to exist by the ethical intuitionist. If these beliefs have a definite normative content (e.g. that an act is wrong) then the coherentist must countenance a form of ethical belief that is warranted on a non-inferential basis.

This is so because a cognitively spontaneous belief of kind "k" is a belief which arrives in a believer's cognitive economy without a need for inference. And as Bonjour argues, these beliefs are more likely to be true. Yet, *if the coherentist in ethics* wants to appeal to these types of beliefs (which indeed they do) they end up endorsing a class of ethical belief which is warranted without a need for inference. Accordingly, experience cannot play the evidential role intended by the coherentist. Since the only observational evidence we have access to are experiences of non-moral properties, the link between evidence and the justification of moral beliefs will be severed. Of course, the coherentist will want to deny this is a problem for their view and maintain that there are no non-inferentially warranted ethical beliefs. Rather, ethical naturalists maintain that it is cognitively spontaneous beliefs derived from observation which justify an ethical claim.

Yet, if this is the case, we might wonder what advantage there is in appealing to cognitively spontaneous beliefs in the first place.

The second problem which now becomes salient is that if we think of cognitively spontaneous beliefs as arriving in our system of beliefs with *no distinctive ethical content* then we have no reason for believing that we are justified in according these beliefs a measure of initial warrant. The implications of the preceding claim is that the coherentist will have no grounds for claiming that any of the cognitively spontaneous beliefs they appeal to are likely to be true. This is so for two reasons.

On the one hand, if they take cognitively spontaneous beliefs of kind "k" to have distinctively ethical content, then the coherentist ends up being committed to the existence of a class of basic ethical beliefs which are warranted without inference. And I have pointed out without appeal to: (a) a faculty of ethical intuition or (b) ethical beliefs which are justified via reflection (both of which the coherentist deny) then the role of cognitively spontaneous beliefs in a coherence theory of justification remains obscure. On the other hand, if the coherentist maintains that ethical beliefs enter into our cognitive economy *without distinctively ethical content* (e.g., non-moral observational beliefs) we have no reason to think that any of these non-moral beliefs justify us in believing an *ethical claim*. Thus, it remains unclear precisely how coherentists can appeal to cognitively spontaneous ethical beliefs to rebuff the arguments of the skeptic. Accordingly, absent appeal to any source of non-inferential judgment the form of coherentism considered here is vulnerable to the arguments of the skeptic.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Intuitionism may also be vulnerable to the skeptic's argument along similar lines. As I argue in the final chapter of this dissertation, the realist must show that moral properties are belief-independent. I develop initial lines of argumentation which show that moral properties can figure in an ineliminable way in cognitively spontaneous ethical judgment.

It is clear that ethical naturalists recognize this potential problem for their endorsement of cognitive spontaneity and instead hold that it is some class of cognitively spontaneous beliefs with distinctively ethical content that supports a belief in moral realism. However, if ethical naturalists take this route in responding to the skeptic, there is another problem which now becomes salient.

Unlike the problem which I raised above (i.e., that the CMR theorist must be committed to some form of non-inferential warrant), the challenge I will discuss in the next section aims to show that CMR theorists cannot retain a commitment to ethical naturalism if they hope to incorporate appeal to cognitively spontaneous belief. I now turn to considering the question of whether the ethical naturalist can retain a commitment to cognitively spontaneous ethical beliefs.

### **2.5.2 Cognitive Spontaneity in Ethics Requires a Commitment to Non-Naturalistic Intuitionism**

I have just argued that if the ethical naturalist wants to appeal to cognitively spontaneous ethical beliefs that are devoid of any distinctively ethical content they have endorsed a moral epistemology in which none of our ethical beliefs are justified in the manner that the realist about morality demands. As I have shown above, coherentists turn to non-inferential sources of moral judgment to rebuff the arguments of the skeptic. Taking this route, however, requires abandoning moral coherentism in favor of a form of foundationalism most often associated with intuitionistic non-naturalism. Recent proponents of this form of intuitionism include Robert Audi (2004), Elizabeth Tropman (2009) and Michael Huemer (2005). What the intuitionist has in mind is that it is through

coming to possess certain distinctively moral concepts that the underlying nature of moral reality is unveiled. By possessing the concept of goodness one is able both to identify the relations between individual things that instantiate the universal of goodness and understand through rational intellection the ultimate nature of goodness. Huemer's recent defense of ethical intuitionism is an exemplar of the intuitionistic contention that ethical knowledge is a priori in character and based upon the apprehension of universals. He writes:

All a priori knowledge is, or derives from, knowledge of the properties and relations of universals. For instance, we know a priori that all spinsters are unmarried. This derives from our knowledge that spinsterhood contains or implies unmarriedness. We know a priori that purple is a color: this is knowledge of a property of purple. And we know a priori that pleasure is good: this is knowledge of a property of pleasure.<sup>23</sup>

The intuitionist believes, in line with Huemer's observations, that if the nature of moral properties can be revealed only through directly apprehending the features of universals, the inferentialism endorsed by the coherentist is simply the wrong model of moral knowledge. Further, the intuitionist thinks that it is intrinsic to the property of goodness that it captures the essential relation between the many individual things that are good. This is so because, while the intuitionist agrees with the skeptic that the property of moral wrongness is not physically instantiated, we can judge that descriptive or natural states of affairs possess a given moral quality. The non-naturalist contends that what ultimately makes us justified in our judgments is an intra-mental process which, when possessed of certain characteristics, reveals a class of judgments whose truth is intuitively apprehended as self-evident based upon an apprehension of the properties of universals. In short, the intuitionist maintains that moral properties (when conceived as abstracta) have a distinct

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<sup>23</sup> Huemer (2005), P.126.

contributory role over and above reference to a set of non-moral properties.<sup>24</sup> However, if the realist is to take this route and conceive of moral properties as abstracta *they must abandon a commitment to ethical naturalism*. This is so because: (a) the faculty of ethical intuition is best thought of as non-natural in character and (b) the basic beliefs produced by that faculty are a priori which is a violation of the ethical naturalist's commitment to a scientifically informed meta-ethics. Since the moral realists discussed here disavow ethical non-naturalism across the board, they cannot take this route without once again compromising core tenets of their view.

We should now notice that appealing to cognitively spontaneous beliefs leaves the coherentist in a difficult position. If the coherentist maintains that the inputs to a moral system of belief have a determinate cognitive content, then the coherentist must abandon the claim that all beliefs in ethics are justified only via relations of mutual support and inference derived from observational evidence. Accordingly, the putative analogy which the coherentist attempts to establish between modes of knowledge acquisition in the social sciences and that of ethics dissolves because a commitment to cognitively spontaneous beliefs in ethics requires a commitment to holding that there is a class of basic ethical belief with normative content. Thus, if the coherentist wants to appeal to cognitively spontaneous beliefs that have *distinctively ethical content*, as Brink and Sayre McCord do, then the correct account of justification *must be foundationalist*. Specifically, the moral epistemology which the ethical naturalist must ultimately rely upon in order to reject the arguments of the explanationist skeptic is a form of ethical intuitionism. As

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<sup>24</sup> However, I am not claiming that the non-naturalist has an effective response to explanationist skepticism. Rather, my point is solely that if the ethical naturalist appeals to this form of cognitively spontaneous ethical belief they seem to be committed to an intuitionistic account of moral knowledge in which moral knowledge is obtained spontaneously through the apprehension of universals.

opposed to the web-like structures which are extant in coherentist theories of justification, intuitionistic theories exhibit a pyramidal structure in which chains of justification terminate in a class of foundational moral beliefs that can be justifiably held without inference.

Traditionally conceived, then, intuitionism rests on a view of moral knowledge in which moral judgments are justified in relation to intellectual apprehensions of universals or abstracta. As demonstrated above, the ethical intuitionist can plausibly make use of all the justificatory benefits of turning to ethical beliefs which have the character of cognitive spontaneity. Ethical naturalists, however, cannot avail themselves of these resources because they deny a role for non-inferentially justified ethical beliefs. And, as I have argued, the class of beliefs which are warranted non-inferentially are most plausibly thought of as beliefs derived from an intellectual apprehension of the self-evident truths of ethical intuitionism. Accordingly, the CMR faces the prospect of dropping a commitment to ethical naturalism in order to save their position from the arguments of the explanationist skeptic. Yet, despite all I have said thus far the ethical naturalist will most likely remain untroubled by the preceding objections. The coherentist will likely respond, as Brink does, that it isn't merely the appearance of a cognitively spontaneous ethical belief in a system of beliefs that justifies. Rather, it is second-order beliefs about morality that justify the claim that cognitively spontaneous beliefs track a belief-independent reality. Importantly, for the coherentist it is always relations of coherence that justifies a belief regardless of its etiology. So, it will always be a matter of appealing to second-order beliefs in order to secure the justification of a cognitively spontaneous

ethical belief. However, there is now a final objection to be assessed in relation to the strategy of turning to *second-order beliefs* in ethics.

## **2.6. Second-Order Beliefs to the Rescue?**

Brink (1989), Sturgeon (1988), Railton(1989) and other ethical naturalists make the claim that second-order beliefs justify us in believing that our moral beliefs track a reality that is constitutively independent of human opinion. Importantly, if the appeal to second-order beliefs is successful then the ethical naturalist has a clear path to avoid the skeptic's challenge. To understand the centrality of second-order beliefs to the ethical naturalist we need to focus on the distinction between first-order and second order beliefs. Second order beliefs play a different justificatory role in a coherentist meta-ethics from their first order counterparts. *First order beliefs* about morality are beliefs regarding the moral qualities of persons, states of affairs, institutions and other subjects of moral evaluation. For example, when someone believes that it is morally wrong for a society not to ensure that all citizens have access to affordable healthcare, their belief is a specific first order moral belief about a certain inequitable state of affairs. *Second order beliefs*, on the other hand, are beliefs about the reliable functioning of our cognitive apparatus and the existence of properties which are postulated to exist by our overall best scientific theory of the world. Ethical naturalists maintain that it is second-order beliefs about the nature of moral properties that justify us in holding that our moral beliefs are cognitive in character. For example, under the homeostatic property cluster account of moral properties endorsed by Richard Boyd and other contemporary ethical naturalists, the non-

evaluative properties that constitute a moral property (e.g. goodness) represent a well-behaved region of the natural order. Boyd identifies the essential nature of the homeostatic cluster concept as follows:

Under a wide variety of (actual and possible) circumstances these human goods (or rather instances of the satisfaction of them) are homeostatically clustered. In part they are clustered because these goods themselves are — when present in balance or moderation — mutually supporting.<sup>25</sup>

As Boyd points out, there are fundamental facts about human welfare which together constitute the property “goodness.” For example, in a just or good society we might find that certain basic needs are fulfilled. The fulfillment of these basic needs will depend on the presence of non-evaluative states of affairs (e.g. access to health care, an equitable distribution of goods and affordable cost of living, etc.). Since these properties tend to occur together in actual (or possible) just societies they reflect a set of mutually supporting relationships. The role of second-order beliefs is key in the naturalist’s attempt to combine moral realism with coherentism. This is so because, as evinced in the view outlined above, naturalist moral realists can hold that moral properties are appropriately belief-independent because the instancing of moral properties has explanatory relevance beyond our subjective beliefs. It is on the basis of these *second-order beliefs* about morality that we are justified in thinking that a certain set of concepts are tracking a mind-independent property. However, as I shall now argue, accounts that attempt to vindicate an explanatory role for belief-independent moral properties on coherentist grounds ultimately fail.

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<sup>25</sup> Boyd (1988), p.181.

The problem lies in another key assumption made by ethical naturalists which is often invoked in conjunction with the idea that second-order beliefs about morality provide evidence that our moral beliefs track an evidence transcendent world. In attempting to avoid the challenge of the skeptic, the naturalist maintains that some of our ethical beliefs can be contextually justified. In short, it is the assumption that we are operating in a "normal context" of justification that, when combined with second-order realist assumptions about morality, allows the naturalist to show that ethical beliefs can withstand skeptical scrutiny. A "normal context" of justification for belief is broadly characterized as one in which certain skeptical possibilities are assumed to be unrealized. Brink contends that we can rebuff the arguments of the skeptic because in most contexts of justification we simply assume that certain beliefs are true.

In identifying some ways that the coherentist is justified in bringing the chain of justification to a close, Brink writes:

In normal contexts of justification, we do not consistently apply the epistemological requirement that justifying beliefs be justified. Although we recognize that the justification of any particular moral belief could be demanded, we in fact hold certain beliefs to be true without demanding their justification (and, as I have indicated with good reason). Because in these contexts a large number of beliefs are simply held to be true, most the justificatory chains we actually produce are actually quite short and linear [emphasis added].<sup>26</sup>

As evinced above, Brink argues that if we are in a "normal context of justification" we can assume that we have reached a sufficient level of warrant for our moral beliefs. Importantly, we have good evidence for believing that our ethical beliefs are true because we have good evidence that we are operating in a normal context of justification. Brink seems to think that in claiming that we can hold that we are operating in a normal context

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<sup>26</sup> Brink (1989), p.123.

of justification and with "good reason" the ethical naturalist can avoid the implications of the isolation objection inspired critiques of moral realism. However, there are two key problems with this approach.

First, why should we hold that we are operating in a "normal context of justification"? Brink's response seems to be that certain beliefs about morality are "simply held to be true". However, if a belief is simply held to be true for no reason at all then we will have no reason to think that any of our ethical beliefs are justified on realist grounds. After all, under the standard of justification introduced by the coherentist, in order to be justified in believing "p" we must have access to some reasons for believing that "p-type" beliefs are true via coherence relations. Yet, if we simply *assume without evidence* that a belief is true it follows that our belief will be systematically ungrounded. So, we will have no reason to believe that other second-order non-moral beliefs can serve as justifiers for cognitively spontaneous ethical beliefs.

The second, and perhaps more troubling, implication of the failure of the invocation of a normal context of justification is that absent "good reasons" for thinking that skeptical possibilities about morality are not realized the ethical naturalist has done nothing to show that the skeptic's claims about morality are not equally warranted. This is so because as the skeptic points out, the best explanation of our moral beliefs on naturalistic grounds will eschew any reference to the instantiation of belief-independent moral properties. Hence, if we *simply assume* that we are operating in a normal context (i.e., in which skeptical possibilities regarding ethical claims are not realized) then we will not have rationally defensible grounds for rebuffing the arguments of the skeptic. Accordingly, if the ethical naturalist argues that we just assume that certain skeptical

possibilities are not realized in a “normal context” of justification we also have no evidence that *second-order beliefs* about morality can be justified since it is also the case that none of the second-order realist beliefs about morality (e.g., the homeostatic cluster property view) are warranted without inferential support from the claim that we are operating in a “normal context” of justification.

Perhaps a “good reason” for thinking that we are operating in a normal context of justification is by reference to the non-inferentially justified ethical beliefs produced by a faculty of ethical intuition (i.e., cognitively spontaneous beliefs). However, I have argued above that taking this route leaves the ethical naturalist with the unwelcome prospect of either: (a) dropping a commitment to coherentism or (b) endorsing a form of non-naturalistic intuitionism. Since the ethical naturalist cannot vindicate the claim that we are operating in a normal context without either abandoning coherentism or turning to non-naturalism, turning to second-order beliefs will be of no help to the naturalist.

The problem I am pointing to here under the second horn of the dilemma is that second-order beliefs about morality cannot play the role the naturalist requires of them precisely because the assumption that we are operating in a non-skeptical explanatory context is unwarranted absent appeal to cognitively spontaneous beliefs. Thus, there are two broad problems that I have posed for the CMR theorist. On the one hand, in line with the argument for explanationist skepticism, the CMR theorist’s appeal to explanatory integration of moral facts encounters difficulty in relation to the skeptic’s charge that a competing non-moral explanation is always to be preferred on grounds of parsimony.

If sound, the skeptic’s arguments will show that abductive accounts of moral knowledge are fatally flawed because, as I have argued, the bridge principles the Cornell

Realist appeals to are without justification. Thus, the CMR theorist's endorsement of coherentism ultimately rests on a flawed standard.

On the other hand, in order to avoid self-defeat the Cornell Realist appeals to a set of realist beliefs to support their claim that moral knowledge is objective in nature. However, this move leads directly to the second horn of the dilemma. In essence, in order to avoid skepticism the CMR theorist must appeal to a set of non-inferential basic beliefs. Hence, skeptical isolation objection style critiques of ethical naturalism will once again gain traction because our system of ethical beliefs will be *isolated* from the truth. In sum, the options which the moral coherentist faces are threefold.

First, the ethical naturalist can hold that it is only non-moral beliefs which justify a cognitively spontaneous ethical belief. However, I have argued that the coherentist can remain committed to inference and observation as the sole justifiers for ethical belief, but only at the cost of a realist account of moral knowledge and justification.

Second, the moral realist could turn to a class of non-inferentially justified apprehensions of universals to rebuff the skeptic's arguments. However, once again this places the CMR theorist in a difficult position. Taking this strategy entails abandoning the scientific realism which the Cornell Realist and other naturalistically minded coherentists endorse.

Third, the coherentist can attempt to turn to a class of second-order moral beliefs which serve as justifiers for our belief that the truth makers for moral claims are belief-independent facts. However, the CMR theorist has done nothing to show that there is good evidence for thinking that realist second order beliefs about the existence of moral facts and properties are true. Accordingly, the objections I have raised in this section, if

sound, show that there are some key problems which arise once the attempt is made to combine coherentism and moral realism.

Despite all I have argued thus far the Cornell Realist might think that there is a way to reconcile a commitment to non-inferentially justified ethical beliefs with an overarching commitment to ethical naturalism. Yet, as I will now argue, even if the CMR theorist is able to solve all of the above problems related to the putative incompatibility between cognitively spontaneous beliefs and the CMR theorist's inferentialist account of moral knowledge, they still face key difficulties which center on the Cornell Realism's commitment to inference to the best explanation. In what follows, I aim to show that the CMR theorist's commitment to an abductive account of moral knowledge is subject to several key objections.

## **2.7. Observation, Inference to the Best Explanation and Moral Knowledge**

In what follows, I will critique another key tenet of the Cornell Realist's research program. Here, I assess the CMR theorist's claim that observation is the proper mode of apprehension of moral properties. As I have outlined above, Cornell Realists maintain that moral knowledge is arrived at via inferences derived from observation. I also discussed the CMR theorist's disavowal, as evinced in Brink's attack on non-inferential sources of justification, of foundationalist accounts of moral knowledge and warrant. However, if this is the approach that CMR theorists wish to take regarding the relationship between observation and inference there are some difficult questions which emerge. The challenges to the CMR theorist I raise in this section are importantly different from the critique of the epistemology I presented in the preceding section.

There, my concern was to consider whether the CMR theorist's coherentist approach to moral knowledge was subject to a dilemma centering on the rejection of all sources of non-inferential warrant. My objective will now be to assess whether an observation-based account of moral knowledge is the best explanation for a moral judgment. However, before proceeding we should first briefly discuss some of the key tenets of CMR's commitment to inference to the best explanation. In his "Inference to the Best Explanation" Gilbert Harman identifies the essential explanatory relation between observation, inference and hypothesis formation. Harman writes:

In making this inference one infers, from the fact that a certain hypothesis would explain the evidence, to the truth of that hypothesis. In general, there will be several hypotheses which might explain the evidence, so one must be able to reject all such alternative hypotheses before one is warranted in making the inference. Thus one infers, from the premise that a given hypothesis would provide a "better" explanation for the evidence than would any other hypothesis, to the conclusion that the given hypothesis is true.<sup>27</sup>

In tandem with his claims above, Harman maintains that there are other tests including explanatory power and fecundity which one can use to rule out competing hypotheses. However, the notion that an explanation that is parsimonious is more likely to be true will take center stage in the discussion which is to follow. Of specific interest, once again, is the following claim which *endorsed by both* the explanationist skeptic and his realist opponent: "P is a real property if and only if P figures ineliminably in the best explanation of experience."

As outlined previously, the explanationist skeptic alleges that a commitment to inference to the best explanation entails the conclusion that there is no need to postulate moral facts and properties in explaining the moral judgments we make or the beliefs that

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<sup>27</sup> Harman (1965), p.89.

we hold. Ethical naturalists contend that the skeptic is wrong and that we must be committed to moral facts and properties to explain moral beliefs and justify moral claims. Specifically, the Cornell Realist holds that observation and inference allow us to justify our moral beliefs.

In the final chapter of this work, I will raise some challenges to the claims made by the explanationist skeptic. However, I will first assess whether the CMR theorist's commitment to observation in tandem with their disavowal of non-inferential sources of justification adequately makes the case for a naturalistic account of moral judgment. I now aim to show that there are some key difficulties that undermine the CMR theorist's reliance on to inference to the best explanation. In espousing his commitment to ethical naturalism, Boyd in his "How To Be A Moral Realist" argues that our perceptual faculties yield non-inferential knowledge because they are epistemically reliable. In commenting on the nature of non-inferential knowledge yielded via perception, Boyd maintains that:

For the crucial case of perceptual knowledge, there seem to be (in typical cases at least) neither premises (foundational or otherwise) nor inferences; instead, perceptual knowledge obtains when perceptual beliefs are produced by epistemically reliable mechanisms.<sup>28</sup>

As evinced above, Boyd holds that knowledge acquired via perception can be arrived at absent inference or explicit reasoning from premises. Note that the reliability of perception is key if CMR is to count as a realist meta-ethical theory. The notion at work in Boyd's comment about observation is that we can know features of a belief-independent reality without a need for inference. However, if this is the approach that

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<sup>28</sup> Boyd (1988), p. 317.

CMR theorists wish to take regarding the relationship between observation and inference there are some difficult questions which emerge. Boyd maintains that ordinary observation reliably yields knowledge both in moral and non-moral instances without a requirement for appeal to ethical intuition. In commenting on questions we can raise about the relationship between observation and moral knowledge, Boyd provides a seemingly straightforward response:

"What plays, in moral reasoning, the role played in science by observation?" Let us turn first to the latter question. I propose the answer: Observation.<sup>29</sup>

In line with Boyd's comments above, the CMR theorist maintains that there is no "foundational" role for intuition in moral knowledge. Rather, as follows from a rejection of all non-inferential sources of warrant, the CMR theorist maintains that there is nothing over and above theory-laden observation in assigning moral qualities to the descriptive features of relations, properties or states of affairs. Accordingly, the relationship between observation and moral judgment for the CMR theorist is one in which we make an observation and infer (on the basis of our background moral theory) the presence or absence of a moral property. There is, however, a dilemma which evolves from the preceding approach to moral knowledge.

On one horn of the dilemma, if the CMR theorist maintains that "observation" means accessible by a perceptual modality, it follows there are many facts which are inaccessible to observation to which The Cornell School must be committed to if their coherentist theory of moral knowledge is to count as a form of moral realism. To see where the problem for the CMR theorist lies vis-à-vis the relationship between inference

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 310.

to the best explanation and observation consider the following scenario. Let us suppose that Smith sees Jones about to walk on a patch of slippery ice. Smith calls out to Jones to make him aware of the dangerous patch of ground. It is plausible to think that the best explanation for Smith's action was simply that, given his good moral character he had a reason to intervene. However, Smith's *reason to act* is not something that is accessible to direct observation. So, if we read "observation" in the narrow sense to mean accessible to some sense modality, then facts about reasons for action which are inaccessible to direct observation will have no explanatory power. However, it is evident that, as robust moral realists, CMR theorists take facts about distinctively moral sets of reasons for actions to exist. Importantly, its seeming to someone that he has an obligation to prevent harm requires the postulation of facts which are not accessible to direct observation. However, it is clear that the Cornell Realist does not think that direct observation is required to postulate the existence of some fact, relation, property or states of affairs. At this point the second horn of the dilemma becomes salient.

The CMR theorist holds that it is via a type of inference to the best explanation in tandem with a background theory that we are justified in believing in the existence of moral facts or properties. In essence, we *infer from observable facts* about Smith's behavior that he did indeed have a reason to act. Yet, the problem that comes to the fore is that there are plausibly facts about, for example, Smith's reasons to assist his friend that can most plausibly be described as non-inferential in character. For instance, there are facts about its seeming to an agent that they have a reason to act (or not to take action) which have an immediacy built into them which does not require inference. Specifically, as in the preceding example, Smith may be warranted non-inferentially in holding that he

has some reason to assist his friend. Thus, Smith does not have to infer that he has a reason to call out to his friend. Rather, it is plausible to think that Smith *immediately and without inference sees* that he has a reason to help Jones in his moment of potential difficulty. In scenarios like the preceding where it seems to an agent that there is some reason for acting it is more plausible to think that a believer detects that he has a reason for action via some process which cannot be plausibly assimilated to observation (whether direct or supported in tandem with inferences from a background theory). Thus, the phenomenology at work here is not one which comports easily to the model of observation via some perceptual modality. Importantly, immediate non-inferential judgments are most often associated with non-inferential theories of moral knowledge (e.g., ethical intuitionism). Accordingly, if they are to be realists, the CMR theorist must hold that it is part of the best explanation of moral judgment that there are some facts about reasons which are only available directly via ethical intuition. Thus, the CMR theorist faces the prospect of either: (a) maintaining that reason facts are not observable or (b) reason facts are accessible directly on a non-inferential basis. Either way, the CMR theorist cannot account for the explanatory power of certain moral facts. We can run the same argument when it comes to facts about moral motivation, beliefs and desires each of which are taken by the CMR theorist exist. Therefore, if the preceding line of argumentation is sound there is no way for the CMR theorist to show that moral facts should be countenanced in our overall best theory of moral knowledge absent an appeal to a phenomenology which is most oft associated with ethical intuitionism.

Even if the CMR theorist is able to grasp the horns of the preceding dilemma, there is another difficulty which is now salient. Simply put, if observation can yield moral

knowledge non-inferentially than there is no bar to a non-doxastic type of foundationalism underlying moral knowledge. If this is so, then the coherentism discussed previously will, once again, be shown to fail as a realist account of moral knowledge. However, if the CMR theorist is alleging that there is a difference between moral perception and non-moral perception, then they have posited a bifurcated account of ways of knowing the world. If this is the case, the CMR theorist cannot be offering a parsimonious account of moral knowledge. In essence, the CMR theorist is offering (at least) two ways in which we arrive at knowledge. One way of arriving at knowledge is via ordinary perception, which, if Boyd is correct, often provides non-inferential justification for moral belief. The other route to moral knowledge, as evinced in the inference to the best explanation type account offered by Brink, Boyd and other realists of the Cornell School, is purely inferential in character. However, the problem is that the CMR theorist account of moral knowledge seems to be doubly wrong. First, in eschewing appeal to ethical intuition the CMR theorist has blocked the way to the most parsimonious account of moral knowledge. As I argued above, there are many cases in which the simplest overall account of moral knowledge plausibly requires an appeal to spontaneous, non-inferential seemings.

Second, in holding that moral knowledge is arrived at via observation while *simultaneously* denying a role for non-inferential sources of justification, the CMR theorist owes us an account of what makes moral observations different from observation in other domains. If there is indeed a difference between the two types of observation the CMR theorist must explain precisely why it is that moral knowledge cannot be arrived at non-inferentially.

If the CMR theorist cannot provide such an account (bearing in mind Boyd's claim that we need nothing more than "observation" to justify a moral belief) then the reasons for adopting CMR's account of moral knowledge remain obscure.

## **2.8. Challenges to Inference to the Best Explanation**

Even if the CMR theorist is able to solve all of the preceding problems related to the phenomenology of moral judgment, there are a set of distinct problems related to reliance on inference to the best explanation. The CMR theorist seems to think that inference to the best explanation is the most viable route to securing a place for a realist construal of moral knowledge within our best overall theory of the world. However, in his *A Final Accounting: Philosophical and Empirical Issues in Freudian Psychology* Edward Erwin points to a key difficulty related to parsimony in inference to the best explanation (IBE).

He writes:

We have, then, two rival epistemic theories about cases where simpler theories are justifiably preferred. One says that simplicity itself constitutes part of the warrant; the other says that background theories and evidence alone provide the warrant. If we cannot point to something that favors the first explanation, there is at least one good reason for not according simplicity separate epistemic value. If we do not, then we do not have to answer the difficult question: Why would simplicity in and of itself provide a reason for believing that a theory is true?<sup>30</sup>

As evinced above, there is a problem of a highly general nature which centers on the use of IBE. In line with a commitment to IBE, we might think that the simplest explanation is the one most likely to be true. Yet, there might also be good reason to think that reliance

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<sup>30</sup> Erwin (1996), p.58.

on IBE simply yields the wrong result where parsimony in explanation is the goal. For example, the best explanation of why someone believes something to be morally wrong may need to invoke a set of non-natural properties as the overall best explanation of moral judgment.

There may be strong rationally defensible grounds for thinking that the *simplest explanation* of moral judgment is via the postulation of sui generis moral facts which resist assimilation to the natural order. And, this seems to be the most parsimonious account of the moral seemings which are pervasive in moral discourse and practice. Perhaps non-naturalism is the wrong account of moral knowledge. Yet, any debunking explanation of non-naturalism will have to rely on a complex set of inferences from natural fact to moral judgment.

Even if such naturalistically preferable explanations are available, the CMR theorist must show that those explanations are *more parsimonious*. The grounds for rejecting non-naturalistic accounts of moral judgment must therefore rest on grounds which are independent of the phenomenology of moral judgment itself. In short, the CMR theorist is tasked with providing an error theory of moral seemings if the form of ethical naturalism endorsed by the CMR theorist is to be at all preferable on grounds of parsimony. Simply put, the CMR theorist must tell us why it seems to us that a moral property is present without the need for inference, while simultaneously denying the existence of a faculty of ethical intuition for accessing moral facts and properties. However, even if an error theory of moral seemings is at all plausible, it must be located elsewhere than merely pointing to observation as a source of warrant for moral judgment.

Yet, even if there are independent grounds for rejecting seemings and the attendant non-natural ontology which informs an intuitionistic theory of moral judgment there are still other important features of moral judgment which the CMR theorist's commitment to parsimony leaves unexplained.

For example, there may be a complex network of consequentialist (e.g., utilitarianism) or Kantian principles involved in justifying moral belief. Moreover, as was the case with W.D. Ross' pluralistic form of deontological ethics, there may be as set of moral obligations which cannot be reduced to a single overarching moral principle. It may indeed be the case that our obligations may be pluralistic in nature and only discernible via introspection. Thus, the true explanation of why someone is justified in making a moral judgment may be more complex than one which depends solely on observation. It therefore seems that the CMR theorist is unable to answer the key challenge Erwin poses above, namely: "*Why would simplicity in and of itself provide a reason for believing that a theory is true?*" Notice that the alternative explanation of moral seemings offered by the CMR theorist is itself far more complex than that offered by the intuitionist who countenances a form of non-inferential warrant *which directly justifies* a belief in a moral claim.

So, the problem which evolves from a commitment to parsimony is that it will either be that intuition alone provides the simplest or most parsimonious account of the justification of moral beliefs or the CMR theorist owes us an explanation as to why simplicity should be accorded any evidential value in a particular case.

This is so because, if any form ethical intuitionism is true, it will be the evidence drawn from intuition alone which justifies a believer in making a claim as opposed to the

evidence gathered from observation of non-moral facts and a series of inferences made from those facts to the truth of a moral claim. Yet, absent principled grounds for showing under what conditions we should ignore or retain a commitment to parsimony, CMR will seem to only offer an ad hoc theory of justification for moral judgments in which all moral beliefs are forced into the inferential model.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, I have raised three distinct problems for the inference to the best explanation account of moral judgments advanced by the CMR theorist. The first problem centered on the nature of the coherentism espoused by the CMR theorist. In the first sections of this chapter, I maintained that the CMR theorist who endorses ethical naturalism must either: (a) appeal to non-inferential forms of justification (e.g., cognitively spontaneous beliefs) or (b) succumb to a skeptical challenge regarding the immunity of moral facts and properties from observational testing.

Second, I argued that even if the CMR theorist is able to grasp the horns of the preceding dilemma they face a challenge related to a reliance on observation as confirming the existence of belief independent moral properties and facts about reasons for action.

Lastly, I challenged the CMR theorist's reliance on inference to the best explanation. As I briefly discussed in the final section of this chapter, there are some severe challenges to depending on inference to the best explanation that call into question the naturalistic form of moral realism advanced by the CMR theorist. Thus, I conclude

that the failure of the meta-ethical theory endorsed by the CMR theorist provides some initial grounds for favoring the non-inferentialist theory of moral judgment I advance and defend in the final chapter of this dissertation.

## Chapter Three

### Some Challenges to Recent Empirical Studies of Ethical Intuition

Recently, a group of empirically-minded philosophers have launched a thoroughgoing attack on ethical intuitionism. Surveys of ethical intuition conducted by Shaun Nichols (2009), Joshua Green (2002), Jonathan Haidt (2001), Jonathan Weinberg and Stephen Stich (2001) and other experimental philosophers seem to clearly demonstrate that non-inferential judgments are unreliable. Because their position rests on a thoroughgoing skepticism regarding ethical intuitions, I will collectively identify these philosophers as *anti-intuitionists*. Armed with results gleaned from surveys of ethical intuitions, anti-intuitionists present both epistemic and methodological critiques of ethical intuition. On epistemic grounds, the anti-intuitionist advises us that we cannot be justified in believing an ethical claim absent some justified inference from other justified beliefs which we might hold. If we cannot be justified in believing some claim without making an inference then ethical intuitionism will fail, since it is based on the notion that believers can have non-inferential warrant or justification for believing an ethical claim. The methodological prescription that the anti-intuitionist offers is that we should turn to experimental work on ethical intuition if we are to understand under what conditions believers are justified in their ethical judgments. I think both of these claims should be rejected.

Against the anti-intuitionist, I will argue that some recent empirical research demonstrates that ethical intuitions are reliable sources of justification and knowledge. Accordingly, I conclude that inferentialism is not supported by the findings of the anti-

intuitionists. Where claims about the relationship between empirical research and moral theory are concerned, I maintain that the picture is more complicated than the experimentalist maintains. There is a role for empirical work on ethical intuition. However, I hold that many debunking studies of intuition have limited applicability.

In support of my claims, I present three challenges to recent empirically based attacks on ethical intuitionism. First, I argue that recent empirical work on ethical intuition leave alternative accounts of non-inferential ethical judgment unconsidered. I also show that even if the conclusions of recent studies are warranted, they only impugn the reliability of a narrowly defined range of ethical intuitions. Some philosophers have argued that empirical studies of ethical intuition demonstrate that the presence of an ethical intuition cannot provide good evidence for holding a moral belief. In essence, philosophers who are skeptical of appeal to ethical intuition claim that recent experiments show that the true explanation of non-inferential moral judgment must be a *debunking explanation*. Debunking explanations of ethical intuition are based on the claim that our non-inferential moral judgments are so thoroughly infected with error that appeal to intuition should not count as evidence for or against belief in an ethical claim. Against these critics of appeal to ethical intuition, I hold that many empirical studies of ethical intuition have failed to adequately characterize the conditions under which non-inferential judgments are justified. Accordingly, I argue that the failure to accurately capture the scope and nature of ethical intuitions undermines debunking arguments. I conclude the section by rejecting debunking arguments based on the variability of ethical intuitions as similarly flawed.

Third, I argue that explanationist skepticism regarding the explanatory power of belief-independent moral facts and properties is not warranted by recent research on ethical intuition. Some anti-intuitionists think some recent findings in neuroscience regarding ethical intuitions support the explanationist skeptic's contention that the best explanation for our moral judgments will not make reference to any belief-independent moral facts. While recent work on the relationship between neuroscience and ethical intuition does show that our innate drives to engage in moral evaluation can be error prone, I argue that it does not follow that we can dispense with intuitions across the board. Rather, empirical research shows only that we now have some evidence that is of considerable importance in showing under which conditions intuitions are reliable or error prone.

If I am correct, ethical intuitionism has no better or worse epistemic standing than other theories of knowledge or justification, even if some of our ethical intuitions are erroneous in character. In sum, if the critiques I present in this chapter are on target, some of the central findings of empirical research on ethical intuition can be called into question or rejected altogether. Before advancing and defending my challenges to recent empirically based attacks on the evidential value of ethical intuition, we should briefly consider the nature and scope of the recent experimental work on non-inferential ethical judgment.

### **3.1 The Anti-intuitionist's Case Against Non-Inferential Moral Judgment**

Consider the following scenario: Johnny and Maria are siblings, related "by blood". Over the years, they notice a growing attraction to one another. Deciding to act on their

feelings, they decide to engage in a night of consensual love-making. However, before engaging in their incestuous behavior, Johnny and Maria take all the necessary precautions (i.e, use of prophylactics and other means of birth control). They never speak of their encounter and no one is aware of their liaison. When naive respondents are asked about the morality or immorality of this action, most claim that such behavior is morally wrong.<sup>31</sup> Yet, there is a puzzle here. Most respondents, even when acknowledging that there are no longer any reasons to find such behavior morally wrong still cling to the intuition that such behavior is morally impermissible. Importantly, the intuition is just as strongly held even when respondents realize that their judgment is ungrounded in moral fact or principle. Jonathan Haidt, in his thoroughgoing empirical study of ethical intuition “The Emotional Dog and The Rational Tail” offers an explanation of the disconnect between a grounding in reasons and non-inferential moral judgment. The separation between reasons and intuitive belief occurs because it is *emotions and not reason* which are the ultimate source of moral intuition. In discussing the nature and source of the experimentalist’s attack on moral intuition, Haidt maintains that our ethical intuitions are a product of two illusions. He writes:

If moral reasoning is generally a post hoc construction intended to justify automatic moral intuitions, then our moral life is plagued by two illusions. The first illusion can be called the *wag-the-dog illusion*: We believe that our own moral judgment (the dog) is driven by our own moral reasoning (the tail). The second illusion can be called the *wag-the-other-dog's-tail illusion*: In a moral argument, we expect the successful rebuttal of an opponent's arguments to change the opponent's mind. Such a belief is like thinking that forcing a dog's tail to wag by moving it with your hand will make the dog happy.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Björklund, F. (2004). Intuition and Ex-Post Facto Reasoning in Moral Judgment: Some Experimental Findings. *Patterns of value: Essays on formal axiology and value analysis*, Lund: Lund Philosophy Reports, 36-50.

<sup>32</sup> Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: a social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological review*, 108(4), 814.

The two illusions that Haidt has in mind above refer, first, to the idea that our moral intuitions find their source in moral reasoning, and, second, that moral reasoning can be used to change another person's deeply held moral intuitions. As Haidt and other anti-intuitionists point out, the reasons and moral principles pointed to by the intuitionist are simply irrelevant if the role of moral reasoning is merely to provide post-hoc rationalizations for deeply-held moral beliefs. Post-hoc rationalization refers to the idea that moral reasoners are constructing *confabulations* which, although constructed without the intent to deceive, are arrived at quite apart from the truth. However, it is important to notice that the anti-intuitionist's case against ethical intuition goes beyond the mere observation that some of our moral beliefs are prone to moral dumbfounding. As Peter Singer points out there is a broad challenge that can be raised to any form of moral theory which attempts to ground the truth or falsity of an ethical claim vis-à-vis its support from ethical intuition. Singer writes:

A standard way of arguing against a normative ethical theory is to show that in some circumstances the theory leads to judgments that are contrary to our common moral intuitions. If, however, these moral intuitions are the biological residue of our evolutionary history, it is not clear why we should regard them as having any normative force.<sup>33</sup>

In line with Singer's observation above, there are dire consequences for the intuitionist which can be gleaned from empirical studies of ethical intuition. If sound, the anti-intuitionist argument against ethical intuitionism poses severe challenges for both: a) the claim that non-inferential judgments are more likely to be true and b) the idea that those judgments are justified via a process of rational reflection. With respect to the first

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<sup>33</sup> Singer, P. (2005). Ethics and intuitions. *The Journal of Ethics*, 9(3-4), 331-352.

challenge, if our ethical judgments are the product of post-hoc confabulations as the anti-intuitionist contends, then we have no reason to believe that our ethical intuitions are more likely to be true. If it is indeed the case, as the anti-intuitionist alleges, that surveys of ethical intuition reveal that the sole role of rational reflection is to construct justifications for things we already believe (regardless of their truth or falsity) then there is simply no reason to think a claim like "causing unnecessary suffering is wrong" is true. Rather, we might believe that it is wrong to cause unnecessary suffering to another living being solely because we have imbibed social prohibitions against harming. The truth or falsity of ethical judgments will thus not play a role in explaining why we believe a claim to be true.

With respect to the second challenge, if the anti-intuitionist is correct, moral judgments are importantly different from the non-inferential judgments we make in other areas like mathematics or geometry. The claim that "the interior angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees" seems to be self-evident upon reflection. Such a claim seems justified non-inferentially to us if we have correctly understood the concepts of line segment and vertex. Intuitionists have by and large held that there is a similar warranting relationship involved in justifiably believing a claim like, "all things being equal one has a duty to beneficence." However, if the anti-intuitionist's critique is on target, ethical claims cannot be justified by rational reflection. The path is blocked for rational reflection to serve as a warrant for ethical belief simply because the best overall explanations of our moral judgments are our deeply held beliefs about morality. Similarly, the link between justification and intuitive judgment is also severed if our moral judgments are simply the product of post-hoc confabulation. Further, the self-evidentness of an ethical proposition

cannot justify an ethical claim simply because the proper role of ethical intuition is to be located in its capacity to reflect our emotions and not in a responsiveness to reason. In what follows, I will address each of the anti-intuitionist's critiques and provide some reasons why they should be rejected. My ultimate aim will be to show that ethical intuitions are good sources of justification and knowledge even in the face of strong empirically based attacks on the intuitionist account of moral judgment.

### **3.1.1 Are Anti-intuitionists operating with the correct Theory of Ethical Intuition?**

The first challenge to debunking studies of ethical intuition centers on the issue of whether anti-intuitionists have correctly defined the nature of ethical intuitions. The problem I am pointing to here is that if anti-intuitionists have incorrectly deployed the terms and concepts used in their study of ethical intuition, then the anti-intuitionists' debunking explanations of moral intuition should be rejected.

To see where anti-intuitionists go wrong in their attacks on the intuitionist position we should briefly examine three recent accounts of ethical intuition that represent the way that non-inferential judgments are often characterized in the literature.

They are as follows:

(1) An ethical intuition is the feeling that a specific action is right or wrong, i.e., the intuitive response of an individual as to whether an act is good or evil. Several prominent philosophers have advocated for systems of morality based on ethical intuitionism, and in practice, most people use ethical intuitionism to guide their behavior.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Chaffee, E. (2012). Always Do the Right Thing: Ethical Intuitionism and Legal Compliance. *Washington University Law Review*, 90(1).

(2) The central kinds of intuitions at issue in these metaphilosophical debates are our natural, quick responses to cases, including novel hypothetical cases.<sup>35</sup>

(3) This model suggests that moral judgment is much like aesthetic judgment: we see an action or hear a story and we have an instant feeling of approval or disapproval. These feelings are best thought of as affect-laden intuitions, as they appear suddenly and effortlessly in consciousness, with an affective valence (good or bad), but without any feeling of having gone through any steps of searching, weighing evidence or inferring a conclusion.<sup>36</sup>

As evinced above, each of the preceding studies of ethical intuition have different explanatory aims and research methodologies. However, if I am correct many of these recent studies of ethical intuition suffer from the same flaw. Simply put, they all fail to accurately characterize the types of ethical intuition which are the objects of philosophical investigation. I will now present some central criticisms of the account of ethical intuitions that anti-intuitionists employ in debunking studies.

### **3.1.2 Seeming Theories, Self-Evidence and Inferential Support: Rejecting the Anti-intuitionists' Critique of Intuitionism**

To see where many recent empirical studies of ethical intuition go wrong, we first need to briefly examine the account of ethical intuition advanced by Robert Audi. Audi maintains that classical intuitionistic theories were mistaken in holding that self-evident propositions cannot be inferentially supported. The reason that classical intuitionists maintain that self-evident propositions cannot be inferred from other propositions is that

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<sup>35</sup> Zamzow, J. L., & Nichols, S. (2009). Variations in ethical intuitions. *Philosophical Issues*, 19(1), 368-388.

<sup>36</sup> Greene, J., & Haidt, J. (2002). How (and where) does moral judgment work?. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 6(12), 517-523.

the intuitionist holds that offering inferential support would undermine the status of self-evident propositions as core axioms upon which a normative theory is to be built. Audi maintains that a self-evident proposition can be inferred from other propositions. It is via reflection, however, that the self-evidentness of a proposition can be revealed. To see what Audi has in mind, consider the proposition "it takes four generations to produce great-grandchildren." We may need to make a series of inferences to arrive at such a self-evident proposition via reflection. If challenged as to why you hold that such a self-evident proposition is true you could offer inferential support (e.g., the propositions regarding familial descent which you used to arrive at the self-evident proposition "it takes four generations to produce great-grandchildren").<sup>37</sup> In much the same way, Audi maintains that we might require inference to grasp some fundamental ethical proposition as "self-evident".

As evinced in Audi's recent defense of ethical intuition, we can infer principles of prima facie duty from Kantian categorical imperatives. For example, when we contemplate whether to lie to avoid completing an unpleasant task for a friend, we might infer from the intrinsic end formulation of the categorical imperative that Ross-style prima facie duty to truth telling (i.e., fidelity) which obligates us to truth-telling even when doing so goes against our desires.<sup>38</sup> Importantly, under Audi's doxastic account of intuition grasping some self-evident proposition to be true is achieved via an "adequate understanding" of the contents of an ethical proposition.

And, much in same way that we might need inference to adequately understand the proposition "it takes four generations to produce great-grandchildren" we might also

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<sup>37</sup> Audi, R. (2004),p.49.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.102.

need inference to see that it is self-evident that “we have a prima facie duty to fidelity”. Thus, if Audi is correct, while some claim might indeed be self-evident we might need inference to bring the self-evidence of some axiomatic ethical proposition into clearer focus. Accordingly, Audi maintains that, rather than assuming that a self-evident proposition cannot be supported by anything other than itself, other propositions can provide support for the self-evident. The problem that now comes to the fore is that, if anything like Audi’s account of self-evidence is on target, many theories of ethical intuition evinced in recent empirical work on non-inferential ethical judgment will be in error. This is so for two reasons. First, consider Greene and Haidt’s claim that what is distinctive about an ethical intuition is that it is a judgment which is reached “without any feeling of having gone through any steps of searching, weighing evidence or inferring a conclusion.” However, if Audi is correct ethical intuitions can be arrived at *via reflection and weighing the evidence*. The idea that some intuitively believed claim can be Thus, while Greene, Haidt and other anti-intuitionists correctly note that there is a non-inferential aspect to believing an ethical claim, they leave certain types of ethical intuition unconsidered. Specifically, they fail to consider the strengths or weaknesses of theories of ethical intuition which are based on “weighing the evidence” and arriving at a conclusion which seems self-evident. And, as evinced in Audi’s account of ethical intuition we may also offer inferential support for a self-evident ethical proposition. Hence, the anti-intuitionist attack on intuitions fails from the outset because it utilizes ill-conceived notions regarding the ultimate nature of ethical intuition. There is another related worry for the anti-intuitionist.

The problem I am now raising is that there are important *phenomenological*

*aspects* to ethical intuition that anti-intuitionists fail to consider. Seeming theorists claim that in order for a believer to be justified there must be an “initial intellectual appearance” present. If there are none of these phenomenological features in intuition experience than a believer cannot be justified in claiming that a certain proposition is true. Michael Huemer’s recent defense of ethical intuitionism rests on the claim that there is a phenomenological aspect to ethical intuitions that serves to warrant an ethical claim. Huemer's account of ethical intuition is as follows:

An initial, intellectual appearance is an 'intuition'. That is, an intuition that p is a state of its seeming to one that p that is not dependent on inference from other beliefs and that results from thinking about p, as opposed to perceiving, remembering, or introspecting.<sup>39</sup>

As demonstrated above, on Huemer’s account of ethical intuition intuitions are best thought of as initial intellectual appearances. Further, a seemingly self-evident belief will be warranted by some phenomenal aspect of ethical intuition itself (i.e., if the intuition experience is clear, determinate and consistent). So, Huemer’s perceptualist account of intuition differs from Audi’s in that there must be some additional phenomenological aspect present in intuition experience which serves as a source of warrant or justification. In Audi’s doxastic account of intuition there is no need for anything other than “adequate understanding” of some putatively axiomatic ethical proposition. With a broad overview of Huemer and Audi’s account of ethical intuition before us, we now need to turn to an assessment of the anti-intuitionists case against ethical intuitionism. In raising the first challenge to empirical studies of ethical intuitionism, I am not claiming that Audi has the

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<sup>39</sup> Huemer, (2005), p.102.

correct account of ethical intuition. Nor am I arguing that Huemer's account of ethical intuition is correct.

Which theory of ethical intuition is true is a matter of considerable meta-ethical and meta-philosophical debate. Of course, I am also not arguing that the anti-intuitionist must account for every theory of ethical intuition. I am arguing only that experimental philosophers have not shown that their preferred theory of ethical intuition is correct. In short, there is no reason to think that the anti-intuitionists have provided a workable account of ethical intuition. Perhaps the anti-intuitionist will contend that their chosen theory of ethical intuition is more plausible than the account on offer from either Huemer's perceptualism or Audi's account of adequate understanding account of intuition. However, anti-intuitionists typically do not offer an argument as to why their theory of intuition is to be preferred. In many instances, as evinced in Greene (2002), Weinberg (2001) and others we are simply told that intuitions are to be characterized in the manner that anti-intuitionists propose, without any reason to think that the account on offer is correct. However, even if they do offer an argument as to why their theory of intuition is to be accepted over others it will not be an empirical question which resolves the issue.

Rather, it will be a meta-ethical investigation that reveals the true nature of non-inferential ethical judgments. Importantly, if it is plausible to think that either account of intuition discussed above is true then anti-intuitionists are simply working with the wrong account of ethical intuition. Thus, the distinguishing marks of ethical intuition will not be that they are "quick", "natural", "a feeling" or arrived at "without weighing the evidence". Moreover, if ethical intuitions are arrived at via reflection, then they will also

not be similar to aesthetic responses as Greene and Haidt allege.

Accordingly, defining intuitions in the ways that anti-intuitionist often do misses what is distinctive about (a) the warranting process for ethical intuition and (b) the phenomenology which is associated with ethical intuition. Further, if they have failed to accurately account for the nature of ethical intuition then any empirical results derived from an incomplete account of ethical intuition will be unable to perform its intended role as a debunking effort. To further understand the challenge I am raising for the anti-intuitionist, we should consider how leaving certain salient theories of ethical intuition unconsidered affects the research findings advanced by experimental philosophers.

### **3.1.3 The Empirical Challenge to Debunking Studies of Ethical Intuition**

The following study of ethical intuition is typical of anti-intuitionists approach in debunking appeals to ethical intuition. In surveying laypersons about their intuitions regarding cases in which respondents must choose an optimal treatment to save victims of a flu pandemic, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky reported variability in responses based solely on the way the scenario is described. In commenting on Khaneman and Tversky's work on framing effects in ethical intuition Walter SinnottArmstrong writes that:

If so, the subjects had different moral beliefs about programs A and C and about programs B and D. The only difference within each pair is how the programs are framed or described. Thus, descriptions seem to affect moral beliefs. Descriptions cannot affect what is really morally right or wrong. Hence, these results suggest that such moral beliefs are unreliable.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2004). Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology", p.16.

However, the conclusion that Armstrong reaches, namely that moral intuitions are "unreliable" is not warranted. The problem lies in the way that Armstrong has operationalized the concepts implicit in his theory of ethical intuition. In an earlier section of the same paper where he claims that intuitions are "unreliable", Sinnott-Armstrong defines ethical intuitions as "a strong immediate moral belief." But, this may be the wrong account of ethical intuition. If Audi and Huemer are correct, such beliefs while strongly held or immediate *do not even count as warranted ethical intuitions*. Moreover, while the ethical judgments of naïve respondents may count as non-inferential they may not even qualify as intuitions simply because they do not result from "adequate understanding" or from a non-inferential seeming. As I discussed above, there may be some phenomenological aspect to ethical intuition unaccounted for in a given empirical study of ethical intuition. Further, there may be the need for some inferential support for an ethical intuition even when that intuition is self-evident.

Either way, Sinnott-Armstrong's claim that some belief is "strong" or "immediate" does nothing to show that it should count as an ethical intuition. There is a broad epistemic moral which can be gleaned from the problems which debunking theories of intuition encounter. Just as in the hard sciences, it is vitally important that the concepts employed in empirical studies of intuition accurately reflect the nature of the phenomena under consideration. A wide array of now well-confirmed theories ranging from Boltzman's atomic hypotheses to the genetic explanation of phenotypic variation in organisms were once viewed with skepticism when originally posited. Of course, it would have been bad epistemic procedure to merely assume without explanation that either theory should be discarded. Thus, in much the same way as theoretical refinement

is required in the hard sciences to verify an empirical result, the anti-intuitionist must also provide some meta-ethical grounds for *preferring their theory of non-inferential ethical judgment*. If I am correct, however, the anti-intuitionist has not provided us with sufficient grounds to think that they have adequately conceptualized ethical intuitions. Even if the anti-intuitionist has captured some salient feature of ethical intuition, they may have debunked only a narrow range of ethical intuitions (i.e., those that are quick and unreflective as opposed to the types of intuitions that Audi and Huemer take to be warranted). Moreover, we have some reason to think that the anti-intuitionist is ignoring essential aspects of ethical intuitionism. If this is the case, then the anti-intuitionist's case should be rejected altogether. Yet, let us suppose that the anti-intuitionist has correctly conceptualized, operationalized and deployed a theory of ethical intuition in empirical surveys of non-inferential judgment. There is another related worry which now comes to the fore. I will now discuss a second challenge to recent empirical studies of ethical intuition.

#### **3.1.4 Are The Ethical Intuitions of Laypersons Reliable?**

Typically, studies of ethical intuition do not study the ethical judgments of trained philosophers. Rather, survey respondents are often undergraduates or laypersons unfamiliar with the essential features of normative theories concerning the conditions under which ethical beliefs are warranted. But if this is the case the anti-intuitionist's supposition that there is a fundamental error in theories which appeal to ethical intuitions is misleading.

To see where Sinnott-Armstrong and other anti-intuitionists have a problem where the concern is related to the intended scope of an empirically based attack on intuitionism, we should consider one study that anti-intuitionists favorably cite as supporting an inferentialist account of moral judgment. The study by Petrinovich and O'Neill yielded the following results from a putatively representative sample of moral reasoners:

Petrinovich and O'Neill showed this by varying the order of 3 dilemmas. One dilemma was the familiar bystander trolley case in which participants are asked whether they would pull the switch to save the five. The second dilemma was "scan," in which one could do a scan on a healthy visitor which would kill that individual but provide information to save five dying patients. The third dilemma was, "transplant," in which one could kill a healthy visitor in order to take his organs and give them to five patients who would die without them. In one condition, people received bystander, then scan, then transplant; in the other condition the order was reversed. Petrinovich and O'Neill found that people's judgments of the scan and transplant cases were not significantly influenced by the order in which they appeared. However, order did affect judgments on bystander: people were more likely to say they would pull the switch when bystander was the first dilemma they saw. Overall, there is diversity in moral intuitions along several different dimensions. It is increasingly hard to deny the naturalists' claim that there is a rich amount of diversity in ethical intuitions. The diversity itself is diverse – ethical intuitions vary by culture, gender, individual, and even order of presentation.<sup>41</sup>

The debunking claim that the anti-intuitionist makes about ethical intuition is that the way a question is worded should be completely irrelevant to the moral permissibility or impermissibility of certain actions. Yet, respondents seem to have been swayed into ruling that one action is morally wrong while another is permissible merely by the way the survey question was posed. As demonstrated in studies by Petrinovich and O'Neil ethical beliefs are often subject to a variety of framing effects which are totally unrelated to the truth of a given proposition. In yet another study, we find the responses of

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<sup>41</sup> Zamzow, J. L., & Nichols, S. (2009). Variations in ethical intuitions. *Philosophical Issues*, 19(1), p.373.

laypersons once again infected with error. This time the source of error is to be found in naïve respondents' propensity to judge that it is permissible to harm someone while in other cases ruling that the same action is morally impermissible based solely on the fact that an individual in a given scenario is similar to themselves in some economic, demographic or racial characteristic. The worry for the intuitionist which is raised by these studies is that it is once again some irrelevant measure of similarity which governs a response. In commenting on the epistemic problems raised by the intuitions that are determined by a "similarity" heuristic, Edouard Machery writes:

Alison Stuart and Eric Hatleback have recently argued that our intuitions about the moral permissibility of causing some harm in order to prevent some greater harm is influenced by our felt similarity with the individuals to whom harm is caused. People are less likely to judge that it is permissible to cause some harm in order to prevent a greater harm when they feel that they are similar to the individual harmed.<sup>42</sup>

So, again, the concern raised by Stuart, Hatleback and other anti-intuitionists is that our intuitions are unconnected to what should be the morally salient characteristics of a given action. The problem that now comes to the fore for the anti-intuitionist is that even if we accept their conclusions regarding the unreliability of ethical intuitions among laypersons, we can still reject the claim that there is a fundamental error in appealing to ethical beliefs that seem self-evident.

Considering the origin, scope and aims of the intuitionistic view advanced in Henry Sidgwick's classical theory of ethical intuition provides an initial line of defense against the critique of intuitions advanced by the anti-intuitionist. In short, it has always been a key claim of ethical intuitionism that *not all ethical intuitions have warrant*. Accordingly, it is no challenge for intuitionism to point out that *some* ethical intuitions of

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<sup>42</sup> Machery, E. (2010). The bleak implications of moral psychology. *Neuroethics*, 3(3), 223-231, p.237.

*some* laypersons are in error. Rather, under most theories of ethical intuition, non-inferential beliefs which do not pass certain reflective tests should be discarded.

In The Method of Ethics we find an essential distinction between intuitions which are unreliable and those which can serve as a source of warrant. In order for a given proposition to be accepted as self evident, Sidgwick advances the following four conditions identifying certain propositions as self-evident. These principles are as follows:

**An Intuitionistic Moral Epistemology: Four Conditions**

1. The concepts involved should be clear and distinct
2. The principles should be reflectively self-evident
3. The principles should be consistent
4. The principles should command general consent.<sup>43</sup>

In relation to the first principle, identified as the “Cartesian Criterion”, Sidgwick holds that the “terms of the proposition must be clear and precise.”<sup>44</sup> Beyond conformity with the first Cartesian principle, a given proposition must also meet the second criterion which holds that “any strong sentiment, however purely subjective, is apt to transform itself into the semblance of an intuition; and it requires careful contemplation to detect the illusion”.<sup>45</sup> The third and fourth condition introduce consistency and coherence constraints on the acceptance of any putatively self-evident moral belief or class of self-evident moral beliefs. The crucial point in relation to our preceding discussion of the

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<sup>43</sup> Sidgwick, H. (1907). *The Methods of Ethics* [1874]. London: Macmillan, 1962, p.338.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, p.337.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p.339.

problem which anti-intuitionists introduce for the ethical intuitionist is that these four conditions taken together allow for consideration of precisely the distorting influences on moral beliefs which the anti-intuitionist contends undermine the case for intuitionism. Sidgwick maintains that “if I find any of my judgments, intuitive or inferential, in direct conflict with a judgment of some other minds, there must be error somewhere: and if I have no more reason to suspect error in the other mind than in my own, reflective comparison between the two judgments necessarily reduces me temporarily to a state of neutrality.”<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, as Sidgwick points out, moral judgments are only accepted as self-evident if they pass a rigorous four-fold test. If they do not pass rigorous examination then Sidgwick advises us to reject the intuition altogether or to adopt a state of neutrality regarding our intuitive belief. Thus, as evinced in Sidgwick’s classical theory of ethical intuition, it has always been part of the intuitionistic view that some ethical intuitions are not to be trusted. Accordingly, it is therefore unsurprising that some intuitions formed under the conditions employed in studies of ethical intuition will be in error. As is to be expected, most laypersons tested by the anti-intuitionists do not run through a reflective process when forming ethical intuitions. Yet, it is not a problem for the intuitionist to hold that some intuitions are unreliable.

Just as in the case where our perceptual modalities can be shown to be in error, for example where one seems to perceive that a white object is colored under certain lighting conditions, we can acknowledge that there are some instances in which our moral intuitions go wrong. Yet, we would not be warranted in maintaining that perception is not a reliable source of belief in the external world, absent some other skeptical argument showing that our beliefs are in error. It would be most reasonable to hold that showing

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, pp. 341-342.

there are some instances in which our perception misleads does not impugn the reliability or truth conduciveness of perceptions generally. In the same way, the intuitionist maintains that there is a way to discard some intuitions as errant and others veridical. The intuitionist, as evinced in Sidgwick's fourfold test for ethical belief, has a thoroughly developed machinery for excluding ethical intuitions which are not the product of rational reflection or careful deliberation. Contemporary intuitionists such as Michael Huemer also introduce criteria for excluding intuitions which are spurious. For example, under Heumer's seeming theory of ethical intuition, a non-inferential judgment is only to count as justified if it is clear, consistent and determinate. Audi's self-evidence theory also does not count all ethical intuitions as justified. Rather, only intuitions which are based upon an "adequate understanding" are to count as warranted.<sup>47</sup>

Accordingly, the anti-intuitionists attack on intuition will either be too narrow in scope or will fail entirely to address the true nature and character of our ethical intuitions. Bearing in mind that the intuitionist has a methodology for rejecting some non-inferential judgments as erroneous, anti-intuitionist surveys of intuitionists do not reveal that there is a core problem with a reliance on ethical intuitions as good sources of warrant or justification.

Simply put, the anti-intuitionist has only shown that *some* intuitions of *some* laypersons are in error—a fact which is hardly surprising since most naïve respondents will be unaware of the necessity of excluding intuitions which are error prone. I will now argue that many of the studies pointed to by the anti-intuitionist as supporting inferentialism about moral judgment also suffer from a significant flaw.

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<sup>47</sup> Audi (2004), p. 35.

### 3.2 Do Experimental Studies of Intuitionism Reveal that Foundationalism is False?

In this section, I'll critically evaluate a recent empirically based attack on the epistemology which informs ethical intuitionism. These critics allege that recent empirical work on ethical intuition shows that the foundationalism that ethical intuitionists endorse must fail. The key criticism advanced by the anti-intuitionist is that the need for confirmation that a belief is justified demonstrates that no belief can be foundationally justified. This is so, the critic maintains, because it will *always* be a matter of inference whether a believer is justified in believing a moral claim. The critic maintains that empirical work on ethical intuition shows that we must be in a position to rule out the possibility that our moral beliefs are not subject to partiality, bias, prejudice and other distorting factors which serve as defeaters for thinking that a particular belief is justified. Since foundationalism in epistemology rests on the claim that some of our beliefs are non-inferentially justified, the need for inferential support for a proposition demonstrates the falsity of foundationalism. The recent thoroughgoing critique of ethical intuition in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's "Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology" is reflective of the anti-intuitionists attack on ethical intuitionism. Sinnott-Armstrong maintains that empirical work on intuition shows that many of our intuitive moral beliefs are subject to distortion or bias. Accordingly, it is supposed to follow that a believer requires confirmation that her intuitive moral belief is free of any distorting influence. Since a believer requires confirmation, there are certain principles which must be adhered to in order to be justified in believing an intuitive ethical judgment.

Briefly, the principles advanced by Sinnott-Armstrong are that if a belief is partial, controversial, emotional, subject to illusion and explicable by dubious sources then the

believer must confirm that their beliefs are free from these distorting influences.

Importantly, Sinnott-Armstrong thinks the need for confirmation that a belief is free from error requires *inferential support* for a claim. He thus arrives at the following conclusion regarding the epistemic standing of beliefs which are arrived at via ethical intuition:

If I am right, moral beliefs are partial, controversial, emotional, subject to illusion, and explicable by dubious sources, so all of the principles apply. However, even if not all but only several of them apply, these principles still work together to make it clear that confirmation is needed for justified moral belief. That undermines moral intuitionism. It also shows how empirical research can be indirectly relevant to normative moral epistemology. [emphasis added].<sup>48</sup>

In line with Sinnott-Armstrong's claim above, we should see that because inferential confirmation is required to show that a belief is free of error, there can be no non-inferentially justified beliefs as the intuitionists contend. As I discussed in the preceding section, the research conducted by Sinnott-Armstrong, Greene, Haidt and other anti-intuitionists seems to reveal that many of our non-inferential ethical judgments are subject to distorting influences. Therefore, it seems to follow that the foundationalist is offering the wrong epistemology for moral beliefs since so many of our non-inferential ethical judgments can be shown to result from error prone processes. The anti-intuitionist argues that if we require confirmation for our belief, then foundationalism (given its commitment to non-inferentially justified basic beliefs) fails as the correct account of the justification of our moral judgments. Yet, this does not follow. Consider our belief in the truths of mathematics.

Certainly we can construct surveys of the folk regarding their mathematical

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<sup>48</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, p.358.

judgments. And, without any specific training in mathematics, it is probable that we might find some basic mistakes in the reasoning of respondents untrained in mathematical reasoning. For example, it might be the case that some respondents may not understand that a negative number times a negative number yields a positive number. Or, where geometric judgments are concerned a respondent may not know that circles are symmetrical about their diameters. Yet, even if such a hypothetical survey of mathematical or geometric intuitions among naive informants was carried out it would be inaccurate to claim that there is something wrong with the fundamental axioms that underlie multiplication or geometry. In the same way, showing that there are some basic errors on the part of some naive respondents does not reveal any flaw in the intuitionistic method in ethics. Nor does it show that empirical work is required in order to understand whether a believer is justified in making an ethical judgment. Consider that many of our mathematical judgments are sound solely because they conform to certain axioms. Importantly, we are justified in believing some fundamental mathematical truths because they follow from certain axioms. That some reasoners make some errors does not impugn the mathematical rules or principles themselves. And, in the same way it is no mark against, for example, Ross' theory of prima facie duty that some naïve respondents cannot understand which obligations follow from adherence to certain prima facie duties.

Note that I am not claiming that empirical study is never relevant to understanding the nature of ethical intuition. For instance, an empirical study of ethical intuition could reveal to what extent certain intuitions are shared among respondents. Rather, my aim has been to show that the presence of error in some subgroup of naive informants does not demonstrate that empirical work requires a corresponding

commitment to inferentialism. It may also be useful to determine to what extent our moral judgments are in error. However, it doesn't follow that an investigation of non-inferential ethical judgment requires an endorsement of the findings of anti-intuitionists regarding the implausibility of foundationalism where ethical beliefs are concerned.

So far, the arguments I have presented only show that there are some aspects of intuitionism which are as yet unconsidered by the anti-intuitionist. Taken on their own my arguments do not show any significant issues for the anti-intuitionist. This is so because anti-intuitionists often take themselves to be making a much stronger claim about the nature of moral judgments. As I have argued, it would not be worrisome for the intuitionist if it could be shown that *some* of our ethical intuitions are in error. Appeal to ethical intuitions may only be warranted if those intuitions can be shown to be of a certain character (i.e., if they are directed at self-evident propositions). However, anti-intuitionists block this line of response and maintain their target is a much broader critique of ethical intuitionism. As Sinnott-Armstrong points out:

At least when we should know that moral beliefs in general are so often subject to distortion, we cannot be justified in trusting any moral belief until we confirm that it is an exception to the rule that most moral beliefs are problematic. So moral intuitionists cannot claim that any moral believers are justified without confirmation [emphasis added].<sup>49</sup>

Accordingly, with Sinnott-Armstrong's observations before us we can understand the intuitionist to be making the strong claim that no believer can be justified in a spontaneous ethical belief without inferential confirmation. Thus, the anti-intuitionist contends that intuitionism should be rejected on the grounds that ethical intuitions vary

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<sup>49</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, p.363.

too widely to count as reliable sources of knowledge or justification. I will now argue against the claim that empirical studies of ethical intuition reveal a systemic and pervasive variability in ethical intuition that undercuts the epistemic value of our spontaneous non-inferential ethical judgments.

### **3.3 Does the Variability of Ethical Intuitions show that Intuitionism is False?**

Recently, experimentalists have claimed that there is a growing body of empirical work that demonstrates that intuitionism is a deeply flawed account of moral knowledge. The core claim behind this critique of ethical intuitionism is that intuitions vary too widely to be of any evidential value for or against the justification of our moral judgment. The central notion behind this critique of ethical intuitionism is described by Nichols and Zamzow as encompassing the following broad claims regarding the evidential value of intuition:

Theories that accord with our intuitions are generally considered to be prima facie better than those that do not. However, recent empirical work has suggested that philosophically significant intuitions are variable and unstable in a number of ways...If intuitions support contradictory claims, Alexander and Weinberg maintain that this undermines the idea that intuitions count as evidence. Although they focus on epistemic intuitions, if they are right that the variability of epistemic intuitions impugns their status as evidence, something similar will likely hold if ethical intuitions are variable.<sup>50</sup>

In line with the preceding, the anti-intuitionist is claiming that the inconsistencies of respondents to thought experiments reveals that many of our beliefs derived from intuitions exhibit a lack of consistency. Our ethical intuitions can be shown to vary

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<sup>50</sup> Zamzow, J. L., & Nichols, S. (2009). Variations in ethical intuitions. *Philosophical Issues*, 19(1), p.368.

according to contextual factors, gender differences (Kohlberg 1966) and cultural background (Weinberg and Stich 2001). Variability is a concern because, as evinced in other domains such as mathematics, physics and geometry, we should expect that claims of both a general and particular nature are justified via relations of consistency and coherence with other beliefs we might hold. For example, the determination that Brownian motion is caused by the “molecular motions of heat” is consistent with the metaphysical assertion that the molecules or atoms in the liquid medium are real entities with tangible effects on the movement and agitation of Brownian particles. Hence, a particular claim, such as “the particulates in this solution are exhibiting Brownian Motion” is supported by observation in tandem with general principles regarding the motion of particulates in liquids. In much the same way, the Cornell Moral Realist will hold that ethical observations are justified via relations of coherence between a particular ethical belief (e.g., it is wrong to support factory farming) and a general ethical claim or principle (i.e., it is wrong to cause unnecessary suffering to a living being).

The reason that beliefs in ethics are problematic is that surveys of our ethical beliefs seem to show that our ethical beliefs remain constant even in the absence of confirming evidence. Consider that in the aforementioned trolley cases, anti-intuitionists maintain there is a fundamental inconsistency in the intuitions of naive respondents. The consequences in both instances (i.e., pushing the fat man and pulling a lever are exactly the same) and thus we should judge that both actions are morally permissible/impermissible. Since naïve respondents seem to have moral intuitions which are in conflict, we might then hold, as Sinnott-Armstrong does, that there is further need for inferential support to show that a belief is justified. However, we should wonder

whether an inferentialist conclusion does in fact follow from difference in intuitive judgments between the two versions of the trolley scenario. In this scenario, respondents are asked to imagine themselves standing at a railway switch. An oncoming trolley hurtles down the track with no brakeman at the controls to stop its rapid progress down the track. There is a split in the railway track.

On one side of the track stands one person who is unaware of the oncoming trolley. On the other side of the track are four people who are similarly unaware of the danger. None of the persons in the path of the oncoming trolley can move out of the way in time. If you do nothing four persons will die. Yet, you can pull the lever sending the trolley crashing into the one person, thus saving the other four persons. Most respondents choose to pull the lever thus saving four persons.

However, a difficulty is presented when respondents are tasked with becoming directly involved in order to save the four people.<sup>51</sup> For instance, in a case where respondents must push a large person off a bridge to save the four persons, respondents are typically reluctant to harm someone directly to bring about the optimal consequences in terms of the greatest good for the greatest number. Yet, there is an inconsistency evident in a reluctance to push, because if one reasons on utilitarian grounds, the outcomes are the same. Such findings regarding the impermissibility of directly causing harms lends further credence to the claim that intuitive responses to dilemmas are unreliable because they vary in ways which are not directly relevant to ethical judgments about the scenario. Armed with these findings anti-intuitionists have drawn the following conclusion about the "instability" of ethical intuitions:

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<sup>51</sup> See: Foot, P. (2002). The problem of abortion and the doctrine of the double effect. *Applied Ethics: Critical Concepts in Philosophy*, 2, 187.

[I]f intuitions generated in response to thought-experiments systematically vary on the basis of irrelevant factors, then it is possible to use intuitions generated in response to thought-experiments as evidence for divergent—even contradictory—philosophical claims. But such instability impugns the status of intuitions as evidentiary.<sup>52</sup>

However, despite the seeming strength of this empirically based attack on the evidential value of intuition, the intuitionist has at his/her disposal two avenues of response. First, while anti-intuitionists make much of the ways that intuitions vary, this doesn't impugn the evidential value of ethical intuition. Nor does it show that ethical intuitionism is false, as Sinnott-Armstrong and others have claimed. Rather the epistemic moral to draw from the responses of naive informants equally supports the claim by Prichard, Clifford and others of the particularist school that intuitions might best thought of as justifying ethical beliefs which are of a *particular* kind as opposed to *supporting some general principle*. In short, the experimentalists have only shown that particularism might be the correct theory of moral judgment. As Prichard points out in his classic work, "Does Moral Philosophy Rest On A Mistake?", we might most plausibly think of our non-inferential judgments as justifying particular claims. He writes:

Or, to put the matter generally, if we do doubt whether there is really an obligation to originate A in a situation B, the remedy lies not in any process of general thinking, but in getting face to face with a particular instance of the situation B, and then directly appreciating the obligation to originate A in that situation.<sup>53</sup>

As Prichard maintains above, we might only be justified in our intuitions about particular cases because we just see *directly* what our obligations are. The particularist will find that what might be a compelling reason for moral action in one case might not apply to

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<sup>52</sup> Alexander, J., & Weinberg, J. 2007. "Analytic Epistemology and Experimental Philosophy." *Philosophy Compass*, 2(1), p.66.

<sup>53</sup> Prichard, H. A. (1912). Does moral philosophy rest on a mistake?. *Mind*, 21(81) p.37.

another case. Prichard and others of the "perceptual" school of intuition hold that we can directly perceive what our obligations are in particular cases even if our moral judgments resist assimilation to a single moral standard. Thus, reasons for action and the justification for moral beliefs can only be identified in particular cases. If a particularist account of intuition is correct, moral judgments thus resist assimilation to general moral principles.

It is in this spirit that Prichard observes that we must "directly appreciate" our obligation in particular cases. Bearing in mind the particularist's contention about the nature of morality, we can draw an epistemic moral regarding the anti-intuitionist's disavowal of non-inferential sources of warrant. Simply put, the anti-intuitionist has not provided us with sufficient grounds to think that experimentalism has achieved its debunking aims based on the variability in ethical intuition. For example, in the scenarios which anti-intuitionists hold out as requiring the rejection of non-inferential sources of justification, the intuitionist can respond that it is some morally salient feature of a particular situation we should point to as evidence.

For example, where the proposition "honesty is a virtue is" is concerned we might hold that there are some cases (e.g., where we must lie to protect an innocent) which demand that we withdraw our assent to the truth of such a generalist proposition. Thus, experimental studies of ethical intuition can be plausibly interpreted as requiring a commitment to particularism about ethical intuitions. However, whether or not particularism is the correct account of moral judgment, the fact remains that the anti-intuitionist has drawn an overly broad conclusion about the nature of intuitive moral judgments.

Either way, it is a matter of substantial meta-ethical debate as to whether particularism or some other generalist account is correct. Also notice that empirical results will be of limited relevance in settling what is essentially a meta-ethical dispute. Whether particularism or generalism is the true account of moral judgment thus cannot be settled by giving the folk surveys of ethical intuition. In the best case scenario, if there is indeed wide variation in ethical intuition which resists assimilation to a broad principle, it may add some extra support to a particularist theory of ethical intuition. Yet, if a particularist theory of ethical intuition is a plausible explanation for variability of ethical intuition then the anti-intuitionist's disavowal of ethical intuitions across the board fails.

On the other hand, if the anti-intuitionist makes the weaker claim that only *some intuitions are unwarranted* then the intuitionist can readily agree, given that in most canonical versions of ethical intuitionism it is only non-inferential judgments which pass tests of reflection that are warranted. So, when Sinnott-Armstrong and other anti-intuitionists make claims like "some recent research in psychology and brain science undermines moral intuitionism" or variation in ethical intuitions "impugns the status of intuitions as evidentiary", the question needs to be raised as to whether the lack of conformity to a general set of principles undermines ethical intuitionism?

If anything like particularism about ethical judgments is true, then the answer should be no. Hence, whether understood as the strong claim that no believer is justified or has knowledge non-inferentially or the weaker claim that some intuitions are to be discarded because they are prone to error, either way the anti-intuitionist arguments based on the variability of ethical intuitions should be rejected. Yet, the preceding observations about the variability of ethical intuitions is not all the anti-intuitionist philosopher is after.

My next target will be the claim that intuitionism should be rejected because it encounters a fatal dilemma.

### **3.4 Rejecting the Anti-intuitionist's Dilemma for Ethical Intuitionism**

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong introduces a dilemma which is intended to show that intuitionism cannot be the right account of moral judgment. The Dilemma is as follows:

If a believer is an educated modern adult then she should know that many moral beliefs are problematic (based on the findings of empirical research). She either knows or does not know that her moral belief is an exception to the trend. If she does not know this, she should accept the significant probability that her belief is problematic. Then she cannot be justified without confirmation. If she does know that her moral belief is exceptionally reliable then she has enough information to draw an inference like this: My moral intuition is exceptionally reliable. Exceptionally reliable beliefs are probably true. Therefore my belief is probably true. If this moral believer does not have the information from the premises then it is hard to see why we should call her justified. Moral intuitionism fails.<sup>54</sup>

As evinced above, Sinnott-Armstrong maintains that because our ethical intuitions are subject to distorting factors believers require inferential support. And the empirical findings which point to variability in ethical intuition according to race, the way a particular scenario is described or other irrelevant factors seem to damn intuitionism as an account of our ethical judgments. However, there are two problems for the inferentialist who claims that our ethical judgments vary widely according to irrelevant contextual factors. The first challenge centers on the claim common to many empirical studies of ethical intuition, that errors in non-inferential moral judgments require inferential confirmation. I have already argued that intuitionists have at their disposal adequate lines of reply to this criticism.

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<sup>54</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, p.363.

But let us accept for the sake of argument the anti-intuitionist charge that inferentialism is required to justify an ethical belief. We can see the skeptical attitude toward non-inferential judgments evinced in the claims which Sinnott-Armstrong advances regarding the necessity of inferential confirmation:

Also consider that some evidence suggests (Haidt) that some people have moral beliefs that do not result from any actual inference. The overall strategy is to deny that moral believers are ever justified in holding such spontaneous moral beliefs if they lack certain inferential abilities.<sup>55</sup>

As laid out above, Armstrong seems to think that one cannot be justified unless they know they are in possession of good evidence that they are justified in holding a particular belief. Yet, if this is the account of justification that Armstrong is proposing, I think that his account goes in wrong in a fundamental way. In essence, I think the anti-intuitionist has introduced a meta-justificatory standard which would render all of our putative beliefs unjustified. To better understand where the inferentialist case against intuitionism goes wrong, we need to consider a simple example involving perceptual modalities.

Consider that I am sitting in front of a computer screen. I believe that I am typing on a computer and the words on the screen reflect my input. In short, I believe the proposition “p” that “I am now typing on a laptop computer.” However, under the inferentialist’s account in order to be justified in my belief that “p” I would have to see if I am a reliable evaluator of my sensorial input, so I would have to have further access to a proposition \*p which justified my beliefs that I am typing on a computer. And in turn, I would have to have access to a further belief or set of beliefs to know that I am justified

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<sup>55</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, p.343.

in my initial non-inferential perceptual judgment. Accordingly, we can see the anti-intuitionists account of justification is untenable. Simply put, agents cannot at all times be in possession of all the relevant evidence to know that they are meta-justified in holding a particular belief. If we demand evidence for thinking a p-type belief to be true then we must also demand a third-order belief which justifies us in thinking a second-order belief to be true and so on up the inferential chain. The implication of this type of regress argument has been well noted in epistemology.

As Timothy Williamson has pointed out this is "a self-defeating operational standard for evidence that requires that one is always in the position to know what one's evidence is."<sup>56</sup> In line with Williamson's observations the standard of evidence that demands that one possess good inferential evidence for a belief is self-defeating because there is no principled way to bring the justificatory chain to a close. One principled way to bring the justificatory chain to a close is in a source of warrant which is non-inferential. Yet, since the inferentialist denies all sources of non-inferential justification and knowledge, this means of escape is unavailable to the anti-intuitionist. To see how this problem arises in the case of ethical belief, suppose that we round the corner in our neighborhood and see some hoodlums setting a cat alight just for fun.<sup>57</sup> We might arrive at the judgment that such behavior is morally reprehensible. Upon confronted with such a scenario we might invoke the self-evident principle that "causing unnecessary suffering is wrong." However, in line with the inferentialist critique of ethical intuitionism we can also *ask why we are justified* in believing the utilitarian principle. To demonstrate the truth of such an axiomatic ethical proposition we might point to second-order beliefs

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<sup>56</sup> Williamson, T. "Philosophical 'Intuitions' and Skepticism About Judgment." *Dialectica* 58 (2004): 109-53, p. 114.

<sup>57</sup> Harman (1977), p.8.

about the disutility of causing pain to living beings. But notice! We can further ask if we are justified in holding second-order non-moral beliefs. In order to show that we have good evidence for believing second-order non-moral beliefs we might invoke a meta-justificational principle. Yet, we should see that we have no principled grounds for stopping there.

The problem for the inferentialist becomes even more intractable when we see that one could also demand a meta-justificational principle for each second-order principle we endorse and so on throughout the chain of justification. Simply put, the anti-intuitionist has two options both of which render our moral beliefs unjustified. On the one hand, if we bring our justificatory chain to a close *arbitrarily* we now have a system of beliefs in which our basic beliefs are unsupported. On the other hand, if we demand further justification we face a potentially infinite regress of justification.

Unless we are ready to count some of our ethical beliefs as warranted, then no amount of inferential support will justify an ethical claim. On the other hand, perhaps the anti-intuitionist is claiming that inferential support is required in order for a believer to be justified. However, as evinced in the intuitionistic systems recently advanced by Audi and Huemer, intuitionism need not be committed to the claim that ethical intuitions must be justified absent any support from other justified inferences. In short, inferences can play a supportive role for an ethical claim that is self-evident. So, it is no decisive objection to intuitionism to show that inferential confirmation is needed for ethical belief. Either way, Sinnott-Armstrong's proposed dilemma for ethical intuitionism should be rejected.

However, there is still another empirical challenge to intuitionism that must be considered. Those who are skeptical about intuitions, once again, aim to show that there is a deeper problem with ethical intuitionism. The more significant challenge to the intuitionistic project is to be found in the claim a realist account of intuitions is undermined by empirical research. I will now address that charge.

### **3.5 Is Explanationist Skepticism Supported by Surveys of Ethical Intuition?**

The centerpiece of the anti-intuitionist's case against a belief independent morality is to be found in recent empirical work on ethical intuition. Some recent empirical studies of ethical intuition have found that areas of the brain associated with emotional response are associated with moral judgment. Explanationist skeptics point to the aforementioned variability in responses to the trolley scenario and instances of moral dumbfounding as indicating that putatively objective moral facts are irrelevant to intuitive moral beliefs. Recent research on moral judgment seems to support an anti-realist account of moral intuition. For example, Joshua Greene points out that there is a neural basis for different responses. In commenting on recent empirical research Greene holds that a brain region associated with emotion is activated according to what types of harms are depicted in a given scenario. Greene writes:

Several studies have focused on neural responses to different types of harm. Luo and colleagues (2006) found that the right amygdala and left VMPFC [ventromedial prefrontal cortex] are sensitive to the intensity of harm displayed in pictures, and Heekeren et al. (2005) found that the amygdala exhibits increased activity in response to narratives involving bodily harm. An earlier study (Heekeren et al., 2003) found no effects in the amygdala using stimuli devoid of violence. Finally, individuals with high psychopathy scores exhibited decreased amygdala activity during the contemplation of moral dilemmas involving “personal” harm (Glenn et al., 2008) Thus, the evidence

from functional imaging suggests that the amygdala plays an important role in triggering emotional responses to physically harmful actions.<sup>58</sup>

Explanationist skeptics have pointed to the role of emotionality in moral judgment discussed above as supporting the claim that moral intuitions are best thought of along projectivist or anti-realist lines. Harman and other explanationist skeptics argue that moral facts are explanatorily inert. The reason that Harman contends that moral facts cannot be invoked in a best explanation of the occurrence of an event is that there is always a competing non-moral explanation that possesses greater explanatory scope and power. Given the explanatory impotence of the moral Harman contends that we should jettison the requirement that our moral discourse and practice requires commitment to objective belief-independent moral properties. In essence, for Harman, non-moral facts such as a person's deeply held psychological beliefs or sociological pressures can best explain the moral judgments that we make. Similarly, Richard Joyce in his The Evolution of Morality argues that we cannot invoke the existence of putative moral facts as the best explanations of moral judgments because we can always explain why moral judgments occurred as reflective of non-moral considerations. Joyce argues that when a person reaches the judgment that a certain set of behaviors is morally wrong they have signaled a commitment that exceeds the scope of rational judgment. The reason that Joyce thinks that this is the case is that the intuitive judgments which *ultimately* generate moral principles are reflective of deeply held drives to identify behaviors which are detrimental to group survival as objectively "wrong". However, Joyce contends that moral judgments

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<sup>58</sup> Greene, J. D. (2009). The cognitive neuroscience of moral judgment. *The cognitive neurosciences IV.*, p.8.

only have a pretense to objectivity. According to Joyce, moral judgments are essentially projective in character and reflect the mind's capacity to project human values onto a fundamentally valueless world.

In essence, Joyce's claim is that moral judgments are in place to serve as "conversation stoppers." Accordingly, moral judgments cannot be justified according to self-evident moral principles. If the skeptic is right, the fact that a moral claim seems self-evident or is based on adequate understanding of ethical claim cannot play an explanatory role. If the primary role of moral judgment is to be found in affective response, then our ethical intuitions will do nothing more than capture our deeply held feelings about morality. Thus, the skeptic's case against the realist seems to dovetail nicely with experimental work on intuitions which finds that differences in moral judgment can be located in which region of the brain is active when an agent contemplates a moral dilemma. However, once again, we can ask if the conclusions drawn from recent experimental studies of ethical intuition are too broad. There are two problems which I want to raise for the explanationist skeptic.

The first objection I want to raise for the skeptic also finds its point of origin in empirical research. Horgan and Timmons in their "Morphological Rationalism and the Psychology of Human Judgment" have argued that moral judgments, instead of constituting a group of post-hoc confabulations, are reflective of a population-wide competence. These rapid intuitive judgments are reflective of three factors which lend credence to the view that moral judgment are reflective of a population wide competence: (1) The disposition to treat as reasons the reasons operative in particular cases, (2) the disposition to experience the moral judgment as non-jarring, and (3) the disposition to

treat one activity as non-jarringly related to the having or making of a particular judgment.<sup>59</sup> For example, in Harman's oft-cited cat burning scenario, Horgan and Timmons hold that most people would be able to offer a moral explanation, for example that the torture of an innocent animal is an example of wanton cruelty, which would fit the facts of the case. It is in this sense that believers find their judgments to be “non-jarring”. Horgan and Timmons point to other instances (i.e., where someone is harmed for irrelevant reasons) in which believers would be able to find that their moral explanations are also non-jarring. The non-jarringness of moral intuitions is to be contrasted with cases of moral dumbfounding in which believers find their judgments to be “jarring” because there is a disconnect between the reasons that naïve respondents offer for their judgments and the facts of particular moral dilemmas. Accordingly, Horgan and Timmons hold that most people possess an innately acquired competence in evaluating moral situations.

As Horgan and Timmons point out, there is a class of ethical intuitions which naïve respondents report to be “non-jarring”. When we hold, for example, that “it is wrong to make lying promises” it seems that we apprehend or grasp the truth of such a proposition immediately without the need of inference from other beliefs. And it seems that when the conditions are right we can reliably judge that making a lying promise is an instance of moral wrongness. I have already pointed out that the intuitionist does have the conceptual machinery for rejecting some erroneous intuitions. Now my claim is that, in line with Horgan and Timmons’ observations about the “non-jarringness” of ethical intuitions, there are some grounds for thinking that ethical intuitions do more than capture

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<sup>59</sup> Horgan, T., & Timmons, M. (2007). Morphological rationalism and the psychology of moral judgment. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 10(3), p. 295.

our subjective reactions. Hence, there is a sense in which moral properties can be invoked in the "best explanation of experience". Simply put, it is the "felt veridicality" of an axiomatic ethical proposition that serves as source of warrant. Yet, as evinced in Huemer (2005) and Chudnoff (2013) these initial intellectual appearances are not projective in nature. These seemings are reflective of an awareness of features of reality which we apprehend in intuition experience. Accordingly, even if the anti-intuitionist is able to reject the claim that some moral judgments are justified via initial intellectual appearances, such a finding will have to rely on substantial meta-ethical argumentation. However, a meta-ethical conclusion cannot be drawn from the empirical work on intuitions itself.

In reply to the skeptic's charge, then, we can grant that in grasping a proposition as self-evident, *we are assessing* something about our own mental states. In short, we are cognizant of the "rational acceptability" of holding certain beliefs. And some of these beliefs will reliably track a relationship between certain facts and our judgments. And, in the same way, it also seems to be true that a class of self-evident ethical propositions can be inferentially supported by other self-evident propositions we take to be true. There is nothing obscure or esoteric about either of the preceding accounts of ethical intuition.

My essential point is that all of this data when considered as a whole should imply, at least initially, that the overall best explanatory account of our moral competence may have to include some appeal to realist considerations. Accordingly, if the explanationist skeptic is merely arguing that there are some brain regions which are associated with affective responses to ethical dilemmas, there is no threat posed to ethical intuitionism. As was the case where error or disagreement is present in non-inferential

ethical judgment, the intuitionist will respond that *some moral intuitions* are not justified. The intuitionist also does not think that all beliefs when formed without inferential support constitute genuine instances of knowledge. As Ross points out, not all ethical intuitions are cut from the same cloth epistemically speaking. Instead, there are only a few intuitions which should count as self-evident. In discussing which intuitions should count as self-evident Ross points out that we should think a proposition is self evident if it conforms to the following conditions:

[n]ot 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 mathematic axiom, or the validity of a form of inference, is evident.<sup>60</sup>

With Ross' observations about the nature of self-evident propositions before us, we should see that the intuitionist has grounds to rebuff skeptical arguments which are derived from the affect-laden nature of moral judgment. If a judgment is rashly considered then it cannot count as justified. Consider that I would not be justified in claiming that "circles are not symmetrical about their diameter" if I arrived at such a belief without careful reflection. Of course, under many accounts, such a claim could not count as a genuine instance of knowledge simply because it is false. The fact that such a proposition is non-inferential in character does nothing to show that it is true. And it also does not follow that such a claim is justified merely because it was formed without inference. Accordingly, we should reject the anti-intuitionist's argument against a realist construal of moral intuitions. There is a related problem which we must now consider.

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<sup>60</sup> Ross, W. D. (2002), p.29.

Interestingly, anti-intuitionists accept that some intuitions are non-confabulations. This observation leads to a second line of response to the anti-intuitionist which has thus far been largely unconsidered in recent debates over ethical intuitionism. For instance, Sinnott-Armstrong explicitly points out that some intuitions reliably track the reasons we give for supporting our non-inferential belief. He writes:

There is, admittedly, more agreement about other cases: Would it be wrong to push the fat man in front of the trolley just because you are angry at him for beating you at golf when killing him will not save or help anyone else? I hope and expect that 100 per cent would answer, 'Yes.' But what would that show? The universality of moral beliefs about cases like this one could hardly be used to justify any moral theory or any controversial moral belief. Such cases cannot get moral intuitionists all that they seem to want.<sup>61</sup>

There are two further lines of argumentation which can be gleaned from Sinnott-Armstrong's observations which are revealing of a flaw in the anti-intuitionist's argument. First, there are some intuitions which seem to be justified non-inferentially. In agreement with Sinnott-Armstrong we can hold that most respondents would judge that it is morally impermissible to cause the death of someone for entirely trivial reasons. Yet, this admission exposes a key difficulty for the anti-intuitionist. Importantly, there are some intuitions that have to be accepted as *true* if others can be ruled to be erroneous in character. Moreover, if we focus on the scenario described above we can perhaps detect that there is a general principle operant in the intuitive moral judgment that it would be impermissible to cause harm on purely arbitrary grounds. The principle at play might be something analogous to "causing unnecessary suffering is wrong". If something like the preceding principle is at work in those cases which Armstrong finds to be instances of non-confabulation, then the anti-intuitionist is not warranted in making the broad claim

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<sup>61</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, p.349.

that no ethical judgments are warranted non-inferentially. It will also follow that some claims which are justifiably believed on a non-inferential basis will count as knowledge. Once again, there must be some intuitions which do track the reasons we give for our intuitive judgments.

Notice that if there are no cases of judgment which are reliably linked to the truth then the anti-intuitionist's case against intuitions could not gain traction. The reason is that absent some instances of uncontroversial moral judgments it is hard to discern precisely what the anti-intuitionist means by saying that some of our intuitions are in error. In trolley type scenarios it is the intuition that "the morality of action is determined by the consequences" that is supposed to be decisive in holding that naive respondents are in error when they refuse to push a large person off the bridge to save five. If such an intuition was not accepted as true (at least initially) the anti-intuitionist could not find some deontologically-based (i.e., it is morally impermissible to use a person as a means to an end) non-inferential judgments to be in error or even to serve as uncontroversial contrast cases to the erroneous deontological intuition. Yet, as evinced by Armstrong's observations which I pointed to above, the anti-intuitionist maintains that pointing to some intuitions as true will do little to salvage any form of ethical intuitionism.

The reason that pointing to the truth of some ethical intuitions will not save the day for the intuitionist is, as Sinnott-Armstrong alleges, that there are enough cases of error in ethical intuitions to show that inferential confirmation is needed. However, a second objection to the anti-intuitionist's project comes to the fore. As I argued earlier, the intuitionist has the resources to rule out non-inferential beliefs which are potentially in error because of rash judgment, bias or other sources of error. Moreover, as will now

become apparent, there is some reason to think that recent empirical work on intuition actually shows that some intuitions are truth-linked. Interestingly, there is a growing body of research which vindicates the intuitionistic method of discarding some intuitions as unwarranted. As reported by Greene, one explanation for varying responses to trolley-type scenarios is to be found in Dual Process Theory. In essence, Dual Process Theory rests on the claim that there are two processes activated when faced with a moral dilemma. The first, automatic system becomes activated when an agent comes to believe that some moral obligation (e.g., not to directly cause harm) is at play in a given dilemma. For example, it is hypothesized that the naive respondent's reluctance in trolley cases to push a large person off a footbridge is driven by the automatic component in moral judgment. The second process kicks in where, for example, the utilitarian responses are concerned. As Greene points out in his study of dual process theory:

A substantial body of research supports a dual-process theory of moral judgment, according to which characteristically deontological judgments are driven by automatic emotional responses, while characteristically utilitarian judgments are driven by controlled cognitive processes. This theory was initially supported by neuroimaging and reaction time (RT) data.<sup>62</sup>

If something along the lines of the dual process theory is supported by functional magnetic resonance (fMRI) imaging data, then the intuitionist account of moral judgment in which initial judgments are to be refined via a processes of reflection remains a plausible account of how moral judgments should be justified and which intuitions are instances of genuine knowledge. Those judgments which are subject to affective distortions are to be discarded. Those judgments which are reflective of the cognitive

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<sup>62</sup> Greene, J. D. (2009). Dual-process morality and the personal/impersonal distinction: A reply to McGuire, Langdon, Coltheart, and Mackenzie. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45(3), p.581.

control evinced in the "second level" of dual process theory may have higher epistemic credentials. Accordingly, the response to the explanationist skeptic is to point out that there is a central problem with turning to empirical work on ethical intuitionism in support of a skeptical account of moral judgment. In essence, the claim I am making is that the anti-intuitionist conflates the etiology of intuitive belief with the justificatory force which may or may not inhere in those beliefs. It is not merely the fact that some belief is formed via intuition that warrants.

As Ross, Sidgwick, Huemer and Audi point out it is the fact that a belief has passed certain reflective tests which justifies. The fact that some areas of the brain associated with affective judgment are activated when considering does nothing to show that the requirement for critical reflection upon one's intuitive judgments is not a key part of the justification of ethical beliefs.

As with the case with avoidance of error, ruling out the distorting influence of emotion has *always* been a part of intuitionism. Importantly, my critique of the experimental work endorsed by anti-intuitionists is intended to show that the meta-ethical conclusions which seem to follow from surveys of non-inferential judgment are unwarranted. Joyce and Harman think that evidence of the affect-laden nature of moral judgments shows that anti-realism must be the correct account of ethical intuition. Yet, the anti-intuitionist's conclusion does not follow.

This is so because even if there are affective components in moral judgments, intuitionists do not count intuitions which are the product of emotional bias as justified. And, as I have pointed out, the intuitionist has developed and articulated theories of justification which are constructed to discern genuine intuitions from the spurious.

Moreover, if there are some moral intuitions that are non-jarring then believers will find that their judgments track the reasons they have for making a non-inferential judgment.

Of course, it would be rash for the intuitionist to claim that anti-realism should be rejected based on some empirical grounds we have for thinking that there are enough "non-jarring" moral judgments to serve a contrasts to instances of moral dumbfounding or error. In this section I have argued that we *shouldn't accept the skeptic's claim that a realist account of ethical intuitions is wrong* merely because it can be shown that some our intuitions are formed under conditions where high emotionality or other distorting factors are present. It remains an area of significant meta-ethical debate whether or not moral realism is true or false. I will discuss some reasons for rejecting the explantionist skeptic's attack on moral realism in Chapter five. However, for now we should see that there is much in the anti-intuitionist's position that remains unproven.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, there are significant methodological assumptions which the anti-intuitionist presents that we are told to simply accept without argument. Specifically, if the anti-intuitionist is only interested in testing intuitions which are not the product of careful reflection then their research only reveals a fact about non-inferential ethical judgments which is already well-known—*some* ethical intuitions formed by *some laypersons* under certain conditions are error prone.

Yet, as I have argued there are (at least) two problems with the research methodologies employed by the anti-intuitionists: (a) it is entirely to be expected that some intuitions formed by laypersons will not be adequately filtered to avoid error and

(b) the studies devised by anti-intuitionists are not structured in such a way as to account for the distorting effects of contextual or emotional bias in intuition.

Nor has the anti-intuitionist shown that any of the empirical research on ethical intuitions decisively shows that anti-realism should be the preferred account of moral judgments. Hence, I think that the anti-intuitionist's case against ethical intuitionism should be rejected. As I will now argue, recent accounts of intuitionism also face difficulties. In the next chapter, I present key challenges to recent form of ethical intuitionism. The failure of competing intuitionistic theories provides grounds for accepting the novel theory of intuition I present in the final chapter.

## Chapter Four

### Competing Theories of Ethical Intuition

Suppose you believe that the proposition “causing unnecessary suffering is wrong” is true. We might wonder what justifies our belief in the truth of such a proposition? In the same way that you might think that “two quantities equal to a third are equal to one another” is justified via an understanding of the contents of such a proposition, you might also think that once you have an “adequate grasp” of all the contents of an ethical proposition, you are justified in believing it. And, where our understanding is of a determinate character we might think that we have non-inferential knowledge. Accordingly, we may come to believe that a *doxastic account of intuitions* is true. If the doxasticist is correct there is no need to appeal to perception-like states in moral knowledge. However, there is another path to non-inferential knowledge and justification.

Some intuitionists will point to something beyond an adequate understanding of the contents of propositions as essential to moral knowledge. Following the partial taxonomy of meta-ethical theories given in the first chapter, *perceptualists* think that it is some additional phenomenal feature of intuition which warrants us in believing that things are as they initially intellectually appear. And, where intuition experience is of a determinate nature we can see through to some salient feature of moral reality directly without a need for inference. The core claim of perceptualism is that non-doxastic states are the source of justification and warrant. So, if we are to explain the nature of ethical intuition we must appeal to some aspect of intuition experience. While I endorse many

key theses of the perceptualist theory of intuition, I think some central explanatory challenges can be raised to both of these accounts of non-inferential knowledge. My critique of recent defenses of ethical intuition begins with the doxastic theory of intuition. First, I argue that absent appeal to initial intellectual appearances, the role of "adequate understanding" in a doxastic theory of warrant and justification remains unexplained. Against the doxasticist, I will argue that adequate understanding can only be explained by appealing to: (a) a "felt veridicality" which is analogous to our intuitive apprehension of the truth of mathematical and geometrical axioms and (b) a perception-like ability to detect the right and wrong making features of descriptive properties, relations and states of affairs. Second, I argue that by eschewing appeal to the phenomenal aspects of intuition experience, the doxasticist fails to explain how inference can support or undermine belief in the truth of a putatively self-evident ethical proposition. While my central critique will be directed toward the form of ethical intuitionism endorsed by Robert Audi and Russ Shafer-Landau, the objections I raise in this section will have broad implications for other doxastic theories of ethical intuition.

In the next section, I criticize some aspects of perceptualism. Both challenges I raise here are explanationist challenges. First, I claim that the perceptualist's argument that we perceive belief-independent universals in intuition experience is unsound. The non-representationalist theories of moral intuition advanced by the quasi-realist present a strong challenge to perceptualism's core thesis that we experience features of universals as truth makers for moral claims. I will contend that the quasi-realist can account for the presentational phenomenology associated with ethical intuition, without the need for belief-independent moral properties. Second, I argue that a central principle that many

forms of perceptualism subscribe to also faces explanatory difficulty. The principle of Phenomenal conservatism is broadly characterized as the view that “all things being equal it is reasonable to assume that things are as they appear.”<sup>63</sup> In essence, I will argue that Phenomenal conservatism appears to be vacuous on several plausible interpretations of the “all things being equal” clause in the core thesis of phenomenal conservatism. In what follows, I aim to show that doxastic and perceptualist theories of intuition fail to adequately explain the nature of intuitive justification, knowledge and self-evidence. Yet, the problems I raise here need not fatally undermine perceptualism. In the final chapter, I present some ways that a suitably modified form of perceptualism can overcome the pressing explanationist worries I discuss. However, before I advance and defend a novel perceptualist theory of intuition, we should first consider the broad outlines of competing doxastic theories of intuition.

#### **4.1 Doxastic Theories of Ethical Intuition and Adequate Understanding**

As we have seen, phenomenal conservatives appeal to non-inferential seemings as justifiers for ethical beliefs. The doxasticist holds a much different view of warrant. The recent forms of ethical intuitionism defended by Robert Audi (2004) and Russ Shafer Landau (2005) evince the doxasticist’s thoroughgoing eschewal of the phenomenal aspects of intuition experience. For Shafer-Landau and Audi, there is no role for a sui-generis phenomenal seeming in ethical intuition. Rather, we affirm propositions on the basis of “an adequate understanding of their contents.” If the doxasticist is correct we can explain all instances of justification and knowledge without appeal to a phenomenology

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<sup>63</sup> Huemer (2005), p.99.

of initial intellectual appearances. The only sources of warrant and justification are to be found in conscious doxastic states. In line with a thoroughgoing rejection of non-doxasticism, Audi maintains that:

A proposition is self-evident provided an adequate understanding of it is sufficient for being justified in believing it and for knowing it on the basis of that understanding.<sup>64</sup>

In the next section, I will assess the doxasticist's claim that some axiomatic ethical propositions are "self-evident." For now, the target of analysis will be on the notion of adequate understanding which informs recent defenses of doxasticism. Importantly, before we assess the role of self-evidence in doxasticism we must first take care to consider the notions of warrant and justification in adequate understanding.

Upon an initial consideration of doxasticism, we might think that it is the immediacy or spontaneity of intuitive belief that justifies. However, this is an incomplete understanding of the nature of warrant in doxastic theories of intuition. As I discussed in the preceding chapter, some recent critiques of intuition are flawed from the outset because they interpret the intuitionist as making the claim that it is the etiology belief which is the source of justification and knowledge.<sup>65</sup> However, this critique can be quickly rebuffed because there are aspects of warrant which are entirely separable from the spontaneous appearance of a belief in our cognitive system. Any assessment of doxasticism should thus begin with the realization that the doxasticist holds that our justification for believing some claim is to be located in understanding of the contents of propositions. For example, one might be justified in believing the proposition

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<sup>64</sup> Audi (2004), p. 49

<sup>65</sup> As I argued in the previous chapter, the claim that is something about the etiology of belief undermines some recent empirically based critiques of intuitionism, as evinced in Sinnott-Armstrong (2005), Haidt (2001) and Singer (2005).

"benevolence is a virtue" because they understand each of the concepts involved in such a proposition. Here, we should see that the doxasticist denies that it is some other characteristic of intuition (i.e., its immediacy) which is a source of justification. Again, under doxasticism it is some relatively determinate grasp of concepts which is basis for warrant. There is another objection which can also easily be put to the side. A facile understanding of doxasticism might cause one to think that adequately understanding a proposition generates justification too easily. We might worry that adequate understanding justifies incompatible ethical propositions. Is the claim "one should bring about the greatest good for the greatest number" justified merely because our understanding is adequate in some relevant sense? Yet, suppose that another fundamentally incompatible proposition, such as "one should never be used as a means to an end" is also believed to be true on the basis of adequate understanding. The concern is that the doxasticist is committed to saying that adequate understanding yields indefeasible justification. And, if this initial criticism is on target, doxasticism seems to run into difficulty right from the outset.

The problem here seems to be that if justification is generated so easily then we end up with an arbitrary list of propositions, each of which can be said to be equally warranted on the basis of adequate understanding. However, this superficial objection to doxasticism can be quickly rebuffed. From the outset, it is also important to realize the doxasticist rejects the claim that the warrant for believing some intuitively believed proposition cannot be undermined. Rather, even though one can have warrant or justification for believing a proposition, the doxasticist maintains that our justification for

believing is defeasible.<sup>66</sup> This occurs in two ways. First, we might find that our justification can be undermined via inference. For example, the claim that "it is wrong to intentionally harm another human being" might seem to be known via an "adequate understanding." However, when considering another proposition such as "one is obligated to bring about the greatest good for the greatest number" we might come to the realization that our initial justification has been undermined.<sup>67</sup> For example, we may need to explicitly infer from a set of premises that a certain act is morally impermissible in relation to a Kantian categorical imperative.

In essence, we might need to infer that a particular action we are contemplating might be morally impermissible via reflection on the proposition that "it is wrong to use a person as a means to an end." The idea is that inference might bring some occurrent belief into focus. An occurrent belief is a belief which is accessible to conscious thought.<sup>68</sup> The preceding claim brings to the fore an important difference between propositions which are justified inferentially and those which are justified non-inferentially. As we just saw, some ethical propositions are justified on the basis of inference. On the other hand, there other propositions that we are justified in believing on a non-inferential basis.

Where propositions like these are concerned, we do not need to examine a set of premises and infer a given conclusion. To see why this is so, suppose that you non-inferentially believe that the proposition "in a right angled triangle the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides" is false. However,

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<sup>66</sup> See Stratton-Lake (2003), Audi (2004 ) and Shafer-Landau ( 2005 ) for refutations of the claim that the justification for believing some self-evident proposition is infallible.

<sup>68</sup> See Audi (2004, 48-49), and Nimitz (2010, 357-358), for defenses of the claim that occurrent and dispositional beliefs are justified on the basis of adequate understanding alone.

upon reflection on the Pythagorean Theorem, you come to see that you are not justified in believing such a claim. You might also see that the preceding proposition is also not supported by other self-evident propositions regarding the nature of triangularity. And, as is the case with geometric propositions of the sort we have just considered, other self-evident propositions can support (or undermine) warrant for a seemingly self-evident claim. To fully reveal the flaw in the preceding superficial objection to doxasticism, another question is now salient. How does a doxasticist theory of ethical intuition account for the idea that our justification for believing some self-evident proposition can be undermined? In response, the doxasticist maintains that a proposition or intuitively believed propositions are only *prima facie* justified. For our present purpose it is enough to consider the concept of *prima facie* justification in its most broad outlines. The notion of *prima facie* justification evinced in many recent doxastic theories of intuition is one in which belief in a certain proposition is justified only initially given that reflection upon some occurrent belief or some ancillary dispositional beliefs we hold may serve to undermine or support some intuitively believed proposition. And, as we have seen inference derived from argument can serve as a defeater for belief in some intuitively believed proposition. The doxasticist also holds that *prima facie* justification can be undermined without a need for inference. So, the superficial worry presented here can be rejected. Our justification for believing some proposition need not be indefeasible. In short, both inference and non-inferential understanding can undermine our warrant. However, there is more to doxasticism than the observation that warrant can be inferential or non-inferential in character. And, since *prima facie* justification is central to both perceptualist and doxastic accounts of intuitive knowledge that concept alone will

not serve to distinguish doxastic theories of intuition from its competitors. There is another claim which of central importance in revealing what is unique about a doxastic theory of intuition. The doxasticist claims that some intuitively believed propositions reach a status of “self-evidence.”

#### **4.2 Understanding and Self-Evidence in Doxastic Theories of Ethical Intuition**

For the doxasticist, there are some propositions which, once adequately understood, achieve a special status. If one possesses a determinate understanding some propositions will be seen to be self-evident. The idea that some propositions are self-evident is key because if doxasticism is intended as a viable theory of ethical knowledge, we must move beyond a consideration of the warranting process to an understanding of how it is that some propositions can serve as axioms for a system of ethics. Here an analogy with other sorts of intuitive belief may serve to demonstrate the central importance of self-evidence to a doxastic theory of intuition.

The proposition “All right angles are equal” may require a believer to make some inferences to see its truth. Or we might come to see that such a proposition is true without inference perhaps upon reflection of some other fundamental axioms of Euclidian geometry. However, once one adequately understands such a proposition, we understand it to be self-evidently true. With preceding overview of a doxastic theory of intuition in place we are now better positioned to assess the relationship between justification and truth adequate understanding.

### 4.3 Self-Evidence and Truth in Doxastic Theories of Ethical Intuition

W.D. Ross' deontological system of ethics is oft considered to be the locus classicus of self-evidence theory. Consider the proposition "there are other beings in the world whose condition we can make better in respect of virtue, or of intelligence, or of pleasure."<sup>69</sup> Here, Ross would have us understand that suitable reflection upon such a proposition might reveal to us that such a proposition is true. Of course, this axiomatic ethical proposition might be true and we could fail to see it as such. However, putting aside worries about fallibility, in the same way that the truth of a core axiom of Euclidian geometry supports the truth of other derived propositions in the geometry of straight lines, we can see that truth of a core ethical proposition should serve as a basis for understanding other propositions. For example, I may come understand that certain duties are required of me based on my understanding that some self-evident proposition is true. And, as Ross held, we can also come to believe that we know some self-evident proposition to be true on the basis of understanding alone. We may also think that we know that the derived proposition "I have a duty to assist a sick friend" is true on the basis of an adequate understanding. Notice here that the understanding of an axiomatic proposition generates the connection between warrant for believing a self-evident proposition and the truth of that claim. It is thus that we should come to see that under the doxasticist theory of intuition, knowledge and truth are grounded in our adequate understanding of self-evident propositions. When considering the axiomatic nature of self-evident propositions, it is also vital to notice the core doxastic thesis that some self-evident propositions are justified via adequate understanding still occupies a position of

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<sup>69</sup> Ross (2002), p.21.

epistemic primacy, even where some ancillary beliefs or inference changes our understanding of a proposition.

The doxasticist maintains that just as we might arrive at intuitive knowledge of self-evident propositions in mathematics and geometry via understanding the contents of these propositions, it is also via “adequate understanding” alone that we arrive at the truth of self-evident propositions in ethics. So, with the preceding summary in place, we should see that doxasticism in the moral domain is just the application of a doxastic theory of justification and knowledge to the epistemology of ethical intuition.

In sum, we can crystallize the difference between doxastic and non-doxastic views of intuitions as follows: (1) Non-doxasticists hold that there is a special role to be accorded to perception-like seemings in ethical intuition and (2) Audi, Shafer-Landau and others of doxastic school of intuition deny (1) and maintain that there is no need for appeal to seemings in coming to know some axiomatic ethical proposition on a non-inferential basis.

In the next section, I will argue that despite the initial plausibility of doxastic theories of intuition there are some pressing challenges which can be raised to the core doxasticist thesis that some self-evident propositions can be known via “adequate understanding” alone without reference to non-inferential seeming.

As we shall see in the following section, this core commitment of a doxastic theory of intuition will generate some problems both for the view that some axiomatic ethical propositions are “self-evident” and that there is a role for inference in justifying self-evident propositions.

#### 4.4 What Is The Role of "Adequate Understanding" In A Doxastic Theory of Intuition?

In this section, I will present an objection to doxastic theories of ethical intuition which is broad in scope. The critique I present here centers on two key objectives of the intuitionistic project. First, whether intuitions are conceived of along the lines of self-evident understandings of propositions or initial intellectual appearances, intuitionists will hold intuitions can play a key role in *selecting propositions* which we intuitively believe to be true.<sup>70</sup> Thus, if the adequate understanding account of justification is to offer a theory which has greater explanatory power than competing perceptualist theorist of justification, it must be able to show how beliefs can be justified via adequate understanding. Second, ethical intuitionists maintain that appeal to our spontaneous non-inferential judgments also demonstrates how *inferences can play a supportive* role for a proposition which is intuitively believed. I will argue that the doxastic theory fails to fulfill both these aims.

##### 4.4.1 Adequate Understanding and Conceptual Competence

The objections I present in this section center on the notion of "adequate understanding" endorsed by doxasticists. To understand where the problem for the doxasticist lies, we should consider the way Shafer-Landau conceives of the warrant derived from self-evident propositions. He writes:

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<sup>70</sup> Huemer (2005) points out that initial intellectual appearances allow us to select those propositions which we can intuitively believe to be true. Accordingly, if Huemer is correct a viable form of ethical intuitionism must appeal to non-doxastic states and the phenomenology of intuition experience.

It seems to me self-evident that, other things equal it is wrong to take pleasure in another's pain, to taunt and threaten the vulnerable, to prosecute and punish those known to be innocent, and to sell another's secrets solely for personal gain. When I say such things, I mean that once one really understands these principles (including the *ceteris paribus* clause), one doesn't need to infer them from one's other beliefs in order to be justified in thinking them true. Of course, to understand the principles in the first place, one must have some other-beliefs one must know what pain is, for instance, and what punishment, threats and secrets are. But once one deploys these ancillary beliefs in the service of understanding the propositions in question, no beliefs are required to serve as evidentiary premises from which to infer the truth of the self-evident propositions.<sup>71</sup>

As evinced in Shafer-Landau's doxastic theory of moral intuition there is an explicit use of the term "seems" in accounting for the nature self-evident propositions. Yet, if the invocation of "seemings" is to rise above the level of mere metaphor, moral seemings must carry some *epistemic weight* for the doxasticist. Note that self-evident principles in a doxastic theory of intuition are of central importance because reflection on some putatively self-evident principle (or principles) is supposed to be the ground of justification for other propositions. Yet, the reference to seemings in a doxastic theory of intuition is doubly problematic. First, when attempting to articulate the conditions for "adequate understanding" doxasticists turn to a core principle. The principle can be broadly characterized as one in which an ethical claim is justified on the basis of reflection on moral concepts. Yet, reflection must be based on some determinate understanding if it is to yield justification and knowledge. The notion of determinacy at work here carries the implication that reflection on concepts which is partial, confused or otherwise inadequate cannot yield justification or knowledge. In short, in order to have an "adequate understanding" a believer must possess some competence in understanding some axiomatic proposition. Recent doxasticist theories of intuition exhibit a

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<sup>71</sup> Shafer-Landau (2003), p.248.

commitment to some form of conceptual competence as one of the defining characteristics of having an adequate grasp. Michael Devitt (2011) characterizes the “conceptual competence” account of intuition as follows:

Conceptual Competence And Intuition:

If having an intuition "I" is partly constituted by possessing a concept C and a person possess C and has I

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Then I is true.<sup>72</sup>

In Shafer-Landau’s strain of doxastic intuitionism it is conceptual competence that allows us "to be justified in thinking" a self-evident proposition is true. In Audi, a commitment to conceptual competence allows him to say that the truth of a self-evident proposition is evident "in itself" via reflection on concepts. As Audi points out it is also adequate understanding that allows a type of “knowing how” to apply the concepts embedded in a self-evident proposition.<sup>73</sup> At least initially, there is nothing obscure about how “adequate understanding” is to function in a doxastic theory of justification and knowledge. Simply, an adequate understanding is manifest via an ability (i.e., knowing-how) to apply a given concept.

In line with our preceding discussion of conceptual competence, just as we would deny an adequate understanding to believer who was not able to recognize a three sided object as falling under the concept of triangularity in the self-evident proposition “a triangle is a three sided object”, we are also to think that someone who fails to see that some instance of unnecessary suffering (e.g., burning a cat alive just for the pleasure of it) has failed to manifest a competence in applying concepts in the self-evident

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<sup>72</sup> Devitt, Michael. "No place for the a priori." *What place for the a priori?* (2011): 9-32.

<sup>73</sup> Audi (2004), p.50.

proposition “causing unnecessary suffering is wrong.” However, the question still remains as to how precisely we are to understand the relationship between competence, adequate understanding and the truth of axiomatic propositions in ethical intuition.

Importantly, in line with the doxasticist eschewal of phenomenal seemings, *prima facie* beliefs are supposed to be justified via an adequate understanding alone. And, when that understanding is free of bias, dogmatism and the result of careful reflection the doxasticist will hold that a belief counts as knowledge of a self-evident proposition.

Yet, if there are other necessary conditions for the justification of intuitive belief which lie beyond adequate understanding itself, then doxasticism leaves the connection between the immediacy of intuitive belief and the truth of self-evident propositions unexplained. I will now argue that the doxasticist cannot plausibly explain why we should be justified in believing a self-evident proposition to be true absent appeal to the non-inferential seemings which are the sole purview of perceptualist forms of ethical intuition.

#### **4.4.2 Non-Doxastic States Are Necessary for Adequate Understanding**

I will now aim to show that it is essential to adequate understanding that there is a non-doxastic state present as a justifier for beliefs. Accordingly, I will argue that absent an appeal to non-inferential seemings the nature of the justification conferred by adequate understanding of a proposition will remain "mysterious" and unexplained as Shafer-Landau admits.<sup>74</sup> Yet, the problem is not merely that the nature of adequate

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<sup>74</sup> Landau (2003), p.248.

understanding is obscure. There are many core logical, epistemic or modal principles which are accepted as sound despite the lack of explicit support from inference.<sup>75</sup>

My objections will also not hinge on showing that the doxasticist has not offered a set of principles from which the truth of adequate understanding can be inferred.

Rather, I will show that even if we work exclusively within the explanatory framework introduced by the doxasticist, there is still a requirement for a non-doxastic state in adequate understanding. Shafer-Landau, Audi and other doxasticists hold that a commitment to “adequate understanding” and its attendant notions of conceptual competence provides believer with a kind of knowing-how to discern the logical implications and inferential connections which can be derived via reflection on a self-evident proposition. As I discussed in the preceding section, this knowing-how may take the shape of understanding the correct application conditions for moral concepts (i.e., moral wrongness) to a given instance. Yet, there are many plausible instance of moral knowledge which an appeal to “adequate understanding” leaves unexplained. To cite just one example, consider a scenario which a quasi-realist, perceptualist and doxasticist will all hold is a clear instance of moral wrongness. Suppose you believe that the proposition “it is wrong to cause unnecessary suffering to a sentient being” is self-evidently true.

As in Harman’s oft-cited cat burning scenario, suppose that you round the corner and come across some ruffians burning a cat alive merely for the pleasure of it. Let us also further consider that you might come to see (without the need for inference) that the

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<sup>75</sup> Erwin (2011, 57) argues that despite the lack positive reasons (perhaps derived from inference) for the truth conduciveness of intuitions, we can still appeal to intuitions in ethics along the same lines of appeal to intuition in logic and mathematics. Accordingly, the lack of inferential support for doxasticism need not undermine the claim that we are justified in believing certain core axioms on the basis of adequate understanding.

ruffian's pleasure in immolating the feline is morally wrong. The problem for the self-evidence theorist is that coming to see the ruffian's action *as an instance of moral wrongness* is dependent on a non-doxastic state. In the same way that my experience of a red object seems to warrant the non-inferential judgment that "I am seeing something red in my visual field" it is an experience (non-doxastic state) that places me in a position to see that a given action is an instance of moral wrongness.

Yet, if it is a non-doxastic state that places us in a position to see something as morally wrong, then we must point to something *beyond understanding* to "adequately grasp" a self-evident proposition. Since a moral seeming is essentially non-doxastic state then it follows that the self-evidence theory presented by doxasticist fails to explain how we come to adequately grasp a self-evident proposition and on that basis manifest the necessary knowing-how to apply the concepts in a self-evident proposition to particular instances. As demonstrated in Shafer-Landau's observations about the nature of warrant and justification for ethical belief there is an implicit appeal to "seemings" in his discussion of why a principle is held to be self-evident. We believe a principle to be self-evident because it seems to be so.

However, absent an appeal to the phenomenology of initial intellectual appearance the use of seeming here lacks explanatory power. Of course, I am not merely pointing at the term seeming which is evinced in some doxastic theories and arguing that the mere invocation of such a term commits the doxasticist to the claim that there are some phenomenological aspects to intuition experience which must be present to justify belief.

Rather, my critique is aimed squarely at the core thesis of the self-evidence theory—that we can know some claims to be true on the basis of understanding alone. If this thesis fails then there are further unwelcome consequences for the idea that some intuitive knowledge can be gleaned via conceptual analysis. If the reason that we think that some principle is self-evident to us is because it initially appears to us to be so, then the justificatory work will be wholly accomplished by the seeming and not in the adequate understanding itself. It is at this point that the core problem for doxasticism is made manifest. Importantly, absent a non-doxastic state we also cannot adequately understand the application conditions for the moral concepts which are embedded in self-evident ethical propositions. Accordingly, it will not be enough to possess the relevant concepts. It also cannot be the case that we have arrived at an understanding of the contents of a given proposition via reflection on the contents of those propositions. Thus, in order to correctly deploy a moral concept embedded in self-evident proposition, you must "see" that seemingly disparate phenomena which are the objects of ethical evaluation are unified in some way. However, this again depends on a distinctive seeming. Of course, the doxasticist will respond that I have missed something important here in lodging the preceding objection. The missing element according to the doxasticist is the idea that inference might also be required in order to arrive at some warranted non-inferential moral judgment. Moreover, the doxasticist might respond that I am conflating seeing some particular action as an instance of moral wrongness with the idea that some proposition is self-evident. However, I will now argue that the doxasticist's reply doesn't go far enough.

### 4.3 The Doxasticist Leaves the Role of Inference In Adequate Understanding Unexplained

The problem I will discuss in this section is that it now seems that having an "adequate grasp" requires a non-doxastic state. To see why this is case, consider that Shafer-Landau and other doxasticists would have to agree that we could make an inference of the following sort: "It is self-evident that (all things being equal) it is wrong to take pleasure in another's pain, therefore taking pleasure in burning a living being alive is morally wrong." Plausibly, anyone failing to make such an inference from a self-evident proposition to a particular moral judgment would have failed to adequately grasp the "unnecessary suffering" proposition. Yet, once again, seeing the burning of a cat as morally wrong (and directly so) is not a doxastic feat. It is an instance of what might be termed moral perception.<sup>76</sup> The objection I am raising here is aimed squarely at the idea that some inferential support can be offered from a self-evident proposition to a particular ethical proposition. Yet, making this inference, once again, requires appeal to a non-doxastic state. The result of our investigation of the notion of adequate understanding is as follows: *It is essential to an adequate grasp of a self-evident proposition that there are some initial appearances in place both in coming to understand a self-evident proposition and in possessing conceptual competence.* The doxasticist might reply that I have only shown that our adequate understanding of self-evident propositions partly depends on seemings. But this is enough.

Doxasticism encounters difficulty because a non-doxastic state is required to explain why a proposition "seems" self-evident. Importantly, in line with the doxasticist

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<sup>76</sup> McNaughton (1988) and Audi (2010) develop theories of moral knowledge which are based on the claim that belief-independent values are presented to us directly via perception.

eschewal of phenomenal seemings prima facie beliefs are supposed to be justified via an adequate understanding alone. However, it now seems that it is not understanding alone which justifies belief. It seems that the doxasticist cannot make sense of the centrality of inference in intuitive belief without appeal to seemings.

The ubiquitous appeal to seemings in adequate understanding is thus sufficient to show there is an explanatory problem encountered by the doxasticist. Thus far I have my objections to doxasticism have been of a highly general nature. However, in order to further understand the problems which doxasticism encounters, we should further examine the role that adequate understanding is intended to play in the resolution of a specific challenge to ethical intuitionism—*the beneficence problem*.

#### **4.4 The Explanatory Challenge To Doxasticism as Evinced In Audi's Proposed Resolution Of The Beneficence Problem**

The nature of the explanatory difficulty that the doxasticist faces is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the "Beneficence Problem." In short, the beneficence problem is generated when the prima facie duty of beneficence comes into conflict with other duties we take to be binding upon us. W.D. Ross identifies the prima facie duty of beneficence is one which you are required to "enhance the virtue, intelligence or pleasure" of other sentient beings. However, there is a problem which immediately comes to the fore—namely what should one do when a commitment to beneficence is in conflict with another prima facie duties. For example, under Ross' system we also have a duty to ourselves, which takes the form of an obligation to self-improvement. Yet, as is readily apparent, if we are *also*

*committed* to improve ourselves in terms of virtue or intelligence, we might wonder how it is that we are to weigh the competing values. For instance, we might think that we have an obligation to give to charity. Yet, if we give away all our money (or a significant portion) we might not have enough resources to pursue academic or athletic interests which are necessary for self-improvement. Audi maintains that it is a major defect of Ross' theory that there is no principle upon which to resolve conflict between duties. Moreover propositions which find their support in such *prima facie* duties seem to be self-evident (e.g., "You are obligated to enhance the virtue, intelligence or pleasure of living beings in some capacity."). However, the defect Audi identifies in Ross' theory need not be fatal. Audi maintains that the intuitionist of Ross' stripe should turn to the categorical imperative to provide a means to adjudicate among competing self-evident propositions.

#### **4.5 The Categorical Imperative and The Beneficence Problem**

In tandem with the claim that a self-evident proposition can be evidenced by something other than itself, Audi maintains that it is possible that the categorical imperative can provide a way to resolve the beneficence problem. Consider that under Kant's Categorical Imperative we have a duty not to use a person as a means to an end. However, we also have duties to ourselves which are delimited by a duty to beneficence. Accordingly, in cases where beneficence seems to place too demanding a set of moral obligations upon me, I risk using myself a means to an end, thus not respecting my autonomy, a state of affairs forbidden under the exceptionless axioms of the Kantian system of ethics. The preceding point is important because, under ethical intuitionism as adumbrated by Ross

and others there is a type of intuitive algorithm from moving from exceptionless self-evident principle to prima facie obligations which constitute the “mid-level” ethical principles in Audi’s Kantian intuitionism. Thus, while there: (1) Inferential linkages between each of the core principles and (2) each of the core principle may be evidenced by something other than itself a Kantian Intuitionism retains its core intuitionistic character, as (1) and (2) are no bar to the type of intuitive induction which the intuitionist maintains is central to a theory of self-evident ethical judgments. By combining the strengths of an intuitionistic theory with the strengths of Kantian system grounded in the absolute moral dictates of the categorical imperative Audi maintains that the intuitionist has the means to ground our obligations and duties. However, Audi's putative resolution of the beneficence problem reveals a key challenge to the self-evidence view of ethical intuition.

#### **4.6. Seemings and The Return of the Beneficence Problem**

Notice that in order to view the categorical imperative as self-evidently true, I must come to see that the categorical imperative overrides other duties. As Audi points out, if one adequately understands the categorical imperative we can resolve conflicts between duties.<sup>77</sup> Here again there is an explicit appeal to the type of “knowing how” which is so essential to self-evidence theories of intuition. Simply, as Audi points out, we if we understand each of constituent concepts autonomy and equality which are embedded in the self-evident propositions in both formulations of the categorical imperative, we can judge some duty as overriding other obligations. The doxasticist maintains that this must

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<sup>77</sup> Audi (2005), p.108.

occur solely via appeal to beliefs. In essence, the categorical imperative must now seem to override other duties. And in turn, I now have justification for believing that a categorical imperative circumscribes my commitment to beneficence, where there is a violation of my duties to self-improvement. However, the problem which was to be resolved via the unifying role of the categorical imperative now returns in force. The unwelcome result which can be gleaned from our examination of Audi's attempt to resolve the beneficence problem is that the core propositions of Audi's deontological system cannot play their intended supportive role for other propositions which derive their justification from the categorical imperative.

As Audi points out, to be justified in believing that the categorical imperative places limits on my obligation to beneficence relies upon a seeming that the categorical imperative is *globally grounded* in way that other principles are not. The claim that a proposition is more globally grounded than others refers to the idea that it is "based on an understanding of the proposition seen in the context of the overall grounds for it."

<sup>78</sup>However, the question remains precisely what the doxasticist means when they invoke the notion that inference has changed the way a proposition is "seen." What is the nature of this seeming? If it is not a non-doxastic state then where can we locate the justificatory force of adequate understanding in selecting axiomatic propositions? It cannot be a further set of beliefs which yields an adequate understanding. Simply, if I cannot "see" that the categorical imperative places limits on my duty to beneficence, I have not displayed the required "knowing how." The problem is that we cannot locate the change in understanding which is achieved via the supportive role of inference solely by appeal to doxastic states. In essence, an adequate understanding must both explain the

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<sup>78</sup> Audi, (2004), p.46.

justification of core axioms and other principles which derive their support from those axioms. However “adequate understanding” accomplishes neither task.

Once again, without an appeal to seemings and their attendant phenomenology of initial intellectual appearances the role of inference coming to see the truth some self-evident proposition, in this case axiomatic propositions of a Kantian system of ethics, is left fundamentally unexplained. Simply put, a seeming is not a belief. If we are to capture what is important about the unifying potential of the categorical imperative we must have a grasp of the global grounds. In sum, both the "global grounds" for belief and the role of inference in adequate understanding remain obscure. Accordingly, if the objections I have raised in this section are on target, there are key aspects of intuitive belief which the doxasticist either leaves wholly unexplained or require an appeal to non-doxastic states. These core problems for the doxasticist leave some form of perceptualism as the most plausible alternative to doxastic theories of intuition. However, I will now argue that recent defenses of perceptualist theories of intuition also must respond to some pressing challenges if they are to remain a viable alternative to doxasticism. I begin with a broad overview of the perceptualist account of intuition.

#### **4. 7 Understanding Perceptualism: Intuitions and The Phenomenology of Initial Appearances**

Perceptualist theories of intuition, refer to "positive phenomenological qualities" as the characteristic of intuition experience that confer justifiedness. In adumbrating his theory of ethical intuition Huemer also maintains that there is a close connection between a seeming state which accompanies an intuition and the truth of a claim which is accessed

through intuitive seeming. Huemer's claim is representative of the view shared by many seeming theorists that it is some internal process that reveals the nature of ethical reality. In essence, as evinced in Huemer's and Bedke's account of moral judgment the perceptualist conceives of the principle of Phenomenal conservatism as follows: "All things being equal it is reasonable to assume that things are as they appear."<sup>79</sup> The preceding gloss on perceptualist's view of intuitions brings to light some key objections both to the idea that intuition experience gives us access to features of mind-independent universals and the plausibility of Phenomenal conservatism as a overarching principle of epistemic evaluation. In what follows, I want to address two claims, both of which are key to the phenomenal conservatism that Huemer endorses. The first claim is that our moral intuitions concern abstract properties—universals. From the outset it is important to understand that my purpose is not to challenge the general notion that universals exist as a matter of necessity. My challenge to phenomenal conservatism is *explanatory in nature*.

The explanationist argument I will critique in the following section is based on the notion that phenomenal conservatism can be plausibly conjoined with a robust form of moral realism. I think that the phenomenal conservative has an explanatory burden that must be addressed *before* we can think that our moral intuitions track abstract properties which exist independently of our perceptions of them. The second claim I want to address is that "adequately" grasping a universal cannot cause false intuitions about it. I will argue that this claim should also be rejected.

The reason is that our moral intuitions are different in many respects from the other sorts or non-inferential. judgments which are warranted solely by the phenomenal

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<sup>79</sup> Huemer (2005), p.99.

characteristics of intuition experience. I now turn to an assessment of the first of the phenomenal conservative's arguments.

#### **4.8 Phenomenal Conservatism, the Transparency of Intuition and Universals**

In answer to the question, "what are the objects of awareness in intuition experience?" the perceptualist claims that we grasp aspects of universals. To see what the perceptualist has in mind, consider the following proposition: "If two coplanar lines intersect, then they intersect in a point."

Putting aside the question of whether such a proposition is self-evident to a believer who possesses the concepts which embedded in a fundamental geometric principle, we should see that perceptualist conceives of our perception of the facts which make ethical claims true along the same lines as our perception of facts that serves as truth-makers for geometrical claims. Just as we might think that facts about lines segments exist independently of our beliefs, we are also to hold that there are universals whose features we are directly aware of intuition experience.

And where our seemings are clear, consistent and determinate we can grasp those features of reality which are the objects of intuition experience. Further, we are placed in a position to see that such a claim must be true, given facts about coplanar lines which we perceive directly via intuition.

If one still finds the thesis of the transparency of perception obscure, we can also point to garden variety cases of perception of physical objects as evincing what it is to have a perception that is "transparent" in the relevant sense. Suppose there is an object in

my visual field. And, let us further assume that it produces an immediate impression that there is a silver object before me. I might come to believe the proposition "there is a nickel on the ground." Of course, there are other initial impressions that also may be present.

For example, I may also seem to perceive there is a round object on the ground. The important point is that for the perceptualist there are properties of external objects (e.g., roundness, color) which feature in my immediate awareness. The preceding claim is what the perceptualist has in mind in advancing the thesis of transparency of perception. Importantly, the perceptualist claims that when we have an intuition experience, it is intuitions that serve as "vehicles of awareness of external things."<sup>80</sup>

Yet, some care must be taken in understanding precisely the perceptualist intends in applying the transparency of perception thesis to ethical intuition. One might think that what the perceptualist conceives of intuitions as a type of evidence. The notion here is that intuition experience gives us some evidence that we are perceiving some external fact. And from our seeming awareness of some external object we might then infer that there is some existing thing external to our awareness.

But it is important to see that this way of thinking about the nature of intuitions fundamentally misconceives what the perceptualist takes to be essential to intuition experience. The transparency of perception when applied to ethical intuition, should be understood as the claim that no inference is required to have a seeming of a determinate character that some external object is present. In arguing against an inferentialist reading of the transparency of perception, Huemer writes:

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<sup>80</sup> Huemer,(2005), p.121.

The thesis of the transparency of perception, like the parallel thesis of the transparency of intuition, is a phenomenological one: in perception, we find ourselves presented with physical phenomena of various kinds; we do not find ourselves presented with mental states... Likewise, in ethical intuition, as a point of phenomenological fact, we find ourselves presented with moral properties and relationships, not with mental states.”<sup>81</sup>

So, in line with the discussion above, the phenomenal conservative maintains that we can conceive of our moral intuitions as giving us access to features of universals which serve as truth-makers for moral claims. This is perhaps why the phenomenal conservative thinks that disputes over the existence of universals can be put to the side so easily. Importantly, the phenomenal conservative thinks that existence of universals follows straightforwardly because of the presence of these abstracta in intuition experience.

In tandem with the thesis of transparency of intuition it is our direct apprehension of universals that allows intuition experience to play its role in unveiling aspects of reality which are unavailable via the apprehension of particulars. In arguing for phenomenal conservatism Huemer is quite explicit in arguing that objects of awareness in intuition experience are universals. He writes:

“Universals’ exist necessarily. ‘Universals’ are abstract things (features, relationships, types) that two or more particular things or groups have in common. For instance, yellow is a universal. It is something that lemons, the sun and school buses have in common.”<sup>82</sup>

From these broad observations about the existence of universals in color perception, Huemer maintains that a similar argument can be made for the existence of moral universals. In essence, universals are a ubiquitous feature of a belief-independent reality whose features we perceive directly without a need for observation, empirical theorizing

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p.122.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p.124.

or inference. In making his case for phenomenal conservatism, Huemer reasons as follows:

**Phenomenal Conservatism and the Existence of Universals**

1. The following statement is true:  
(Y) Yellow is a color.
2. The truth of (Y) requires that yellow exists.
3. Therefore, yellow exists.
4. Yellow is a color, and lemons have it.
5. No word or idea is a color, nor do lemons 'have' words or ideas.
6. Therefore, yellow is not a word or idea.<sup>83</sup>

Hence, the phenomenal conservative presents an argument of the preceding sort as evincing both the ubiquity and necessity of universals in accounting for the phenomenology of color perception. And, in much the same way, the phenomenal conservative would have us believe that “all things being equal” we have reason to believe that our moral intuitions reveal features of reality that lie beyond individual existing things. It is in intuition experience that we come to see what superficially are disparate phenomena are unified at a deeper level. Yet, there is good reason to doubt that phenomenal conservatism yields an acceptable explanationist argument for moral realism. In the following section, I will evaluate some objections derived from non-representationalism. In the final chapter I suggest an emendation to a perceptualist theory of ethical intuition that may be of use in countering explanatory challenges to a realist

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

account of moral knowledge. However, we must first understand the nature of the explanatory challenge for perceptualist accounts of intuition.

#### **4.9 Does Phenomenal Conservatism Give Us Access To Universals?: Assessing the Non-Representationalist Challenge**

The first explanationist challenge to Phenomenal conservatism thus centers on the question of whether we perceive universals directly in intuition experience. Of central importance here is the phenomenal conservative claim that we grasp aspects of universals in intuition experience. I aim to show that the application of phenomenal conservatism to moral intuition yields some difficult explanatory challenges which must be addressed. Specifically, while we might think that we can trust intuition experience in the case of mathematical, logical or modal intuitions we should ask whether there some *domain specific issues* which undermine appeal to phenomenal conservatism as applied to *ethical intuition*. The phenomenal conservative thinks that there is a distinguished and privileged explanatory niche for universals in our best overall of the necessary and sufficient conditions for arriving at a clear, consistent and determinate ethical intuition. Yet, the phenomenal conservative approach to moral intuition is doubly problematic.

First, we encounter the challenge posed by the non-representationalist. Non-representational approaches to moral perception also appeal to the initial appearances which the phenomenal conservative countenances as having explanatory power. However, the non-representationalist offers a different conception of the explanatory role that moral seemings should play in meta-ethics. If the non-representationalist is correct, then there is no need for our moral intuitions to reflect features of a belief-independent

moral reality, even if those apprehensions are of “universals.” Hence, where explanationist arguments are our concern, the non-representationalist also thinks that there is a distinguished and privileged explanatory niche for moral seemings. In essence, it is the explanatory role of seemings to reflect a pre-existing moral sensibility to find certain descriptive aspects of the world as seemingly possessed of rightness, wrongness or other moral properties. Where moral seemings are concerned, the arguments advanced by form the quasi-realism presented in §1.2 represent the strongest threat to phenomenal conservatism.

Fundamentally, Quasi-realism subscribes to a thoroughgoing form of non-representationalism. If the non-representationalist is correct, just as in an instance in which we come to think that the lines in the Muller-Lyre illusion are of different lengths or where a straight stick is *seems* to be bent in water, the non-representationalist thinks that our moral seemings which purport to be of an objective (i.e., belief independent ) moral reality are similarly illusory in nature.

The arguments of the quasi-realist reveal that the first premise of the argument for phenomenal conservatism putatively requiring the existence of a universal ( i.e., yellowness) cannot be extended to the existence of belief independent moral properties, relations or state of affairs. Note that it isn't merely the presence of a potential defeater from non-representationalism that undermines phenomenal conservatism. Rather, it is that the non-representationalist has shown that the truth of the first premise does not *require the truth of the existence claim* in the second premise.

The explanationist skeptic and the quasi-realist will both agree that it does indeed seem to us that there is a moral property present when we make moral judgments.

However, in line with a commitment to non-representationalism, the skeptic argues what occurs in moral intuition is that we have some more or less developed moral beliefs and sentiments which are the ultimate cause of our supposed apprehension of belief-independent universals.

Accordingly, absent other inferentialist arguments for accepting phenomenal conservatism the truth of the first premise only entails that we perceive ordinary descriptive properties, relations or state of affairs as possessing a moral property. The ethical intuitionist who is tasked with making a plausible case for moral realism might think that we must appeal to facts about universals in order to make sense of inferences. Yet, this line of response has been anticipated by the non-representationalist. This leads to the second explanationist challenge to phenomenal conservatism.

#### **4.10 Quasi-Realism and Inferential Support for Phenomenal Conservatism**

Where conditionals are concerned the non-representationalist will hold that putative reference to the truth of moral statements can be replaced by a "logic of attitudes." My concern here is not with the deflationist account of truth which informs quasi-realism. Rather, my objection hinges on whether a statement like "yellow is color" can be used to warrant an existence claim of the sort that Huemer introduces in the second premise of the argument for the existence of universals in the moral domain.

As I pointed out in section 1.1, the non-representationalist can account for statements like "If it is wrong to cause unnecessary suffering to a living being, then flogging a baby to death is morally wrong" via a re-translation of moral discourse. In

accounting for the putative truth stating surface of moral discourse the quasi-realist can effect a retranslation as follows:

Quasi-Realist Conditionals and Moral Intuitions:

(P1) If (B!) on (x) then (B!) on (Y)

(P2) (B!) on (x)

(C) (B!) on (Y)

In essence, in line with a non-representationalist account of moral discourse the acceptance of a certain state of mind (i.e., disapproval) in the antecedent should also yield a commitment to the truth of the proposition in the consequent. The retranslation scheme above yields the following results. First, the non-representationalist has shown that there is a distinguished and privileged explanatory niche for moral seemings. In essence, it is the explanatory role of seemings to reflect a pre-existing moral sensibility to find certain descriptive aspects of the world as seemingly possessed of rightness, wrongness or other moral properties. Yet, the non-representationalist has also shown that our seemings can be thought to be just that—merely seemings. There thus is no requirement to postulate the existence of belief-independent moral facts in accounting for the truth of conditional statements. A rejoinder to this objection is perhaps what Huemer has in mind in the fifth premise in the argument for phenomenal conservatism. Yet, here again there is no requirement for belief independent moral universals. The non-representationalist can simply reply that we can make inferences from the seeming presence or absence of a moral property. The problem that I am pointing is not merely that there are plausible anti-

realist arguments on offer. Any realist account of moral knowledge must address these type of challenges. Rather, as I will stress throughout this chapter, the threat is to the core phenomenal conservative claim that “all things being equal it is reasonable to assume as things, as they appear.” However, adhering to the explanatory framework introduced by Phenomenal conservatism yields two conclusions: a) the non-representationalist has shown that there is no requirement for belief-independent universals in explanations of our distinctively moral seemings and b) there is no requirement for reference to belief-independent universals in making sense of conditional claims. If this is so, then the argument for the existence of universals cannot plausibly be extended to the moral domain . Yet, perhaps there is still an explanatory role for belief-independent moral properties if further inferential support can be offered for the existence claim in the second premise of Huemer’s argument in the preceding section. However, I will now argue that the effort to provide further inferential support for phenomenal conservatism also encounters difficulty.

#### **4.11 Quasi-Realism And Inferential Support For Phenomenal Conservatism**

Note that perhaps there are might indeed be good reasons to reject the quasi-realist’s approach to understanding the need for descriptive facts as truth-makers for moral claims. Perhaps the non-representationalist conclusions will not go through because of the Frege-Geach problem or some other realist inspired rejoinder to the quasi-realist project. But we should notice that if the phenomenal conservative takes this route we have now abandoned phenomenal conservatism as the supreme epistemic principle which is supposed to yield knowledge non-inferentially. To see why this is so, suppose that a

skeptic challenges our belief that "yellowness" exists. What could be our response? Plausibly, our response could take the form of an inferentialist type argument for the existence of color properties. For example, we could appeal to facts about absorption properties or emission spectra which produce the impression that certain objects are colored. In the same way, we might think that just as we require descriptive facts about colored properties to make sense of the inferences derived from the existence of colored properties, we should also think that such a role can be performed by universals as the truth-makers for ethical propositions. Thus, along the lines of the argument presented by the CMR theorist we could say that we can infer the existence of a moral fact from the existence of other properties (e.g., special science properties). Yet, this inferentialist response violates a central principle of phenomenal conservatism: that it is via intuition experience itself we can come to know the essence of universals. Huemer, in adumbrating his phenomenal conservatism based perceptualism, argues that:

To begin, with I propose that having a clear, consistent and determinate concept is sufficient for one's grasping a universal or universals. There is no possibility of one's failing to refer to anything (universals are plentiful in this sense, and their existence is necessary). Notice, however, that the defining characteristics of an adequate grasp are intrinsic-consistency, clarity, and determinacy belong to the nature of a concept in itself, as opposed to depending on relationships between the concept and something else. So, the intrinsic characteristics of a concept sometimes are sufficient for its constituting an adequate understanding of the nature of a universal. Furthermore, adequately grasping a universal cannot cause false intuitions about it. Therefore, in some cases—namely, when one's intuitions are caused (only) by clear, consistent and determinate understanding—the internal process by which one forms an intuition guarantees their truth.<sup>84</sup>

Importantly, we should notice that if we attempt to offer an explanation for a belief in the *existence of moral properties* along the lines of our inferential argument for the existence of colored properties we can no longer claim that it is something "intrinsic" which allows

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<sup>84</sup> Huemer(2005), p.126.

us to grasp the nature of moral universals. Rather, as was the case with the seeming perception of colored properties it is some justified inferences from facts about subvening descriptive properties which justifies the "belief independence" aspect of moral universals. Therefore, contrary to a key assumption made by the phenomenal conservative we cannot grasp the nature of moral universals *directly*. Moreover, and perhaps even more troubling for the phenomenal conservative, there is now no real *epistemic difference* between an inferentialist form of moral realism advanced by CMR and the phenomenologically based intuitionism, proposed by Bedke, Huemer and others of the perceptualist school. Note that even the Cornell Realist will grant that we do indeed have moral *seemings*. But the CMR theorist thinks that the best overall reasons we have for thinking that belief independent moral facts, properties exist are provided via *inference*. Thus, it will not be anything about the etiology of belief that puts us in touch with features of belief-independent universals. The phenomenal conservative may think the preceding objections tendentious, as this seems to be an unacceptable explanatory burden to place upon this form of ethical intuitionism. But the explanatory burden which the phenomenal conservative must discharge is generated by the assumptions that the phenomenal conservative makes about intuition experience. And if the non-representationalist challenge is on target we have some domain specific reasons to be skeptical about the claims the phenomenal conservative makes about our moral intuitions. Ultimately, while we might think that phenomenal conservatism is true about logical or mathematical intuitions there are *domain specific reasons* which undercuts phenomenal conservatism as it applies to ethical intuitions.

Accordingly, the claim made by the phenomenal conservative that a denial of Phenomenal conservatism leads to a generalized skepticism does not go through. Again, we have some evidence also drawn from seemings which casts doubt on the core thesis of phenomenal conservatism. However, perhaps the phenomenal conservative will hold that there is another privileged role for non-doxastic states in accounting for our knowledge of self-evident propositions. An examination of the challenge from variable relevance also calls into question another core thesis perceptualist theories which rest on principles analogous to phenomenal conservatism. I will now argue that the effort to provide further support for phenomenal conservatism based on a non-doxastic apprehension of the truth of a “self-evident” axiomatic ethical proposition also fails.

#### **4.12 Phenomenal Conservatism and the Challenge of Variable Relevance**

In line with a commitment to phenomenal conservatism, Huemer provides some examples of propositions which can be known on a non-inferential basis. Among the propositions whose truth can be grasped via an initial intellectual apprehension is the proposition "courage, honesty and benevolence are virtues." Importantly, the phenomenal conservative claims that propositions such as the preceding: a) pick out universals which are the right making (or wrong making) non-moral properties of an action, relation or state of affairs and b) the truth of some putatively axiomatic proposition can be known immediately without reference to anything but inference independent apprehension of the features of universals. I think that both of these claims can be challenged. First, the principle "enjoyment is better than suffering" might be understood as a proposition which can serve as a foundational moral principle. Once we see that this proposition is true we

also have reason to believe that there is a moral property present. Accordingly, our belief that "causing unnecessary suffering is wrong" might be like the non-inferential judgment that "circles are symmetrical about their diameter". In short, as in the case with circularity, once we are in possession of the relevant moral concepts we can verify a moral claim to be true on the basis of intuition experience alone, quite apart from inference. Initially, there does seem to be some reason to think that we can model moral knowledge on our apprehension of the universals in domains like mathematics and geometry. For example, in considering the proposition "circles are symmetrical about their diameter" I can be justified in believing such a claim because, if I have correctly grasped the nature of circularity, such a claim is guaranteed to be true. I may make a mistake in my reasoning and fail to see such a proposition as being true. Yet, this does not mean that such a proposition is false. Rather, if the phenomenal conservative is correct such a claim is "guaranteed to be true" if I have a clear, consistent and determinate intuition. But there is evidence that our moral intuitions do not function in the manner envisaged by the phenomenal conservative. Importantly, counterexamples to the core thesis of Phenomenal conservatism can seemingly be multiplied ad infinitum.

For example, when considering the proposition "honesty is a virtue" we should see that there are some instances in which honesty is not the manifestation of a virtue. Consider that, in a context in which a commitment to honesty causes more harm than good (e.g., conflicts with a commitment to benevolence) what may be a virtue actually counts against a given action.

To cite just one example, in a recent survey nurses who care for patients suffering from dementia have admitted to being dishonest with their patients. This is so because

dementia sufferers often cannot remember when a loved one has passed away. When they are reminded of the passing of their loved one some dementia patients can re-experience the painful experience of loss and bereavement as if it has happened for the first time.<sup>85</sup> In cases such as the preceding, we might hold that it is not a virtue to be honest with a patient. The challenge I am raising for the phenomenal conservative lies in the role that moral concepts are supposed to play in moral intuition. In reply to these worries, the phenomenal conservative will appeal to *ceteris paribus* clauses in fleshing out the import of the “all things being equal” proviso in the core thesis of phenomenal conservatism. Consider that when we deploy a *ceteris paribus* clause the perceptualist will maintain that it is a non-doxastic state that plays a role in showing why a proposition is only self-evident “all things being equal.” For instance where the proposition “one should not make lying promises” is concerned, we can perhaps see via inference that there are contexts in which the seeming self-evidence of a proposition has been overridden. Crucially, the perceptualist maintains that it is constitutive of adequate understanding that one *sees* that there are *ceteris paribus* clauses which play a role in the justification of belief. And, if the perceptualist is right grasping the relevance of a *ceteris paribus* clause and determine whether a self-evident proposition is inferentially supported is achieved solely via appeal to non-doxastic states. In short, if the perceptualist is correct there is no explanatory problem which is generated by a commitment to phenomenal conservatism.

However, this line of reply offered by the phenomenal conservative fails. In order to avoid arbitrariness there must be some reasonable grounds for accepting or rejecting a proposition as self-evident. In essence, we must grasp which grounds for a moral

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<sup>85</sup> Marzanski, M. (2000). On telling the truth to patients with dementia. *Western Journal of Medicine*, 173(5), 318.

judgment are relevant in a given context. In turn, our moral concepts should track that variable nature of the grounds of moral judgment. This is so because in order to avoid arbitrariness in moral judgment, the variable nature of moral concepts as embedded in a suitably relevant *ceteris paribus* clause must be taken into account. However, the problem which comes to the fore is that if we now re-translate the core principle of Phenomenal conservatism to mean “all things being equal it is reasonable to assume that things are as they appear, so long as they are well supported by inference from supporting *ceteris paribus* clauses which justify initial intellectual appearances” then we have removed any explanatory advantage of appealing to Phenomenal conservatism in the first place.

We should now notice that the core principle of phenomenal conservatism, “all things being equal it is reasonable to assume that things are as they appear” now appears to be vacuous. It also does not follow that “there is no possibility” of a failure of reference. In essence, unless the variable grounds for moral judgment is taken into account our seeming apprehension of the presence of a moral property will fail to refer. Consider that we may have a clear, consistent and determinate grasp of the concept of moral rightness. On that basis, we might possess clear consistent and determinate intuition that “enjoyment is better than suffering.” However, once again, we might imagine in case in which the enjoyment of a sadist adds to the negative valence of an action. Perhaps we might then withdraw assent from the generalist proposition that “enjoyment is better than suffering.” The particularist is in a strong position to explain variable relevance. Does the phenomenal conservative have a viable reply to the particularist that can be derived from intuition experience itself? The answer seems to be no. This is so, because if moral properties exhibit variable relevance, the phenomenology of moral intuition will involve

grasping a feature that is relevant in a particular case, as opposed to referring to a property which is always relevant. In turn our moral concepts must also reflect the variable nature of the grounds of moral judgments. The unwelcome result for the phenomenal conservative is that merely possessing moral concepts and reflecting on their nature will not yield the strong cognitivist conclusions that Huemer and other perceptualists are committed to under the core thesis of phenomenal conservatism. Again, the point to focus on is whether Phenomenal conservatism has greater explanatory power than competing theories of moral knowledge. Recall that for the phenomenal conservative it is initial appearances which stand in a position of epistemic primacy. However, if our intuitions derived from seemings do not reflect the variable grounds of moral concepts, then phenomenal conservatism leaves central aspects of ethical intuition unexplained. Accordingly, if the arguments presented in this section are on target there are key explanationist challenges which undermine appeal to phenomenal conservatism as a realist theory of moral intuition. Notice that it is no part of Phenomenal conservatism that phenomenal conservatism's core principles must be true absent support from inference. Yet, even if this is the case, the explanationist challenges advanced here undermine the supportive role of inference from facts about the use of conditionals, non-moral facts or *ceteris paribus* clauses.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have raised some challenges to recent defenses of ethical intuitionism. As I argued, the problem for the doxasticist resides in the necessity for appeal to seeming states in accounting for our knowledge of self-evident ethical propositions. If the

arguments I have presented here are sound there are reasons to reject the core claims of the doxasticist where our knowledge of self-evident propositions is assumed to be yielded directly via “adequate understanding” alone. I also attempted to demonstrate that there are significant challenges which the doxasticist encounters when attempting to show that self-evident proposition can receive inferential support from other propositions which we can plausibly believe to be true. Ultimately, if I am correct the justification for propositions which are candidates for self-evidence will wholly reside in the seemings and not in an understanding of the proposition. Absent further reasons to think that propositions can be justified or intuitively known via adequate understanding alone the doxasticist theory of intuition generates an unacceptable explanatory gap between an adequate understanding of a proposition and the truth of a proposition. The explanatory burden encountered by the phenomenal conservative is to show that direct apprehension reveal something to us about truthmakers for moral claims. And, as I argued, there is no explanatory advantage yielded by merely pointing out that moral seemings have an immediacy built into them. So, there must be something which is explanatorily distinctive about phenomenal conservatism. But if the only good reasons we have for believing intuition experience gives us access to belief-independent aspects of reality are provided via inference then we are simply saying that we have some ethical intuitions. Yet, the phenomenal conservative has not shown that some clear, consistent, and determinate phenomenological aspect of intuition experience puts us in touch with belief-independent *universals directly*. Some perceptualists have argued that a denial of Phenomenal conservatism leads to a thoroughgoing rejection of all forms of intuition.

However, I have argued that there are *domain specific* reasons for believing that some of the core theses of phenomenal conservatism can be challenged. Importantly, as was the case with the challenge from variable relevance many central challenges also are derived from initial seemings. Yet, there might still be good grounds for thinking that some form of ethical intuitionism is viable, even in the face of pressing skeptical challenges. In the final chapter, I present some lines of response to explanationist skeptics which have thus far remained largely unconsidered in recent defenses of ethical intuition.

## Chapter Five

### A Defense of Perceptualism

As evinced by the long running debate between Cornell Moral Realists and their skeptical opponents, a core explanationist principle has gone largely unquestioned. We can broadly characterize this principle as follows: “P is a real property if and only if P figures ineliminably in the best explanation of experience.” For example, Don Loeb (2005), Brad Majors (2003), and most prominently Nicholas Sturgeon (2009) assume that in order to count as a “real property” a property should play a role in the best explanation of some aspect of “experience.” However, if I am correct recent defenses of moral realism based on this principle all fail. I maintain that the source of the problem for recent realist theories in meta-ethics does not lie in a false ontological presupposition about the existence of moral facts but in thinking that the most plausible case for moral realism must be made along inferentialist lines. If the arguments I presented in the preceding chapters are sound, the inference to the best explanation based arguments of the Cornell Realist are vulnerable to the arguments of the explanationist skeptic. The explanationist skeptic’s abductive arguments seem to show that the best explanation of our moral judgments need not appeal to belief-independent properties, relations or states of affairs. However, given the failure of the inferentialism endorsed by the Cornell School of meta-ethics, the moral realist might wonder how skeptical arguments can be rejected absent appeal to inference to the best explanation. In this chapter, I aim to show that a perceptualist theory of ethical intuition has distinct explanatory advantages over competing inference to the best explanation accounts of moral knowledge.

The plan of this chapter is as follows. First, I argue that we can know some fundamental ethical propositions to be true on the basis of an initial seeming. For example, the proposition “honesty is a virtue” seems to be true without the need for inference. I hold that where axiomatic ethical propositions such as the preceding are concerned there is a distinctive presentational phenomenology in place which is wholly distinct from belief. Accordingly, the defense of ethical intuition I present here agrees with the phenomenal conservative on the necessity for non-doxastic states as a source of warrant. In the next section, I suggest a potential line of response to the explanationist skeptic that has thus far gone largely unexplored. The second line of argumentation is based on the premise that the phenomenal characteristics of intuition experience give us a non-inferential awareness of the truth-makers for an intuitively believed proposition. I suggest that our moral intuitions function analogously to visual seemings. I argue that in the same way that a visual seeming might reliably reflect a reality which exists independently of our perceptions, a moral seeming might also reliably track features of belief-independent reality. After providing a broad overview of a perceptualist theory of ethical intuition, I devote the remainder of this chapter to showing how a commitment to perceptualism can play a vital role in responding to the challenge of explanationist skepticism. I also defend perceptualism against other arguments presented by ethical naturalists. Against these critics of perceptualism, I aim to show that intuition experiences and the belief-independent moral properties which serve as truth makers for intuitively believed propositions occupy a privileged explanatory niche. I conclude this chapter with an assessment of the explanationist skeptic’s remaining challenges to moral realism. I show that even if we leave key premises of the explanationist skeptic’s argument

unchallenged, Harman's skeptical conclusions regarding the explanatory impotence of belief-independent moral facts, properties and relations still do not follow.

Hence, if the arguments I present in this chapter are sound, then there are compelling reasons to think that perceptualism has a distinct explanatory advantage over competing skeptical and non-skeptical approaches to moral knowledge. In the following sections, I will lay out the broad outlines of a perceptualist form of ethical intuitionism. However, before going further, we should briefly assess how the theories of moral knowledge we have considered up to this point fare in relation to key challenges to realist accounts of moral knowledge.

### **5.1 Assessing Explanationist Challenges to Competing Theories of Moral Knowledge**

One initially plausible line of reply to the explanationist skeptic is based on the claim that we can infer the existence of belief-independent moral properties, facts and relations via coherence relations with other facts in our overall best theory of the world. However, if I am correct, inferentialist theories of moral knowledge are vulnerable to the analog of the isolation objection in mainstream epistemology.

As I discussed in section §2.2, the isolation objection is the claim that there is no warrant for thinking that the coherentist has provided sound arguments for holding that our best overall system of belief is connected to a belief independent world. Likewise, it seems that the coherentism which CMR endorses fails to explain how it is that moral facts, properties and relations should figure in the best overall explanation of moral knowledge. Hence, the inferentialist theory of moral knowledge advanced under CMR is

particularly vulnerable to the arguments of the explanationist skeptic since relations of coherence alone cannot provide evidence that our moral beliefs connect with a belief-independent reality. Given the failures of inferentialist accounts of moral knowledge, we might think that some form of intuitionism is best positioned to counter strong explanationist objections to a realist account of moral knowledge. However, I argued that some recent perceptualist theories of intuition also fail to explain key aspects of warrant, knowledge and belief.

As I pointed out in §4.9 perceptualist theories which are based on Phenomenal conservatism are vulnerable to a non-representationalist challenge which is analogous to the arguments advanced by the explanationist skeptic. I have also pointed out that doxastic theories of intuition also encounter key explanatory difficulties.

These problems centered on the "adequate understanding" account of warrant. I pointed out that several plausible readings of the locution "adequate understanding" are susceptible to challenges which show that a non-doxastic state is *necessary for warrant*. Given the failures of non-doxastic and doxastic theories of intuition I have considered thus far, we must now assess another option for the ethical intuitionist. The intuitionistic theory I will present in the following section evinces a commitment to certain key theses of perceptualism.

However, I will argue that there are some important realist rejoinders to the arguments of the explanationist skeptic which have thus far been largely unconsidered. In the following section, I lay out the broad outlines of a perceptualist theory of ethical intuition. However, first it is important to identify some commonalities between a perceptualist theory of intuition and a perceptualist theory of *ethical intuition*.

## 5.2 A Perceptualist Account of Justification and Knowledge

In what follows, I will present the essence of a perceptualist theory of intuition. After discussing some of the core theses of a perceptualist intuition, I present an emendation to perceptualism which I contend will be of central importance in rebuffing the arguments of the explanationist skeptic. I begin with an overview of a perceptualist theory of justification and knowledge. The perceptualist models intuitive knowledge and justification in terms of non-doxastic states. For the perceptualist, intuitions are an experiential state with a wholly different phenomenology from inference or belief. The preceding point must be emphasized when characterizing a perceptualist theory of intuition because there must be something which distinguishes intuition from other modes of knowledge-acquisition. One might suppose that the perceptualist thinks that by having an intuition experience you thereby obtain some evidential ground from which you can infer the truth of a proposition. However, this is a misunderstanding of what the perceptualist claims regarding the nature of intuitive knowledge. Claiming that we have an intuition experience and then come to believe that an initial seeming gives us some *evidence* that we are perceiving features of a belief-independent reality wrongly construes perceptualism as a form of inferentialism. But if it is wrong to think of perceptualism as involving the claim that intuitions provide a type of evidence for believing some proposition, we might wonder what characteristics of intuition experience warrant belief without inference. Elijah Chudnoff (2013) maintains that when speaking of intuitive judgments we should bear in mind that there is an essential phenomenological difference between the intuition experiences which license certain judgments and the judgments themselves. To fully grasp how perceptualism is intended to work as a theory of

knowledge and justification we should apply Chudnoff's observations to a case of intuitive knowledge. Consider the following proposition: "there exists a unique distance between any two points in space and a line is the shortest path between them". How can we know such a claim to be true? It would be implausible to think that we could come know such a claim to be true via inference. Must we run through an inferential process each time to see such an axiomatic proposition is true? The answer seems clearly to be no. Once we have a grasp of the contents of such an axiomatic proposition clearly in mind we can come to see that a proposition such as the preceding is true apart from the support provided by inference. We might need to make some initial inferences to come to see the truth of such a claim. However, inference is unnecessary (again, once we possess the necessary understanding) in coming to see such a proposition to be true. Importantly, in the proposition involving the unique distances on a line we might think that we must also have some intuitive access to the truth-makers for a geometric proposition. Perhaps we might think that it takes some act of imagination to see such a claim to be true. And, in some instances we might be able to visualize the features of abstract reality which serve as the truth-makers for such a claim. In short, the perceptualist holds that intuitions possess *presentational phenomenology*. In claiming that intuitions have a distinctive presentational phenomenology, we have located an important between intuition and inference. We are also now better positioned to understand the importance of presentational phenomenology to the perceptualist.

As Chudnoff points out, the perceptualist holds that it is via the presentational phenomenology intuition experience that we are aware of the items which are truth-makers for an intuitively believed proposition. In discussing the role of truth-makers in a

perceptualist theory of intuition Chudnoff stresses that there is intuitive awareness of the “chunk of reality” that serves as a truth-makers for some intuitively believed proposition.

He writes:

Consider two propositions about circles: (1) Two circles can have at most two common points. (2) If a quadrilateral is inscribed in a circle, the sum of the products of the two pairs of opposite sides is equal to the product of the diagonals...My intuition of (1) does not just represent it as true; it also makes it seem as if its truth is revealed to me by my intuitive awareness of its subject matter, i.e. my intuitive awareness of those abstract items in virtue of which it is true.<sup>86</sup>

Accordingly, with Chudnoff’s observations regarding the nature of truth-makers in intuition experience before us, we see how it is that the claim that intuitions possess presentational phenomenology puts us in a position to have intuitive knowledge of the truth-makers for some intuitively believed proposition. Huemer and Chudnoff both endorse something analogous to the core thesis of phenomenal conservatism discussed in the preceding chapter. In much the same way that Huemer maintains that “all things being equal” we are justified in believing that things are as they appear, under the perceptualism endorsed by Chudnoff we also have some prima justification for believing a proposition is true based on presentational phenomenology. So, the key point to realize about the perceptualist’s claims regarding the nature of an intuition experience, is that intellectual appearances are a source of warrant. Crucially, it is the phenomenology of *intuition experience itself* that also yields knowledge. When we have an initial seeming of the veridicality of some intuitively believed propositions, we are in a position to know a proposition to be true. Thus the perceptualist is able to point to some key

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<sup>86</sup> Chudnoff, (2013) , p. 51.

phenomenological aspects of intuition experience which are important not along epistemic dimensions, but which are also explanatorily powerful. In essence, it is via an initial intellectual appearance that we come to see that some proposition is true and to have some awareness of the truth-makers for a given proposition. The preceding account of justification and knowledge is unavailable to competing theories of moral knowledge that do not countenance non-doxastic states as having explanatory power. So, as discussed above, the perceptualist's core contention is that intuitive awareness brings us into contact with a reality that exists independently of our beliefs.

For example, where our concern is with geometric propositions, the perceptualist holds that we perceive some features of abstract reality which are truth-makers for a given claim. Accordingly, we can capture the essence of the perceptualist's claim that we have some non-doxastic awareness of the truth-makers for an intuitively believed proposition via the following locution:

Whenever you seem to intuit that  $p$ , there is some  $q$  (maybe  $= p$ ) such that—in the same experience—you seem to intuit that  $q$ , and you seem to be intellectually aware of an item that makes  $q$  true.<sup>87</sup>

With the preceding overview of a perceptualist account of intuition before us, we should now consider the explanatory importance of perception-like states in intuition.

Importantly, as I argued in the preceding chapter, the perceptualist's appeal to non-doxastic states generates an model of justification and knowledge which has greater explanatory power vis-à-vis competing doxastic accounts of intuition. This is so because the perceptualist is able to explain how we come to have warrant and knowledge on the

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<sup>87</sup> Chudnoff, Elijah. "What Intuitions Are Like." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82.3 (2011), p.641.

basis of the presentational phenomenology of intuition experience. Thus far, I have presented some core claims which help to distinguish a perceptualist theory of intuition from its competitors. In the main, I agree with the perceptualist account of justification and knowledge in domains such as mathematics, geometry and perhaps where modal truths are concerned. However, I now present some grounds for thinking that there should be an empirical component to ethical intuitionism. Accordingly, it is the empirical aspects of the view presented here that help to distinguish the defense of perceptualism presented in this chapter from other recent defenses. I now turn to a discussion of how we should conceive of the truth-makers which are grasped in intuition experience.

### **5.3 The Search For Truth-Makers In A Perceptualist Theory Of Ethical Intuition**

Suppose we come to believe that the axiomatic ethical proposition “I have a duty not to harm others physically or psychologically” is true. Do we have reason to believe that such a proposition is true because our culture disapproves of harming others? Is the explanation for our belief in the wrongness of killing an innocent person based on inference? Perhaps we might think that we *justifiably believe certain actions are morally wrong* based on our contingent moral psychology and then make inferences from that claim as a source warrant for other beliefs we might hold. If so, then we might hold that our moral beliefs are wholly subjective in character. Or is there something independent of belief which serves as a truth-maker for an ethical proposition?

Some moral epistemologists have argued that is a non-doxastic state which serves to warrant ethical propositions of both a general and particular nature. These philosophers also make another claim regarding the nature of intuition experience. As evinced in

Huemer (2005) perceptualist theories of intuition which of a realist orientation are based on the claim that we have some direct unmediated apprehension of the truth-makers for an ethical proposition. However, while it might be easy to see that the truth-makers for an intuitively believed proposition in geometry or mathematics are universals or abstracta, we might wonder whether the truth-makers for ethical intuition should also be construed along similar lines.

In what follows, I am not claiming to completely resolve the difficult and complex issues which center on the perception of universals in intuition experience. Rather, I hope to suggest an emendation of perceptualism that places the seeming theories in a stronger position vis-à-vis competing theories of moral knowledge. However, in order to see why I propose a modification to a perceptualist theory of ethical intuition, we should first consider the broad outlines of a competing naturalistic account of moral knowledge.

#### **5.4 A Challenge to A Recent Defense of Ethical Naturalism**

In the second chapter, I presented some broad challenges to an inferentialist account of moral knowledge. There I argued that a commitment to the inferentialism endorsed by realists of the Cornell School fails to show how it is that our moral beliefs connect to a belief-independent world. However, there is another naturalistic defense of moral realism should be assessed. Perhaps we might think that a place for belief-independent facts, properties and relations can be secured via the unique function that moral concepts occupy in an overall best naturalistic theory of the world. If so we might come to think

that moral realists should adopt a type of *functional role semantics* in order to counter the arguments of the explanationist skeptic. Ethical naturalists who appeal to functional role semantics adopt the view that normative concepts are grounded in the *functional* role that moral concepts occupy.

The role of moral concepts in our overall best theory of the world is fixed by descriptive properties. Thus broadly construed, we should see that functional role semantics is a subset of conceptual role semantics. Under conceptual role semantics, the meaning of a given term is to be identified via the conceptual role occupied by a given term in our overall best theory of the world. In this respect, Frank Jackson points out that there are key points of commonality between functionalism in philosophy of mind and a functionalist account of moral concepts:

In the case of the mind, we have a network of interconnected and interdefinable concepts that get their identity through their place in the network.... The network itself is the theory known as folk psychology, a theory we have a partly tacit and partly explicit grasp of.... In the case of ethics, we have folk morality: the network of moral opinions, intuitions, principles, and concepts whose mastery is part and parcel of having a sense of what is right and wrong, and of being able to engage in meaningful debate about what ought to be done.... Moral functionalism, then, is the view that the meanings of the moral terms are given by their place in this network...<sup>88</sup>

So, with the preceding overview of functional role semantics before us, there is another key aspect of moral functionalism which is now salient. We should now see that an explanationist argument for moral realism can be derived from a functionalist analysis of moral terms.

Simply put, just as we might think that we can secure a role for mental concepts via their “identity” in a network of concepts, we might also think that there is a unique

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<sup>88</sup> Jackson (1998), p.130.

role for moral concepts in a naturalistic theory of morality. However, despite the initial plausibility of a role semantic theory for moral concepts, I will now present some key ways that a specific sub category of role semantics—platitude role semantics—fails as a defense of naturalistic moral realism.

### **5.5 Platitude Role Semantics and The A Priori**

*Platitude Role Semantics* is based on the claim that the meaning of a moral term is identified by that terms role in our "folk theory". Jackson contends that under role semantics a claim such as "causing unnecessary suffering is wrong" is to be identified with those platitudes which identify feature in our "common sense" or naïve theory of right and wrong. Those platitudes include fundamental ethical propositions such as "an act is right if leads to the greatest good for the greatest number" and "you cut I choose". It is the task of a suitably developed meta-ethics to identify those properties to which the terms in our folk theory refer. And, via the method of successive approximation our final moral theory will converge on those properties which best fix the role of moral concepts in our overall best theory of the world. Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit identify the connection between functionalism and Conceptual Role Semantics as follows:

According to the functionalist view, the meaning of relevant moral terms will be fixed by roles which certain common places give them, and so moral thinking is bound to involve the attempt to use common places as a base, and holding onto as much of that base as possible, or at least to the parts considered most secure, to fix opinion on particular questions. The commonplaces that emerge in this process as those whose rejection cannot be countenanced will be taken to fix the relevant roles; they are the a priori compulsory propositions that anyone who knows how to use the terms is in a position to recognize as true. Other

commonplaces—other putatively a priori propositions—will have to be dismissed as false or downgraded to the status of empirical, contingent truths.<sup>89</sup>

Importantly, the functionalist account advanced above, is a type of reductionism about the moral. This is so because the moral terms embedded in some platitudinous moral statement can be reduced to the descriptive properties which fix the meaning of the “relevant moral terms.” With the preceding overview of platitude role semantics before us, I want to present an objection to the form of ethical naturalism discussed in this section. In essence, I will argue that the functionalist theory considered here leaves key aspects of moral knowledge unexplained.

If this is so, we have further grounds to prefer a perceptualist theory of moral intuition over competing theories of moral knowledge. There are two reasons we should reject a naturalistic account of platitude role semantics. First, as was the case with doxastic theories of intuition, the naturalist must appeal to non-doxastic states as essential to moral knowledge. To see why this is so, recall that in the preceding chapter, I critiqued doxastic theories of intuition which are based on the claim that we can have some intuitive knowledge of some proposition or a grasp of concepts. If the lines of argumentation I presented there are correct, we cannot have justification or knowledge of some self-evident ethical claim without an appeal to seemings. In much the same way, we might also think that there is a necessity for seemings where our knowledge of platitudinous moral statements are concerned. We might come to have an initial intellectual appearance of the truth of a platitudinous moral proposition (i.e. “torturing for fun is wrong”) on the basis of our grasp of concepts. On these grounds, the perceptualist

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<sup>89</sup> Jackson, Frank, and Philip Pettit. "Moral functionalism and moral motivation." *The Philosophical Quarterly* (1995), p.26.

can argue, in line with platitudinal role semantics, that certain propositions can be justifiably be believed without the need for inference derived from observation. Yet, if the naturalist takes this route it will be the *phenomenology of initial appearances* which secures a role for a platitudinal moral statement in our overall best theory. I contend that, in line with a broader commitment to perceptualism, we must have some initial intellectual appearances in place in order to affirm some platitudinal moral statement as being true. In short, there must be some appeal to the phenomenal characteristics of intuition experience in order to believe that some moral proposition is true in the first place. In defending a perceptualist theory of ethical intuition, Huemer claims that the eschewal of intuition leaves a naturalistic account of moral knowledge bereft of explanatory power. In discussing the centrality of intuition to moral knowledge, Huemer points out that the naturalist (especially of the reductionist sort we have considered here) cannot provide a sound argument for thinking that some fundamental ethical claim is true.

He writes:

[W]ith no initial information about the nature of goodness or which things have it, we would have no basis for framing any hypotheses as to what natural property goodness might be reducible to...One might be tempted to say that that we simply rely on our common sense beliefs about good and bad. But unless we are justified in thinking these beliefs are generally true, this would be arbitrary, and we have as yet seen no account of why those beliefs are justified.<sup>90</sup>

In line with Huemer's observations above, we should see why the naturalistic theory considered here fails. Importantly, absent appeal to a phenomenology of initial intellectual appearances we have no reason to think that some platitudinal moral

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<sup>90</sup> Huemer (2005), p.87.

proposition is true. If so, then the proposed naturalistic reduction of moral terms to descriptive terms will also fail to explain key aspects of our knowledge of moral platitudes. If the perceptualist is correct, knowledge of the truth of a platitudinous statement is by necessity a priori in much the same way that knowledge of the truth of the fundamental axioms of set theory are a priori. Jackson and Pettit's characterization of platitudinous moral statements as having "compulsory force" is thus most plausibly construed as having a similar phenomenological character as the initial apprehension that "all circles are symmetrical about their diameter." This is so because in geometric and ethical intuition, these axioms seem to "force themselves upon us as being true. Yet, the theory on offer from Jackson and Pettit does not appeal to non-doxastic states. Hence, platitude role semantics will have failed in its explanatory ambitions. So, absent appeal to the phenomenology of initial intellectual appearances the "compulsory" nature of platitudes will remain obscure. With my arguments against Jackson and Pettit's platitude role semantics in place, I turn to a discussion of the nature of truth-makers in intuition experience.

### **5.6 Ethical Intuitionism and Truth-Makers**

In a preceding section, I argued that a standard perceptualist account of intuition has the conceptual resources to explain how it is that we come to apprehend the universals or abstracta that are the objects of awareness in mathematical or geometrical intuition. Yet, the challenge remains as to how best to think of the truth-makers for intuitively believed moral propositions. As outlined above, we can conceive of commonplaces or platitudes as capturing features of a belief-independent reality. Importantly, I do not maintain that

the preceding point entails a commitment to some form of ethical naturalism. Rather, holding that we have some intuitive awareness of truth-makers of some fundamental ethical proposition only entails that a believer has some sensitivity to the grounds of moral judgment. This sensitivity requires nothing more than perception and an emotional response to descriptive fact. Audi points to a potential worry for the intuitionist in accounting for our awareness of the grounds of moral judgment. He writes:

Consider a sensitive moral agent who sees someone gleefully whipping an infant with a leather belt...given the ground of this judgment—the perception of the flogging—the judgment apparently represents moral knowledge if anything does. The ground of the wrong itself is a natural event: the injury constituted by the flogging. As Ross might say, it is in virtue of the act's being a flogging (hence having a perceptible property of the act) that it is wrong. In responding to this ground, the judgment reflects, in a non-inferential way, the basis of that wrong, and that basis in turn, supports the truth of the judgments.<sup>91</sup>

Accordingly, with Audi's observations before us we can see how the intuitionist can account for a sensitivity to the grounds of moral a moral judgment. Audi's observations about the grounds of moral judgment reflects the perceptualist claim that in intuition experience we both have a seeming awareness of the truth of 'p' and an awareness of the truth-makers for some proposition which is intuitively believed. However, I maintain that there is also key role for inference in providing additional support for a proposition which is believed via intuition experience. In this respect, there are some aspects of the naturalistic theory of moral knowledge which should be appealed to by the perceptualist. In line with the functional aspects of the role semantic theory considered above, the compulsory nature of platitudes reflects the claim that moral properties constitute a

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<sup>91</sup> Audi (2009), p.56.

unique causal-explanatory kind. It is thus that platitudes attain their compulsory nature. This is so because in order to function as a platitude, the properties to which moral concepts refer must be unified as a kind to attain a suitably fixed role in moral discourse. Accordingly, despite the objections I have raised to Jackson and Pettit's version of platitude role semantics, I think that there are some aspects of the theory which can be appealed to by moral realists in countering the arguments of the skeptic.

One of the central virtues of platitude role semantics is its potential to explain how some claim which is intuitively believed can also be supported by inference. In short, it is the way that moral terms are "networked" with descriptive properties that provides evidence that the objects of awareness in intuition experience are suitably belief-independent. Accordingly, if moral properties constitute a unique explanatory kind then reference to these properties cannot be omitted without a loss of explanatory power. Importantly, one might think that that holding that certain properties must feature in an explanation commits one to inference to the best explanation. Yet, again, this is not so for two reasons.

First, as was the case with perceptualist theories of intuition, I am claiming that we can hold that intuitions track features of a belief-independent reality on the basis of intuition alone. So, it is important to realize that inference is not the primary source of warrant operant in the perceptualist theory I defend.

Second, there are many sorts of explanations we can offer which are "best" via their intuitive appeal. For example, Russell's proof of an inconsistency in Frege's Law V, is based purely upon a priori reasoning. However, the grounds for finding Russell's explanation as the "best" or possessed of greater explanatory power vis-à-vis Frege's

axiom is determined wholly apart from inference.<sup>92</sup> Of course, inferential support may be marshaled to show that an intuitively believed proposition is superior on explanatory grounds. As in the case of Russell's disproof of Frege's axioms we may be able to introduce additional inferences in order to support some proposition which is intuitively believed. However, as evinced in the logical force of Russell's disproof of Frege's core axiom, intuition still occupies a position of primacy. And, in much the same way I contend that explanations in ethics can retain or be divested of explanatory power on the basis of intuition alone.

We might think that some proposition involving prima facie duty is true (i.e., "I have a duty to beneficence") and yet see that some other intuitively believed proposition has undermined our initial warrant. Yet, in line with platitude role semantics there are also sound inferences which can be made from the way the moral terms are networked with our overall best moral theory. Again, it is the presence or absence of some descriptive property which establishes the fixity of our moral concepts. So, given that moral terms are coextensive with natural properties we cannot omit moral terms without a loss of explanatory power. However, it is a matter of an initial seeming that some platitudinous moral proposition is true. And, I have argued that in coming to see some fundamental moral proposition is true we might have some awareness of the truth-makers for such a proposition. With the preceding overview of the relationship between platitude role semantics, moral platitudes and the belief independence of moral properties, I am now in a position to provide a broad characterization of a variant of perceptualism which I believe is better suited to respond to the arguments of the explanationist skeptic. We can

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<sup>92</sup> MacFarlane, John. "Frege, Kant, and the logic in logicism." *Philosophical Review* (2002), p.41.

broadly characterize my suggested emendation to a perceptualist theory of moral judgment as encompassing the following three features:

(P1) An ethical intuition is a non-doxastic state which results from an awareness of the seeming truth of "p".

(P2) There are phenomenal characteristics of a seeming state that make us aware of truth-makers for some platitudinous moral proposition.

(P3) The truth-makers for intuitions that we are aware of in intuition experience are belief-independent moral properties.

As I argued above, we can conceive of an awareness of the seeming truth of a platitudinous moral proposition along the lines of a non-doxastic awareness of the truth of other axiomatic propositions in other domains (e.g., the axiomatic propositions of geometry). So far, the perceptualist theory presented here is in concordance with the standard account of a perceptualist theory intuition. However, (P3) establishes a difference from the theory of moral judgment presented here and other intuitionistic theories. While I follow the perceptualist in holding that a non-inferential awareness of the truth of some platitudinous proposition is essential moral knowledge, I also maintain that it is imperative that the perceptualist show that we also have a grasp of the features of reality which serve as the truth-makers for an axiomatic ethical proposition. In the preceding section, I argued that a standard perceptualist account intuition has the conceptual resources to explain how it is that we come to apprehend the universals or abstracta that are the objects of awareness in mathematical or geometrical intuition. Yet, the challenge remains as to how best think of the truth-makers for intuitively believed moral propositions. As outlined above, we can conceive of commonplaces or platitudes as capturing features of a belief-independent reality. And, in line with Audi's

observations, we can see that the ethical intuitionist can account for a non-inferential awareness of the truth-makers for some moral proposition via a felt “sensitivity to the grounds.”

If I am correct, we can have some substantive knowledge of truth of some axiomatic proposition without appeal to inference to the best explanation. And, in intuition experience we also have some non-inferential awareness of the features of reality for some intuitively believed proposition. Before arguing that the perceptualist theory of moral intuition outlined above places moral realists in a strong position to rebuff the arguments of the explanationist skeptic, I want to respond to some initial objections to the perceptualist theory of moral knowledge adumbrated above.

### **5.7 An Initial Objection To A Modified Perceptualist Theory Of Intuition**

Some philosophers have held that the question of whether there is a type of knowledge which is separable from empirical methods should be of central importance in meta-ethics. For example, in arguing for a non-naturalist theory of moral intuition Shafer-Landau maintains that there are some key distinctions that can be made between the “scientific” meta-ethical theory of CMR theorists and the intuition driven “adequate understanding” account of moral knowledge adumbrated under Shafer-Landau’s doxasticist theory of moral knowledge. In distinguishing non-naturalist intuitionism from competing accounts of moral knowledge Shafer-Landau reasons as follows:

Non-naturalists cannot have such a tidy view. They define their view in opposition to one that restricts the world's contents to those things confirmable by the best sciences. The best scientific views will not reveal the existence of moral properties, because moral properties are not scientific ones. Doing ethics is not doing any kind of science.<sup>93</sup>

Accordingly, with Shafer-Landau's observations before us, we might come to hold that there is a crucial difference between moral and scientific knowledge. And, reasoning along these lines, we might come think that once we have established such a distinction we might be able to show that there is a unique non-empirical way of knowing some claim to be true which is immune from the arguments of the explanationist skeptic. In short, we might think that moral knowledge is *just different* from other modes of knowledge acquisition. So, perhaps we might come to hold that the "self-evidence" theory of intuition establishes that we can know some claim to be true on the basis of intuition alone. If so, we can show that there is a distinct explanatory role for moral intuition based on an essential difference between science and ethical inquiry. And, I agree that ethical inquiry cannot be assimilated under the abductive modes of knowledge gathering in the physical and special sciences. Yet, Shafer-Landau's approach to securing a distinctive role for explanatory role for a realist theory of ethical intuition does not go far enough. To see why this is the case, consider that there is also knowledge of propositions in scientific theorizing that conform to many aspects of the "self-evidence" theory of intuition advanced by Shafer-Landau and others of the doxastic school of intuition. For instance, let us suppose that a scientist comes to believe the proposition that "Brownian motion in a liquid medium is caused by the motion molecules" is true. Importantly, the seeming truth of the preceding proposition, while perhaps initially based

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<sup>93</sup> Shafer-Landau (2003), p 66.

on inference is now intuitive in character. It counts as an intuition because once a believer is familiar with the concepts embedded in such a proposition, one can come to know such a claim to be true without a need for further observation or inference.<sup>94</sup>

Also, note it is no objection to the self-evidence of such a claim that inference or observation is initially required to believe such a claim to be self-evident. In the much the same way that one may need to initially make some observations or inferences to in order to adequately understand the proposition “causing unnecessary suffering is wrong”, the scientist may have to make some observations and theory-laden inferences to come to have a clear, consistent and determinate understanding of the proposition regarding the motion of the particulate matter suspended in a liquid medium. Accordingly, given the ubiquity of claims which can be intuitively believed in science and ethics, such an approach to securing a distinctive explanatory role for intuition will fail. Thus, I maintain that rather than searching for a *methodological* distinction between science and ethical inquiry moral realists should concern themselves with the question of what modes of knowledge acquisition of are best suited to show our moral intuitions capture features of a belief-independent reality. I contend that a suitably modified perceptualist theory of intuition has the explanationist resources to show that the truth-makers we are aware of in intuition experience are suitably belief-independent. However, there is another objection to the perceptualist theory advanced here which must first be addressed.

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<sup>94</sup> As Huemer points out, there is an error in thinking that there is something about the way one acquires concepts that fixes some knowledge claim in the a posteriori domain. The point of focus should be whether one is justified in affirming a proposition via reason alone. See, Huemer (2005), p.111 for a discussion of the role of reflection in moral knowledge.

### 5.8 Is Ethical Knowledge A Posteriori?

It is also important to note that some ethical naturalists maintain that intuitionism should be rejected because our ethical knowledge must be “empirical” in some substantive sense. For instance, some contemporary meta-ethicists hold that instances of moral disagreement demonstrate that the justification for believing an ethical proposition *must be a posteriori in character*.

If this is the case, then ethical intuitionism should be rejected from the outset because we will only require appeal to inference and observation in order to explain how we know some fundamental claim to be true. David Copp’s recent defense of moral naturalism evinces a commitment to understanding the relationship between moral concepts, the a posteriori and the justification of moral claims along the preceding lines.

He writes:

The key idea is that our warrant for believing a proposition can be undermined or weakened by the disagreement of others... If it is correct, then moral disagreement can weaken our warrant for our moral beliefs, and since disagreement is an empirical phenomenon, this supports the naturalist’s thesis that synthetic moral generalities are not strongly a priori.<sup>95</sup>

The claim that Copp thinks is well supported by his attack on the a priori account of moral judgment centers on the notion that because our belief in the truth of a moral proposition is subject to empirical defeat moral knowledge cannot be a priori in character. Copp takes the empirical character of moral judgments to entail a commitment to the “synthetic moral generalities” which fall under the purview of ethical naturalism. However, the ethical intuitionist can easily accommodate this feature of moral discourse.

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<sup>95</sup> Copp (2007), pp. 48-49.

Note that in a similar way, pointing out that our geometrical judgments often go wrong, or that our senses sometimes fail to accurately report that a particular visible object is an instance of triangularity doesn't count against the necessity of a priori knowledge in these cases. It is also no mark against the seeming theorist to demonstrate that some empirical route is needed to arrive at moral terms. Consider that in order to verify the claim "all bachelors are unmarried males" we must learn, perhaps through ostension or being taught paradigm examples, each of the terms that are necessary to verify such a claim. And plausibly, we can verify such a proposition to be a priori. However, once we have the necessary concepts in hand we can verify such a claim without the need for inference or observation. Accordingly, my proposed modification of perceptualist theory of ethical intuition does not rest on merely demonstrating that some empirical route is necessary in coming to acquire moral terms and concepts. Nor does it rest on showing that empirical considerations do play a role in whether or not someone is justified in making an a moral claim. And as I argued above, Copp's claim that a commitment to ethical naturalism follows from the fact that empirical evidence weakens justification for believing some ethical proposition to be true is also unsupported. The only thing that Copp has shown is that there might be disagreement over some intuitively believed proposition. Yet, this does not show that a proposition is not fixed firmly in the realm of the a priori. Again, there may be disagreement over some a priori proof. And, disagreement may indeed be an empirical phenomenon. However, despite Copp's claims to the contrary, the fact of disagreement does not relegate any aspect of knowledge gathering to the synthetic. Accordingly, I maintain that we have some grounds for thinking that the two preceding initial arguments against a perceptualist theory of intuition in ethics are unsound. I now

move on to an assessment of the explanationist skeptic's claims against the explanatory power of belief-independent moral properties.

I will argue that the skeptic's argument from *direct observation* fails to show that belief-independent moral properties are explanatorily impotent. I also suggest some ways that the skeptic's argument from *indirect observation* fails. However, before responding to these oft-lodged objections to moral realism, I will provide some reasons for thinking that the case for moral realism must be made without appeal to inference to the best explanation.

### **5.9 Rejecting the Appeal to Inference to The Best Explanation**

As I discussed previously, the explanationist skeptic's disavowal of the explanatory power of belief-independent moral properties flows from the claim that a given property (p) is a real property if and only if (p) figures ineliminably in the best explanation of experience. The preceding bi-conditional unveils the essential division between the realist ethical naturalist and his skeptical opponent. Ethical naturalists of a realist orientation contend that there is a role for mind-independent properties in the best explanation of our moral knowledge. Skeptical naturalists deny that there is any role for belief-independent moral properties in our best overall account of moral knowledge. As I will now argue, moral realists should reject the skeptic's argument from the outset because it rests on a false principle. The dialectic between the realist and the explanationist skeptic which is generated by a commitment to inference to the best explanation is perhaps most clearly evinced in Sturgeon's counterfactual test of explanatory relevance. Sturgeon maintains

that the counterfactual test of explanatory relevance provides an effective avenue of response to the explanationist skeptic because such a test demonstrates that belief-independent moral properties are explanatory relevant. For example, we might consider whether the consumption of factory farmed meat would still be morally wrong even if the animals were treated humanely. So, reasoning counterfactually we are to conclude that if the moral property was not instantiated we would not have rendered the same moral judgment. We are to think that if "p" (where "p" is some moral fact) would not have obtained the relevant explanandum would not have occurred. However, there is good reason to think that this core explanationist principle is false. I begin my critique with an assessment of the role of parsimony in inference to the best explanation.

Among the canons of inference to the best explanation (i.e., simplicity, fecundity, explanatory scope, fertility, precision and compatibility with background theories) the idea that an explanation is possessed of greater simplicity vis-à-vis its competitors is supposed to carry a great deal of explanatory weight. Yet, the simplest explanation for a given phenomena may invoke entities which cannot be plausibly understood to "exist." For example, frictionless planes, while indispensable to our overall best physical theory are barred from existence in a world, such as ours, in which it is impossible to actually produce an inclined plane devoid of friction. A working scientist who invokes a frictionless plane to investigate some aspect of physical theory is not ontologically committed to the existence of frictionless planes. However, an explanation involving frictionless planes may be superior to another proposed explanation which does not invoke such fictional posits. And, yet a plane devoid of friction could pass Sturgeon's counterfactual test given that the absence of reference to such entirely fictional posits

would render certain explanations of physical phenomena devoid of explanatory power. So, it seems that the IBE based test introduced by moral realists introduces some unwarranted results. As in the case of frictionless planes, the most parsimonious account of experience may need to invoke entities which are clearly fictional in nature. Yet, the CMR theorist and other realists who endorse IBE, seem to think that inference to the best explanation as applied to direct or indirect observation (i.e., experience) yields some form of robust ontological commitment to objects, properties or relations which have existence beyond their appearance as mere posits in our overall best theory of the world. As evinced in the case where simplicity is our concern, it seems that IBE yields the wrong results. In short, a property can figure in the “best explanation” of experience, yet not bear ontological commitment in the way that the moral realist demands. Accordingly, in granting the skeptic the claim that moral properties must play a role in the best explanation of experience, moral realists have assumed an unwarranted explanatory burden. Hence, we should wonder why explanationist moral realists are required to pass such a test in the first place, given the inapplicability of such a principle to demonstrating the existence of (belief-independent) non-moral properties relations and states of affairs.

Beyond the problems related to inference to the best explanation there are some further challenges which undermine explanationist skepticism. I now turn to a rejoinder to explanationist skepticism derived from the perceptualist theory I advanced in the preceding sections. Importantly, I will show that even if we grant the explanationist skeptic key premises in their argument for the explanatory impotence of belief-independent moral facts, the arguments advanced by Harman and other naturalistically inclined critics of intuitionism will still be unsound.

### 5.10 Assessing the Skeptic's Argument from Direct Observation

Despite all I have said thus far, the skeptic might respond that perceptualism still must explain our mode of access to belief-independent moral properties. The notion underlying the preceding objection lies in the idea that while I can see a vapor trail and measure its characteristic effects on instrumentation I cannot observe moral wrongness. I have already gone some way in answering this objection in the preceding section, but I want to return this objection because it still seems to have some force. We can again locate the force of the skeptic's claim as centering on the naturalist's notion that "a real property must figure ineliminably in the best explanation of experience". There are two ways to understand the core principle which motivates explanationist skepticism.

First, the explanationist skeptic could intend that we understand a "real property" to mean a fundamental property which is directly responsible for a given observation. This is what Judith Jarvis Thomson has in mind when she argues that there is no rationally defensible way to think that moral properties can figure in the best explanation of experience. In arguing that our mode of access to moral properties is unacceptably mysterious maintains that:

Given their metaphysical mysteriousness, these properties and this relation are epistemologically mysterious...[w]hat we observe upon looking around us is the factual, the nonmoral; what mode of knowledge-gathering is to enable us to get from there to the conclusion that such and such things have or lack the queer properties goodness or badness... There seems to be no answer. The crack in the universe of discourse seems too deep to be crossed in any way.<sup>96</sup>

As Thomson points out above, claims related to supposed instances of moral observation are always better explained in relation to a set of non-moral facts which are more *directly*

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<sup>96</sup> Harman and Thomson (1996), p.128.

responsible for an observation. So, again, we are to think that since belief-independent moral properties exhibit an immunity from direct observation they cannot play a role in the best explanation of experience. Yet, there is an ambiguity in the term "experience" which must be considered. Intuition can be plausibly described as an experience under seeming theories. Accordingly, in the same way a non-inferential seeming that the interior angles of a triangle must add up to 180 degrees is also directly responsible for an "experience", we can hold that the seeming wrongness of an action is also directly responsible for our non-inferential apprehension that a state of affair possess a given moral quality. Unless the skeptic has good grounds for rejecting these types of intellectual appearances (which he has not yet provided) then the mode of "knowledge gathering" which is responsible for ethical intuition will not be mysterious. Rather, in line with my broad characterization of intuition, there is a straightforward way to think of intellectual apprehensions which accompany the seeming truth of a basic moral proposition as a type of "experience." As I discussed in advancing the broad contours of a perceptualist theory of intuition, ethical intuition has the characteristic of both of presenting a platitude as warranted on the basis of an initial seeming and also capturing features of an extra-mental reality.

The belief-independent descriptive properties that moral judgments evaluate feature as the objects of awareness for ethical intuition. The answer to the skeptic's challenge from direct observation is that intra-mental aspects associated with judgments of value can be reconciled with the requirement that there be some apprehension of some feature of reality which is *direct* in some salient sense. I have argued that in coming to see the truth of a platitudinous moral statement we are aware both of the seeming truth of

an axiomatic ethical proposition and we also possess a non-inferential awareness of the truth-makers for an ethical proposition. Thus, the skeptic's argument from direct observation can be rejected on the grounds that, a more direct explanation of our moral judgments, for example, regarding the hoodlum's behavior is that we deem the behavior as morally wrong via the a non-inferential causal connection between the seeming truth of a platitude and the descriptive properties which *fix* the content of platitudinous statements. Accordingly, platitude role semantics affords the moral realist the conceptual resources to hold that certain apprehensions of value can play an explanatory role which is analogous to the pre-theoretical experiences which underlie non-inferential judgments in non-moral domains. Thus, we have in place one key rejoinder to the arguments of the explanationist skeptic. We now need to evaluate the skeptic's argument from *indirect observation*.

### 5.11 Evaluating The Argument from Indirect Observation

In line with his commitment to explanationist skepticism Harman maintains that there is never any observational evidence for the truth of a moral principle. In commenting on the lack of *indirect observational* evidence for the truth moral principles, Harman writes:

In explaining the observations that support a physical theory, scientists typically appeal to mathematical principles. On the other hand, one never seems to appeal in this way to moral principles. Since observation is evidence for what best explains it, and since mathematics often figures in the explanations of scientific observations, there is indirect observational evidence for mathematics. There does not seem to be observational evidence, even indirectly, for basic moral principles.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Harman (1977), pp.9-10.

Reasoning from Harman's observations above regarding the explanatory impotence of the moral, we should see that skeptic denies that there is a legitimate role for belief independent moral properties, even where our sole concern is with the type of indirect evidence which are pointed to by the naturalist as requiring ontological commitment to mathematical objects.

I now turn to showing why the skeptic's claims regarding the of lack indirect observational evidence for the truth of a moral claim is false. My rejoinder to Harman's skeptical argument is twofold. First, we can see that the skeptic does have something right in claiming that we cannot observe moral properties. However, many forms of moral realism are committed to the claim that we apprehend the truth of certain self evident propositions on the basis of intellectual apprehensions. While experience is relevant to moral learning and the acquisition of moral concepts, the perceptualist account of intuition I advanced above is based on the claim holds that our knowledge of the fundamental principles of morality is reflective of the apprehension of a priori truths. Accordingly, once we have fixed the truth of moral claims in the realm of the a priori, we should see that the explanationist skeptic's charges do not go through. The skeptic argues that there is no observational evidence we can muster for the truth of an ethical claim.

When we claim that "causing unnecessary suffering is wrong" or "it is morally right to actively euthanize patients whose life will be one of unremitting misery", the skeptic maintains that it is always better to think of ethical claims as reflective of our attitudes, dispositions or contingent psychological make-up. A consideration of the broad outlines of a perceptualist theory of moral judgment reveals a central flaw in the skeptic's argument from indirect observation. The salience of ethical principles to observation

stems from the claim that our moral intuitions, while a priori in character "mirror" or reflect the descriptive natural facts which moral judgments evaluate. It is in the preceding sense that I argued that it is key that perceptualist show that our intuitions exhibit some sensitivity to the descriptive facts which are the grounds of moral judgment.

Accordingly, in response to the skeptic's argument, I contend that it is not "problematic" to show that there is indirect observational evidence for the truth of an ethical claim. The key move for the realist is to hold that spontaneous non-inferential judgments do play a key (indirect role) in explaining observations. For the advocate of intuitions, a particular belief is held to be right or wrong in relation to its support from or violation of certain basic moral sensibilities). In response to Harman's claim that "one never seems" to appeal to moral principles, the moral realist can point out that we do in fact invoke distinctively moral principles in explaining an observation. The key move which the perceptualist can make in relation to derived from the lack of indirect evidence for believing some moral proposition to be true is to hold that our moral intuitions allow for the possibility of moral knowledge because in invoking distinctively normative concepts, we are able to evaluate the descriptive properties of objects, relations or states of affairs which we do observe. So, instead of holding that moral properties can be perceived, the moral realist might contend that moral properties do play an explanatory role because they have something to *contribute* to an empirical account of moral judgment.

In this way, moral principles will be indirectly relevant to observation both at the level of moral judgments of a general and particular nature. Thus, we might agree with the skeptic that moral do exhibit an immunity from observational confirmation. However, it does not follow that there is "never" any observational evidence for platitudinous moral

statements. As outlined above, the intuitionist can show that moral properties are indirectly relevant to our observation. Thus, when the a priori character of moral knowledge is taken into account we can see that the realist can reject the skeptic's claim. In short, the intuitionist is maintaining that moral properties (even if they are conceived as abstracta) have a distinct contributory role over and above sole reference to a set of non-moral properties.

In considering my claims against the explanationist skeptic, one should not think that I am arguing that belief-independent properties exist merely because we seem to grasp moral truths on the basis of intellectual apprehensions. Nor am I arguing that we should be committed to the claim that moral properties should be conceived of along the lines of universals. There may be independent reasons for denying that moral properties have the standing of abstracta or universals. And there might also be good reasons for denying the truth of ethical intuitionism. Rather, in this section I have only considered whether the explanationist skeptic is warranted in thinking that moral properties are excluded from our overall best theory because they are immune from indirect observational confirmation.

As I have shown above, the skeptical naturalist's explanatory standard cannot rule out the existence of belief-independent moral properties based on the argument from indirect observation. The reason why the skeptic's argument does not go through is that we will be justified in positing belief independent moral properties precisely along the same lines of mathematical entities under the standard endorsed by the skeptical naturalist.

To further see where another problem for the explanationist skeptic lies, consider the axiomatic ethical proposition: ‘The good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view (if I may say so) of the Universe, than the good of any other; unless, that is, there are special grounds for believing that more good is likely to be realized in the one case than in the other.’<sup>98</sup>

Clearly, such a principle could be true. Yet, in the same way that one does not need inference or observation to see the truth of a proposition like “all right angles are congruent” once they have a grasp of the constituent components in such an axiomatic proposition, we might also see that we cannot characterize the immediacy which accompanies the apprehension of truth a fundamental ethical proposition as anything other than an intuition. Thus, the warrant for believing such a claim cannot be located in inference alone.

Seeing the truth of such an axiomatic proposition cannot be plausibly construed as an act of inference or observation. Accordingly, just as we might come to say that inference cannot explain our apprehension of the truth of a fundamental axiom of geometry there are also instances of ethical knowledge which are warranted via the phenomenal characteristics of intuition experience.

Hence, the skeptic’s commitment to inference to the best explanation once again leaves key aspects of our knowledge of moral facts unexplained. Accordingly, the skeptic’s argument from indirect observation fails. In what follows, I argue that there is another central challenge which can be raised to the skeptic’s commitment to inference to the best explanation.

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<sup>98</sup> Sidgwick (1874), p.382.

### 5.12 Ontological Naturalism, Parsimony and Explanationist Skepticism

My target in this section will be the explanationist skeptic's claim that the overall most parsimonious (i.e., simplest) account of moral judgment need not include reference to objective moral properties. Harman argues that the most parsimonious overall ontological scheme is one which does not include reference to belief-independent moral facts. In line with a broad commitment to ontological naturalism, the explanationist skeptic argues that there is no reason to refer to mind-independent moral facts even in *practice*. However, the realist might wonder whether the explanationist skeptic's case against the explanatory power of objective moral properties is too strong. The moral realist might also contend that the arguments of the skeptic *also* require that we abandon other properties which are legitimately pointed to by the naturalist as having explanatory power.

Harman maintains that we might think that we can reason analogously from the case of color to show that moral properties must figure somehow in our overall best theory of the world, if only to account for the realist seeming surface features of moral talk.

In adherence to the ontological parsimony that naturalism subscribes to, Harman maintains that although it is the indeed case that in an *ultimate* sense all of our talk of color can be reduced to a set of explanandum which only considers the underlying microphysical properties of colored objects and the neuro-psychology of an observer, we still nonetheless *must* make reference to the actual colors of objects "if only for the sake of simplicity."

In line with his commitment to explanationist skepticism, Harman claims that the truth of ontological naturalism leads to the conclusion that we can replace all seemingly objective moral talk with a relativistic morality which only makes reference to those properties countenanced by empirical psychology. He writes:

Even if we come to be able to explain color perception by appeal to the physical characteristics of surfaces, the properties of light, and the neurophysiological psychology of observers, we will sometimes refer to the actual colors of objects in explaining color perception, if only for the sake of simplicity... We will continue to believe that objects have colors because we will continue to refer to the actual colors of objects in the explanations that we will in practice give... A similar point does not seem to hold for moral facts. There does not ever seem to be, even in practice, any point to explaining someone's moral observations by what is actually right or wrong, just or unjust, good or bad. It always seems more accurate to explain someone's moral observations by citing facts about moral views, moral sensibility. So, the reasons we have for supposing there are facts about colors do not correspond to reasons for thinking there are moral facts.<sup>99</sup>

As indicated by the preceding passage from Harman's The Nature of Morality, the explanationist skeptic maintains that best account of our moral discourse and practices will eschew any talk of objective morality in favor of a minimalist empiricist ontology.

If Harman is correct, then, the role of seemingly objective moral talk will only be to capture our contingent beliefs, desires and attitudes. The explanationist skeptic contends that we do not need to postulate belief-independent moral properties because we can better explain the use of moral terms without reference to belief-independent moral properties.

With Harman's thoroughgoing critique of the existence of belief independent moral facts before us, I want to present a key dilemma which I contend is generated from Harman's commitment to explanationist skepticism.

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<sup>99</sup> Harman (1977), p.22.

### 5.12.1 A Dilemma for Explanationist Skepticism: The First Horn

From the outset, it is important to realize that although I reject inference to the best explanation, my objective is to show that even if we grant the explanationist skeptic his core abductive principle, the case for explanationist skepticism fails. If so, then we have additional grounds for accepting competing realist accounts of moral knowledge. With this proviso in place, I move on to presenting the first horn of a dilemma for explanationist skepticism. The essence of the first horn of the dilemma stems from the skeptic's claim that, much as is the case with explanations that refer to the actual colors of objects, there are explanations available to the naturalistically minded philosopher which do not appeal to objective moral properties. For example, we could eschew all talk of the objective property of injustice, and solely make reference to non-moral states of affairs. However, the problem is that under this naturalistic proposal our explanation of injustice would have to invoke (a perhaps infinite!) conjunction of states of affairs including (but certainly not limited to) the economic conditions in a given society, a tradition of suppression of minority rights, lack of equitable access to healthcare and so on all the way down the non-moral explanatory chain.

However, such a proposed explanation violates a core tenet of IBE (i.e., parsimony) which Harman invokes to prove the explanatory irrelevance of the moral. Not only would our proposed non-moral reconstruction render our explanations of a given claim (e.g., that a society is unjust) perhaps hopelessly complicated, but it would also render certain other explanations (e.g., why a revolution occurred in a given society) needlessly convoluted. Thus, while there are a number of possible explanatory

relationships that can be generated, some relations between objects and observation will have a more direct bearing on our overall most parsimonious explanation.

Accordingly, if the preceding rejoinder to Harman's argument from simplicity is on target, we cannot show that mind-independent moral properties should be excluded from our overall best theory of the world *merely* by pointing to some facts about the ease of reference. In making the preceding claim, the reader should bear in mind that I am only targeting Harman's claim that it is never useful, *even in practice* to refer to objective moral properties. There is another closely related problem for the explanationist skeptic to be considered under this horn of the dilemma. I now will contend, despite Harman's claims to the contrary, that the realist can also hold that moral properties cannot be eliminated even under a core principle (i.e., simplicity) endorsed by the skeptical naturalist. Note that this will be so even if our concern is simplicity of reference.

Accordingly, Harman's claim that there is an important disanalogy between color properties and moral properties breaks down upon closer scrutiny. The reason why this is the case stems from the fact that Harman and other skeptics grant seemingly objective color properties a place in a naturalistic ontology even though in an *ultimate* sense color properties are reducible to the properties of surfaces, lighting conditions and certain facts about the neurophysiology of observers.

The reason that the explanationist skeptic's argument fails is that, if seemingly objective color properties are *acceptable* because they facilitate explanation even if a reduction of color properties to other non-colored properties is available, it will also follow that seemingly objective moral properties should *also be acceptable* under the ontological naturalism that the explanationist skeptic endorses. The same point which

applies to an overall best explanation of a moral claim also applies to direct moral observation as well. To see why this is so, consider that just because we can explain our disapprobation of the hoodlums burning of the cat in terms of experiences of the disturbance of molecules or the lighting of flammable surfaces, it doesn't follow that our observation of microphysical properties or other lower level properties offers any explanatory advantages. Accordingly, the instantiation of a moral property (e.g., wrongness) seems directly relevant to our explanation of our intuitive disapprobation of the Hoodlum's behavior in a way that reference to a set of lower level properties is not. In this respect, a perceptualist theory of the sort I adumbrated earlier will also be able to point to simplicity or explanatory ease as a response to the claim that our moral observations only capture certain contingent psychological features of agents. Accordingly, if simplicity is to be our guide, the naturalist moral realist can rightly claim that reference to objective moral properties has equal standing to the skeptic's proposed naturalistic reduction of moral knowledge to empirical psychology. Following Copp (2005), Boyd (1988) and other moral realists, I hold that the truth-makers perceived in intuition experience are belief-independent facts.

As I discussed in the preceding section, under causal role semantics platitudinous moral statements could not attain their fixity or compulsory nature if they did not map onto a distinct causal-explanatory kind. And, since moral properties can be held to constitute a unified kind, any explanation which leaves out appeal to the belief-independent features of reality is bereft of explanatory power. Hence, the moral realist has equally rationally defensible ground to hold that adherence to the principle of simplicity in explanation *requires* reference to objective moral facts. This is so because

just as reference to actual color properties (which are ultimately reducible to other non-colored properties) are relevant to the explanations which we give in practice it will also be the case that reference to the objective moral properties will be useful to the explanations of why we hold judge certain acts to be right or wrong. Accordingly, Harman cannot claim that ease of reference or simplicity of explanation alone shows that moral anti-realism is to be the preferred view. Thus, we should see the explanationist skeptic's argument based on facts about the use of terms will not decide what is essentially an ontological dispute one way or another. However, there is another, perhaps more significant, problem with the argument from simplicity I want to consider. The nature of the problem I will now discuss centers directly on a strategy common to many forms of moral naturalism which are skeptical about the explanatory power of belief-independent moral properties. I will now argue that, despite Harman's claims to the contrary, the explanationist skeptic cannot show that belief-independent moral properties are irrelevant to moral discourse.

### **5.12.2 A Dilemma for Explanationist Skepticism: The Second Horn**

To understand why the skeptic's argument is unsound we must first briefly examine some key aspects of the skeptic's charge that the realist surface of moral discourse can be explained away. In essence, as outlined above, the skeptic claims that moral terms can be replaced by the terms invoked in empirical psychology. To accomplish his aim of demonstrating the explanatory irrelevance of the moral, the skeptic adopts a unique rephrasal strategy. As evinced in Harman's quasi-absolutism, moral claims such as "x is wrong" are to be understood as *elliptical* for the claim that "x is wrong" according to a

moral framework. The term "elliptical" in use here is meant to imply that all of our putatively objective moral judgments are filled in by ellipses, as in act "X" is morally wrong implies that "X" is morally wrong according to framework...x,y,z. A moral framework can be roughly conceived of a system of norms or rules which identify under which conditions actions are morally impermissible (the same applies mutatis mutandis for other sorts of moral judgments). Accordingly, as outlined above, the quasi-absolutist can avoid a commitment to objective mind-independent moral properties and still judge things to be right, wrong, good or bad. However, it is important to point out that the relativist thinks that despite the seeming objectivity of moral claims our judgments will *always be* framework relative affairs. Accordingly, since moral judgments are contingent on the moral framework from which one makes judgments of right and wrong, the skeptic claims that it does not make sense to talk of "objective" moral judgments in the sense that moral judgments are true or false apart from a moral framework. However, the quasi-absolutist immediately faces a realist challenge. The realist critic of Harman's account of moral judgment might counter that Harman's account of morality faces all the problems encountered by the most basic forms of ethical relativism. For example, it seems to follow from Harman's endorsement of framework relativity that one can claim the following: "If the Spartans approve of throwing babies off cliffs, then it is morally permissible to throw babies off cliffs". Accordingly, the realist might think that in denying objective moral qualities to states of affairs, properties or relations the relativist is committed to endorsing all moral judgments regardless of the reprehensible nature of the of the acts.

Of course, a moral system in which "anything goes" can hardly be called a moral system at all since an essential role of a normative framework is to provide some sort of guidance in the form of morally defensible rules of permission and prohibition. However, Harman maintains that the quasi-absolutist has a means of escape from the charge that a commitment to ethical relativism entails a commitment to approval of all sorts of actions which we find to be intuitively morally impermissible. Initially, it may be puzzling as to how Harman can reconcile his claim that morality is purely an expression of attitudes with the claim that certain actions can be held to be wrong across moral frameworks. However, it is important to realize that the quasi-absolutist is claiming that given certain moral commitments which are evident across moral frameworks, there will be agreement on the permissibility of certain acts. In line with the disavowal of objectivity across the board the relativist holds that when two moral frameworks agree that "genocide is morally wrong" what we are in fact committed to is the notion that genocide is morally wrong, given the shared normative commitments of two frameworks. Harman introduces a typographical distinction between WRONGNESS (i.e., a property which is belief-independent) and "wrongness" (i.e., a framework relative moral property). Accordingly, the relativist maintains that while it doesn't make sense to talk of moral WRONGNESS in an objective non-relative manner, we can talk of "wrongness" and "rightness" of acts relative to moral frameworks. Accordingly, where two moral frameworks share normative commitments we can hold that such an action is wrong across frameworks. Superficially, it might seem that Harman's relativistic account of moral judgment amounts to little more than a typographical distinction. Yet, it is important to notice that the quasi-absolutist maintains that in claiming that certain acts will be found to be morally

permissible across moral frameworks, he maintains that he has successfully avoided any requirement for moral objectivity in explaining why a moral knowledge. I will now argue that, in an attempt to evade the problems of crude ethical relativism the explanationist skeptic is forced into assuming the existence of moral facts, even “if in theory this assumption is dispensable.” The essential point I am making here is that the quasi-absolutist *must* accept reference to actual rightness and wrongness if we are to make sense of agreement across moral frameworks. The reason why this is case is that the simplest or overall most parsimonious account of agreement across moral frameworks must make reference to the property of WRONGNESS. Of course, the quasi absolutist will respond that the property of WRONGNESS will ultimately be explained by a complex conjunction of non-moral facts, including but not limited to, the moral upbringing of the denizens of a particular moral framework, socio political facts and other framework relative facts which are relevant to a moral judgment. However, we should see that it will do the quasi-absolutist no good to appeal to a reductivist non-moral explanation precisely because of the naturalist’s commitment to parsimony. Simply put, the quasi absolutist cannot eschew all reference to the moral because the simplest explanation of agreement across moral frameworks is *one which does* include appeal to objective moral properties *in practice*. Note under the quasi-absolutist’s account of moral judgment we still refer to the seeming wrongness (or rightness) of action *even if* these objective moral properties are dispensable in principle.

The reason that we must do so is that under the explanatory standard introduced by the quasi-absolutist, we cannot explain agreement across moral frameworks without positing moral WRONGNESS as a property. Since the quasi-absolutist cannot explain

agreement across moral frameworks without appealing to objective moral properties the skeptical position leaves important features of our moral discourse and practice unexplained. So, Harman proposed disanalogy fails because the overall explanatory grounds we have for postulating the existence of objective color properties are largely the same as those which require the positing of seemingly belief independent moral properties. With the preceding claims against explanationist skepticism before us, we can now assess the full scope of the dilemma which confronts the skeptical naturalist.

On the first horn of the dilemma, if the quasi absolutist eschews all reference to objective moral properties then the proposed reconstruction of moral discourse will be too unwieldy, thus violating the naturalists core commitment to parsimony and ease of explanation. Importantly, as I have shown above, the explanationist skeptic is still subject to the preceding dilemma even if he claims objective moral properties are *ultimately dispensable in principle*. After all, the skeptic is arguing that we never have any reason to posit the existence of belief-independent moral properties *even in practice*. Yet, we should see that there is good reason to think that the skeptic has not shown that moral properties are dispensable where our moral practices are concerned. Accordingly, if the property of moral wrongness is to function at all in its intended role for the quasi-absolutist, we should see that moral properties will function precisely along the same lines as the color properties which the explanationist skeptic takes to be in good standing. And, as I have argued under the first horn above, the skeptic is also in no position to rule out competing *realist* explanations which are similarly parsimonious. Moving onto the second horn of the dilemma, we should see that the quasi-absolutist cannot explain agreement across moral frameworks without appealing to objective moral properties. If

my arguments presented in this section are sound we see that the explanationist skeptic's thoroughgoing attack on the role of belief-independent moral properties is subject to a fatal dilemma. Accordingly, although I have claimed that we should reject the skeptic's IBE based argument from the outset, we now have further grounds to hold that skeptic's abductive argument against the existence of belief-independent moral properties is unsound even if we accept core tenets of an abductive account of moral knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

Initially, it may seem apparent to us that our moral intuitions give us direct access to features of reality which exist independently of our beliefs. However, a realist construal of intuition encounters a thoroughgoing explanatory challenge. The explanationist skeptic argues that the only facts which are needed to explain moral judgments are facts about our beliefs. The explanationist skeptic's arguments are similar to subjectivist theories of aesthetic judgment. For example, when someone views Picasso's "Guernica", the aesthetic subjectivist will hold that it is my beliefs about the painting which best explain my aesthetic judgment. In much the same way, the explanationist skeptic will argue that our belief that burning cats alive merely for the pleasure of it is morally wrong can solely be explained by our beliefs. I think that the skeptic's argument should be rejected. However, I have argued that many forms of moral realism have taken the wrong approach to countering the arguments of the skeptic.

As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, much of the recent literature in meta-ethics has been dominated by attempts to counter the arguments of the explanationist skeptic via an appeal to inference to the best explanation (IBE). I have

argued that this principle fails as a test of the explanatory power of moral properties. Given the failure of inference to the best explanation, I have argued that moral realists should turn to intuitionism in order to counter the arguments of the skeptic. The answer to the skeptic's challenge is that our intuitive judgments of value can be reconciled with our overarching commitment to the moral realism given a suitably developed account of non-inferential judgment as related to the platitudinous statements of ordinary moral discourse and practice. Crucially, it is the phenomenology of intuition experience itself that also yields knowledge of belief-independent truth-makers for some intuitively believed proposition. The explanationist skeptic claims that any appeal to mind-independent moral properties is completely irrelevant to the best explanation of moral judgment. However, if the lines of argumentation advanced in this chapter are sound, intuition experiences and the moral properties which serve as truth makers for moral judgment occupy a privileged explanatory niche. I have argued that CMR theorist's inferentialist arguments for moral realism fail. The core problem for the coherentist theories of moral knowledge is generated by the effort to assimilate moral knowledge under an abductive model. I have maintained that this is a mistake. I contend that if we come to view intuitions as a set of distinctive moral seemings, we can agree that while there are no set of moral experiences that correspond directly to theory laden inference observations in non-moral domains, the occurrence of an intuition (e.g, that x is wrong) provides an awareness of features of a belief-independent reality, Thus, if the arguments presented in this chapter are correct, the case for moral realism should be made without appeal to inference to the best explanation.

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