1-2007

Review of "The Right In the Good: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value"

Eric M. Rovie
Georgia State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation

Rovie, Eric M. (2007) "Review of "The Right In the Good: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value"," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 18.

Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Book Review

At the turn of the Twentieth Century, intuitionism was perhaps the most dominant position in ethics, coming in more than a few varieties. While G.E. Moore's intuitionistic defense of ideal utilitarianism was influential, maybe the most important (and most misunderstood) form of intuitionism was W.D. Ross' 1930 contribution to the discussion, *The Right and the Good*. Just as soon as Ross' view was coming into view, however, the various intuitionist approaches were coming under attack, both directly (by A.J. Ayer, Charles Stevenson, and J.L. Mackie) and indirectly (through Quine's naturalism), and intuitionism soon fell from favor. Following the heyday of ethical intuitionism, a whole host of moral theories (including theories that challenged the existence of any moral properties) became far more common than versions of intuitionism, and intuitionism developed the reputation for relying upon what Mackie called 'queer' metaphysical properties. Mackie's arguments (and the advent of emotivism and its successors) drove intuitionism out of the mainstream of philosophical discussion for a period of time, but it has recently begun reappearing as a legitimate meta-ethical contender. Recent work by David McNaughton, Jonathan Dancy, John McDowell, Derek Parfit, Philip Stratton-Lake and David Wiggins shows elements of the intuitionist tradition, but Robert Audi has provided what may be the finest book-length defense of a self-avowed Rossian intuitionism to come from this current revival with *The Good In The Right*. My review of this book proceeds in four parts: I will begin with an extremely brief introduction to ethical intuitionism, focusing on the key components of the theory. Most of my discussion mirrors the depiction of the view in Audi's book. In the second part, I will present a short overview of Audi's book, focusing on Chapter 2, but providing brief synopses of all five. In the third part, I offer some criticisms. In the last, I provide my positive feedback and provide a conclusion.

§1. To begin, I should give at least a cursory description of the position that is being considered here, ethical intuitionism. Mackie's argument from queerness, one of the most common responses to intuitionist claims, is frequently offered as an easy rebuttal to the view, but as McNaughton and Stratton-Lake have argued, this argument rests on certain misconceptions of intuitionism itself. Following Audi (among others), we can differentiate between three appeals to intuitions in ethics:

    1. Epistemological intuitionism. This is the view, according to Audi, that there is **non-inferential knowledge**, knowledge that can be gained without inference to other facts, premises, or axioms. Audi seems to allow 'self-evident' to be used as a synonym for 'non-inferential knowledge.' Ross claimed that a self-evident proposition is "evident without any need of proof, or of evidence beyond itself" (Ross 1930, 29). Part of Audi's goal in this book

is to expand on this claim, as we will see.

2. Ethical (pluralistic) intuitionism. Following Ross' *The Right and the Good*, many commentators began to conflate Ross' **moral pluralism** with intuitionism. Ross was a pluralist about the RIGHT; for him, there was a plurality of *prima facie* duties, each one binding but not lexically ordered. Ross identified five: fidelity, reparation, gratitude, promotion of the good, and non-maleficence; each served, in part, to direct right action. Ross was also a pluralist about the GOOD, and he offers virtue, pleasure, justice, and knowledge as the primary human goods. The key element to note here is that the right (or the good) cannot be explained in terms of one overriding duty or end. The hedonist utilitarian, for instance, is wrong in believing that the only right act is the one that promotes the good, and also wrong in believing that pleasure is the only human end. Following Ross, ethical intuitionism was often taken to mean pluralism about the right or the good, or both. This was clearly a misconception of the position given that other notable ethical intuitionists (Moore, C.D. Broad, and possibly Henry Sidgwick) were clearly not pluralists about the right, the good, or both.

3. Intuitionism about cases (Intuitivism). Audi wisely notes (24-25) that there is another common use of the term intuition in moral philosophy: the use of controversial and challenging thought experiments as "intuition pumps." These intuition pumps abound in contemporary philosophy: brains in vats, runaway trolley cars, violinists attached to innocent bystanders, Chinese rooms, fat men lodged in cave exits, and so on. These challenging cases are meant to bring about a univocal response in the readership, although recent empirical work may raise doubts about the kinds of intuitions being pumped (see Knobe, forthcoming and Nichols, 2004). And, of course, there are those who find the use of such "intuition pumps" to be the use of a red herring. Dennett's use of the term is meant in just such a derogatory way (Dennett, 1980). More to the point, Audi notes that these appeals to intuitions are not necessarily in line with either **epistemological intuitionism** or **ethical intuitionism**. One may respond or react to a proposed intuition pump without reasoning non-inferentially or pluralistically. To note the difference between the first two and the third, Audi calls the case-oriented appeals to intuitions **intuitivism**.

Ross was an intuitionist in both of the first two senses. It's not clear whether Ross had any leanings towards intuitivism, although it would not be inconceivable, Audi says, for an intuitivist to provide an intuitionist rationale for their moral and epistemological positions. Regardless of Ross' take on thought experiments, Audi's focus is on the position held by Ross, and on beefing up the defense of **epistemological intuitionism** in an effort to buttress the claims made about **ethical intuitionism**. With the preliminaries about the various ways of understanding intuitionism out of the way, I will now move to the text of Audi's book itself.

§2. Audi's book is quite detailed and complex, and dredges up a host of interesting and challenging points with each turn of the page. In my limited space here, I will provide a rough and extremely brief sketch of each of the chapters of the book, highlighting Audi's main points but leaving out any substantive discussion or criticism, which will follow in the next section. I will focus my discussion on Chapter Two, which carries most of the weight of the argument, and will offer only passing glimpses at the core issues in Chapters One and Three though Five.

Chapter 1, "Early Twentieth-Century Intuitionism," provides exactly what the title suggests, a quick

tour through the important intuitionists of the early part of the Twentieth Century. He discusses Sidgwick's important work on the various categories of intuitionism, Moore's version of intuitionism (and his disagreements with Sidgwick), Prichard's dogmatic intuitionism (rejected by both Moore and Sidgwick), and C.D Broad's concept of "fittingness." Most of the chapter, however, deals with Ross's version(s) of intuitionism and his arguments for *prima facie* duties. The bulk of the analytic work is done in the sixth subsection of the chapter, where Audi begins to lay out what Ross meant by **direct knowledge** (also called **non-inferential knowledge** and **self-evident knowledge**). He thinks there are four characteristics to an intuition:

> **1. The non-inferentiality/directness requirement.** The intuited proposition is not believed on the basis of a premise.
>
> **2. The firmness requirement.** The intuitions must be moderately firm cognitions, such as beliefs or other mental events implying belief. They cannot be mere inclinations or tendencies to believe.
>
> **3. The comprehension requirement.** There must be a minimal understanding of the propositional objects. One cannot have intuitions about things which one does not have even a minimal understanding of, according to Ross.
>
> **4. The pretheoreticality requirement.** Intuitions should not be dependent on theories themselves nor themselves held as theoretical hypotheses. This does NOT mean they are preconceptual, merely that they are not grounded in some theoretical hypothesis.

The devil, as they say, is in the details, and Audi's second chapter, "Rossian Intuitionism," fills in many more of the details of the notion of self-evident knowledge.

The majority of the epistemological workload of the book is carried in Chapter Two, and I will address several of the important elements here without coming close to touching on all of them. In an attempt to provide the foundations of a plausible intuitionism, Audi begins by trying to pin down the nature of self-evident propositions. If, according to the earlier intuitionists, self-evident propositions are objects of intuitions, we apparently simply apprehend the truth of propositions with no need for proof. They are, Audi says, proof-exempt, and would be something you either saw or did not see, but could not be proved one way or the other (42). According to Audi, a proposition is self-evident "provided an adequate understanding of it is sufficient both for being justified in believing it and for knowing it if one believes it on the basis of understanding it" (49).

But Audi wants to differentiate his position from the Rossian position in at least one crucial way, that is, where Ross was unwilling to concede that self-evident propositions could be inferred from other propositions, Audi is willing to allow that self-evident propositions can be inferred from other propositions. He says, for instance, that one could judge a poem to have artificial language either by responding to certain evidential propositions (the author has manipulated words to make the lines fit) or by responding to the general integrated feel of the poem itself (45). Some propositions will be recognized easily by normal adults (or by the "mentally mature" to use Ross' own term) and are **immediately self-evident**. Others will only be grasped through the mediation of self-reflection, and are **mediately self-evident**. Audi claims, contrary to Ross, that any proposition that can be known non-inferentially can also be known inferentially, on the basis of an argument. Where Ross would

claim that self-evident propositions are only known immediately, Audi allows for mediately self-evident propositions. Audi defends this by distinguishing between **hard self-evidence** and **soft self-evidence**. Hard self-evidence is strongly axiomatic, immediate, indefeasibly justified, and compelling, while soft self-evidence has none of these properties, and will always be mediate (53).

After providing the account which leads to his updated "moderate" intuitionism, Audi considers and replies to several objections that apply to intuitionism. These objections are:

1. The 'dissensus' objection. Since there disagreements on allegedly self-evident principles in ethics, this must indicate a problem with the notion of self-evidence. This is an objection focused primarily on the epistemological notion of intuitionism.

2. The incommensurability problem. Any system that provides (or allows) a plurality of different principles and/or reasons for action will run into situations where two competing values or duties will be in conflict and, hence, incommensurable. This objection impacts both the pluralistic view of intuitionism and the epistemological view.

3. The dogmatism objection. Claims about intuitions can come off sounding like dogmatism about certain moral necessary truths. This is, as Audi puts it, a "metaphilosophical" position about the nature and grounding of philosophical beliefs in general.

The final section of Chapter Two finds Audi teasing out the distinctions between different types of particularism, and accepting **epistemological particularism** (intuitions regarding our awareness of duty proceed from specific cases and not from general principles) and **genetic particularism** (our learning of concepts comes from understandings of specific cases rather than beginning with broad-based conceptual ideas). He rejects **normative particularism** (that a consideration's counting for or against something will vary based on the particular case) in favor of the **invariant valence view** (the valence of some actions will always be a negative valence, regardless of the situational factors that are present) and he remains undecided on **conceptual particularism** (cognitions regarding concrete cases are conceptually prior to cognitions concerning the more general concept). All of this, claims Audi, leads to a form of **moderate particularism** which he shares, tellingly, with Ross.

In his conclusion to Chapter Two, which is a pretty massive undertaking on its own, Audi notes that he has done several important things to reconcile Ross' intuitionism with the standard reading of it in contemporary philosophy:

1. He has shown it to be less like Moore's than it is generally understood to be.

2. He has jettisoned the idea that intuitive knowledge is indefeasible (or dogmatic).

3. He has rejected the notion of a 'special faculty' by which knowledge is gained.

4. He has rejected that we "just see" the truth of basic moral principles.

5. He has refuted the claim that non-inferential moral judgments cannot be both intuitively justified and defended with reference to principles.

In Chapter Three, Audi moves to show that Rossian intuitionism can be combined with a broadly Kantian approach to ethical theory, in particular by utilizing a version of the Categorical Imperative to help resolve some of the problems that occur when Rossian *prima facie* duties seem to conflict. This problem, which Audi doesn't give a particular name to, might be dubbed the **practical wisdom problem**: the problem of conflicting or uncertain moral duties, and the question of how to choose between them. One possible answer to the question "what is my duty here in the face of a conflict between *prima facie* duty A and *prima facie* duty B" would be to rely on practical wisdom (or practical reason), as Ross does. Another solution, according to Audi, is to apply a highly generalized version of the Categorical Imperative (one that combines the universality formulation and the intrinsic end formulation) to such conflicts. Part of the appeal of this move, it seems, is that it doesn't require any puzzling or question-begging moves toward some undefinable faculty of practical wisdom: the Categorical Imperative (says Audi) is quite clear and straightforward, even if applications of it are less so. Audi thinks that this move to a Kantian Intuitionism mutually reinforces the best elements of both Kantian moral theory (and he explicitly notes this is *Kantian* and not *Kant's* moral philosophy) and Rossian deontological moral intuitionism. The two theories work in two different ways: Kantian theory is a **top-down** theory (starting from broad principles and never from examples or cases) while Rossian theory is a **bottom-up** theory (starting from particular cases and working towards generalizable principles). Kantian Intuitionism, he says, is an **up and down from the middle** approach, taking the best of both approaches while avoiding the limiting factors of each.

Chapter Four expands upon the notion of "final duty" and attempts to tease out how there can be a "comprehensive principle, which may or may not be non-inferentially knowable, that can unify first-order principles of duty without undermining the point that they are non-inferentially knowable" (159). He offers an explanation of how one's final duty could be determined in cases where it was NOT intuitively recognized that one ought to perform action X in a particular case. And he attempts to synthesize these Kantian and Rossian principles in such a way that encourages and engenders human fulfillment and flourishing.

Chapter Five brings the meta-ethical arguments home by attempting to apply them to both normative moral theory and applied ethics, considering how Kantian Intuitionism might apply to professional ethics, questions of moral rights, beneficence, and personal conduct. Most interestingly, he proposes an expanded set of *prima facie* duties that would be endorsed by a Kantian Intuitionism. He is careful in his usage of 'duty': he wants to avoid the tricky implication of corresponding rights to these "duties" and so he couches their usage in terms of moral **shoulds** rather than "oughts" or "musts." These ten *prima facie* duties are:

1. We should not injure or harm people.

2. We should not lie.

3. We should keep our promises.

4. We should not treat people unjustly and we should rectify (and prevent) injustices.

5. We should make amends for our wrongdoings.

6. We should contribute to the good (the well-being) of other people.

7. We should express gratitude to others when good is done to us.

8. We should develop or sustain our distinctively human capacities.

9. We should contribute to increasing or preserving the freedom of persons.

10. We should treat other people respectfully.

The book concludes with a brief (seven page) Conclusion that summarizes the core arguments of each chapter, and highlights the main strands of each of the lines of argument in non-technical form.

§3. Having provided a somewhat brief synopsis of some of the core elements of each of the chapters of this challenging work, I will move to some criticisms of the book, each intended to clarify or reinforce the project. I approach this book with an admiration for, and an inclination towards, intuitionism. My criticisms are directed at helping continue the reclamation project that Audi and other intuitionists are spearheading. I will roughly divide these into four distinct critiques, although they are interconnected and less than completely distinct.

The first question that I find left unanswered in the book is the exact nature of non-inferential knowledge. While he often speaks of non-inferential knowledge as self-evident (both mediately and immdiately), in other places he speaks of non-inferential knowledge as knowledge that **requires no premises** or knowledge that is **proof-exempt**. He also defines a self-evident proposition as one where an "adequate understanding of it is sufficient for both being justified in believing it and for knowing it if one believes it on the basis of that understanding" (49). It is not entirely clear to me that Audi has given us a good description of what he means by 'premises' or what an "adequate understanding" will turn out to be. If premises are mere "if-then" kinds of reasonings ("if I light this cat on fire, then the cat will suffer" paired with "if I make something suffer, then I have acted badly"), it's hard to tell how intuitionism can avoid using something that at least looks like premise-based reasoning. If he means that premises are somehow to be equated with provability, he might be using 'premises' in too restrictive of a fashion. And his usage of 'adequate understanding' still leaves some unanswered questions. It seems that he wants to place understanding in some kind of linguistic competence, as is evidenced here:

> Keeping in mind what constitutes a prima facie duty, consider how we would regard some **native speaker of English** who denied that there is a prima facie duty not to injure-say to stab or burn-other people and meant by this something which clearly implies that doing it would not in general be even prima facie wrong. This is not amoralism-the point is not that the person agrees but would not be *moved*. Rather, such a person apparently exhibits a kind of *moral deafness*, apparently not hearing the moral element at all. (67, my emphasis)

If, as seems to be the case, Audi is placing a lot of the ethical workload on being a native speaker of English, there seem to be unanswered questions. Is he saying that prima facie duties hold within linguistic communities only? Is he implying that all English speakers share the same core set of

values about injuring others? Or is the linguistic emphasis a red herring? This sort of broad question about the grounding of *prima facie* duties leads to both my second and third questions.

Secondly, at several points Audi attempts to resolve some of the perceived problems in the Rossian system by providing us with something more concrete than what he calls "Ross' Aristotelian leanings." He finds room to criticize Ross in places where Ross falls back on Aristotelian arguments about "practical wisdom." Instead of being forced to posit some non-definable sense of practical wisdom, and falling into the trap of positing some faculty of moral intuition, Audi claims to give us something more concrete. One version of the story is that Audi gives us a plausible reading of Kantian ethics to supplement those moments where moral intuitions are fuzzy. But, given the way that I understand the quote, cited above, I think Audi is giving us more than just a Kantian clarification; he is rooting the answer to conflicts between *prima facie* duties (and even our **awareness** of these duties) in some sort of shared set of linguistic norms. On this reading, the things Audi (following Sidgwick) wants to call "middle axioms" seem to be merely shared sets of (at minimum) linguistic conceptions of right and wrong, duty and non-duty. If this is really what Audi is aiming for, I would have liked to have seen the argument for the shared language of morality more explicitly. It seems quite plausible to me that native speakers of English could come to reasonably different conclusions about the nature and structure of prima facie duties, even about such uncontroversial moral "oughts" as stabbing or burning. I'm not sure I see how Audi hasn't begged the question at hand (about moral "oughts") by calling those who deny his proposed *prima facie* duties morally deaf.

A third, and closely related criticism, asks Audi why he doesn't move from linguistic competence to some broader **social epistemological** approach. These "middle axioms" that Audi defends could easily be put in terms not of linguistic competence but **social competence**. Even if it turns out that we learn them through Audi's Kantian Intuitionism, we may be learning **social facts** and not some other set of facts (linguistic, moral, and/or metaphysical). The importance of the social is not lacking in the examples Audi uses. In his discussion, for example, of the duty of beneficence, he concedes that "communal living with others may create obligations of beneficence in several ways" (95). And most of the ten proposed prima facie duties are other-regarding and not self-regarding duties. All of this leaves me wondering if there isn't a richer story to be told about the role of intuitions and non-inferential knowledge in ethics and epistemology as it relates to social norms. Maybe incorporating some of the relevant recent work in social epistemology (Goldman, 1999 and 2004) would provide some support and clarification to Audi's "native speaker of English" comment. While I agree with Audi that someone who is not averse to injuring others may be "deaf", I would be inclined to think this could just as easily be social deafness rather than moral deafness. A better story about the moral reality of the wrongness of injuring others might resolve this problem, and could lead to the rejection of the need for social epistemology.

My final criticism is to question the Kantian overtones of the project. This is not to say that I deny either his attempt to bring Kantian principles into the picture, nor that I deny that they might work, but only to wonder if this merging of Rossian intuitionism with an existing moral theory could work when applied to a non-Kantian moral theory. It would seem, for instance, that a broadly consequentialist rubric could easily support most, if not all, of Audi's *prima facie* duties. A well-drawn rule-consequentialism (Hooker, 2000) might be able to provide the same level of clarification to the practical reason problem as Audi's Kantian approach, and it might be easier for the average

moral agent to understand the machinations of rule-consequentialism over Kantian moral maxims when faced with conflicts of *prima facie* duties.

In the same vein, Audi makes explicit his desire to rebut the Rossian claim that "no general theory satisfactorily deals with these conflicts and that here practical wisdom is our best resource" (84). He expresses a desire to make Ross' Aristotelianism more palatable, seeming to assume that there is something about Aristotelianism that is found to be unacceptable. Ultimately, his concern may be a common concern about Aristotelian approaches to virtue ethics generally; if the theory isn't easily codifiable into something vaguely rule-like, it can't do much action guiding. This is a worry that still raises hackles in discussions of virtue ethics, but there are replies available, and there are both Aristotelian (see Foot, 2001) and non-Aristotelian (see Slote, 2001) versions, each attempting to show that virtue ethics **can** be action-guiding. Ultimately, it seems to be Audi's claim that Ross' reliance on some form of "practical wisdom" is too vague or metaphysically obscure, but that an application of some version of the Kantian Categorical Imperative resolves the vagueness or obscurity. I'm not sure I'm as optimistic about that claim as Audi, and I'm also not as quick to dismiss the value of the virtue of practical reason, conceived in a broadly Aristotelian fashion.

§4. Despite these criticisms of the details of his project, my ultimate assessment of *The Good In the Right* is one of unapologetic admiration. I find the book compelling on several levels: it serves as an admirable discussion of the history of ethical intuitionism, it offers a detailed look at the various ways intuitionism finds its form, and it serves as a powerful piece of meta-ethical and normative ethical philosophy. It is deep and complex, and re-readings bring to life nuances that were previously unnoticed, which I find to be a virtue in an authored text. The denseness and complexity of the material covered would probably rule this out as a text for anything but the most advanced undergraduates, but this would easily work as a core text in contemporary meta-ethics, in a seminar on intuitionism, or as an alternative to the standard readings of Kant in a course of contemporary Kantian moral philosophy. These, of course, are merely suggestions. Individual chapters from the book may well fit nicely into other courses (Chapter 5, for example, would make a nice primer for a normative ethics course looking for an intuitionist counterpoint to the standard set of positions in normative ethics). This book combines a potent set of parts, including insights from the history of moral philosophy, meta-ethics, epistemology, and normative ethics, and combines them into an original and powerful moral theory that is both familiar and comfortable while still feeling new and fresh. Audi's voice may well help resuscitate ethical intuitionism as a viable moral theory after close to a century of being on life-support.

*Thanks to Jim Sias for comments on a draft of this review.

Eric M. Rovie
Georgia State University

REFERENCES

Dennett, Daniel. 1980. "The Milk of Human Intentionality." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3.

Foot, Philippa. 2001. *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Goldman, Alvin I. 1999. *Knowledge in a Social World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Goldman, Alvin I. 2004. "The Need for Social Epistemology." In *The Future for Philosophy* (ed. Brian Leiter). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hooker, Brad. 2000. *Ideal Code, Real World: A Rule Consequentialist Theory of Morality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Knobe, Joshua. "What Is Experimental Philosophy?" forthcoming in *The Philosopher's Magazine*.

Nichols, Shaun. 2004. "Folk Concepts and Intuition: From Philosophy to Cognitive Science." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 8:11.

Ross, W.D. 2002 (1930). *The Right and the Good*, edited by Philip Stratton-Lake. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sidgwick, Henry. 1907. *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th Edition. London: Macmillan.

Slote, Michael. 2001. *Morals From Motives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.