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# Some Good and Bad News for Ethical Intuitionism\*

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## Abstract

The core doctrine of ethical intuitionism is that some of our ethical knowledge is non-inferential. This paper develops a qualified defense of intuitionism against a recent objection, due to Nicholas Sturgeon: if ethical intuitionists accept a certain plausible rationale for the autonomy of ethics, then their further commitment to foundationalism leads them to an implausible epistemology outside ethics. The good news is that, irrespective of whether ethical intuitionists take non-inferential ethical knowledge to be a priori or a posteriori, their commitment to the autonomy of ethics and foundationalism doesn't commit them to the existence of non-inferential knowledge in areas outside ethics (such as the past, the future, or the unobservable) where its existence would be implausible. The bad news is that our support for ethical intuitionism should for now remain merely conditional, because each form of intuitionism requires a controversial stand on certain unresolved issues outside ethics.

## 1 Introduction

The core doctrine of ethical intuitionism is that some of our ethical knowledge is non-inferential. This epistemological doctrine doesn't entail certain philosophical

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excesses that critics have often attributed to intuitionism, such as that we have some dedicated faculty of ethical intuition or that beliefs based on ethical intuition are infallible or self-guaranteeing.<sup>1</sup> Nor does it require various other positions that have often been often associated with the intuitionist tradition in moral philosophy, such as a non-naturalist metaphysics of ethical facts and properties or irreducible pluralism in axiology and normative ethics. Although much still remains to be done in defense of ethical intuitionism, it has of late been getting a worse rap than it deserves. This paper focuses on the recent objection that intuitionism implies an implausible epistemology *outside* ethics. The good news is that the objection in question fails to establish this. The bad news is that whether ethical intuitionism implies a plausible epistemology *within* ethics depends on how we resolve certain outstanding issues in other areas of philosophy.

## 2 The Standard Argument for Ethical Intuitionism

According to ethical intuitionism, some of our ethical knowledge is non-inferential. Speaking roughly, inferential knowledge is knowledge that is based on other things one knows by reasonable inference. The nature of this ‘based on’ relation is a complicated matter, but at minimum it marks some kind of positive dependence of a belief’s status as knowledge on the factors from which the belief derives its status as knowledge.<sup>2</sup> In the case of inferential knowledge, these factors may be other propositions that one knows or other beliefs one has (or has ‘available’) that count as knowledge. Knowledge that  $p$  may then be a case of inferential knowledge even if the psychological process that produced the belief wasn’t an actual inference, so long

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<sup>1</sup>In what follows I’ll largely jettison the word ‘intuition’ altogether. Not only do different writers use the word in quite different ways. From W. D. Ross onwards, many ethical intuitionists themselves have preferred to avoid using ‘intuition’ in expounding their theory because the word can be misleading in various ways.

<sup>2</sup>For a distinction between positive and negative epistemic dependence, see e.g. Robert Audi, *The Structure Of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 144.

as the belief's status as knowledge positively depends on whether it is reasonably inferable from other things one knows. (How to understand this idea depends on how generously we understand the notion of inference. For example, would the reasonable inferences have to be explicit if they were drawn, or could they be implicit?)

Accordingly, still speaking roughly, non-inferential knowledge is knowledge that needn't be based on reasonable inference from other supporting propositions or beliefs that count as knowledge. (Of course, one might know some such supporting propositions all the same. If  $p$  can be known non-inferentially, it doesn't follow that  $p$  cannot also be known inferentially. If there are ways other than reasonable inference for knowledge that  $p$  to be based on other propositions or beliefs that count as knowledge, then in those cases we can say that knowledge that  $p$  is 'mediated' by them if it comes, at least in part, from one's knowledge of other propositions, and 'immediate' otherwise.<sup>3</sup> In this terminology, non-inferential knowledge would be knowledge that doesn't come even in part from other, supporting propositions that one knows or the fact that one knows them. In what follows, however, I'll follow the targets of my discussion in sticking to the terms 'inferential' and 'non-inferential' even though the terms 'mediate' and 'immediate' might on occasion be more apt. We can give analogous rough characterizations of the notions of inferential and non-inferential, and mediate and immediate, epistemic justification. In what follows, however, I'll often simplify by talking about knowledge even when it would be more apt to talk about epistemic justification.) To make things a bit more precise, I'll take ethical intuitionism to require that ethical knowledge can be based by some non-inferential mechanism on some kind of reasons or evidence, where such non-doxastic states as experiences and phenomenal and intellectual appearances of various sorts are typically taken to be capable of presenting the relevant kind of reasons or evidence.

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<sup>3</sup>For this terminology, see James Pryor, 'Is There Immediate Justification?', in Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa (eds), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 181-202, at p. 183.

One reason to understand the core thesis of intuitionism – that some of our ethical knowledge is non-inferential – along the above lines is that then intuitionism purports to solve the skeptical regress problem for ethical knowledge.<sup>4</sup> For if one knows that  $p$  non-inferentially, then there is no further proposition that one must know in order to know that  $p$ . This would stop the regress.

Another reason to understand ethical intuitionism in this way is that it reflects an argument that has influenced most intuitionists and their critics alike. Understanding inferential and non-inferential knowledge as above, we can present this ‘standard argument’ for intuitionism as follows:

- (S1) If we have any ethical knowledge, then such knowledge is either (a) non-inferential, or (b) based on reasonable inference from partly ethical premises, or (c) based on reasonable inference from entirely non-ethical premises.
- (S2) *The Autonomy of Ethics*: There is no reasonable inference (deductive or non-deductive) to any ethical conclusion from entirely non-ethical premises.
- (S3) Therefore, if we have any ethical knowledge, then such knowledge is either (a) non-inferential or (b) based on reasonable inference from partly ethical premises.
- (S4) *Foundationalism*: If we have any knowledge (*a fortiori*, any ethical knowledge) that is inferential, then all such knowledge is ultimately based on reasonable inference from some knowledge that is non-inferential.
- (S5) Therefore, if we have any ethical knowledge, then some of it is non-inferential.

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<sup>4</sup>I won’t here state the regress argument. The argument comes in many versions, but the differences between them matter little to my present purposes. See e.g. Pryor, ‘Is There Immediate Justification?’, p. 184.

(S6) *Ethical Non-Skepticism*: We have some ethical knowledge.

(S7) Therefore, some of our ethical knowledge is non-inferential.<sup>5</sup>

(S1) is a reasonable general assumption. (S2) entails that not all of our ethical knowledge falls under clause (c) in (S1). So (S1) and (S2) jointly entail (S3). (S4), which strictly speaking doesn't exhaust foundationalism but only states a salient implication of it, entails that not all of our ethical knowledge falls under clause (b) in (S1). So (S3) and (S4) jointly entail (S5). Finally, (S5) and (S6) jointly entail the core thesis of intuitionism in (S7). So the standard argument is valid.

The standard argument teaches us that if we combine foundationalism with the autonomy of ethics, then we face a choice between skepticism and intuitionism about ethics. We must also realize that the standard argument is valid independently of the fact that it concerns ethics. A parallel argument concerning the future or the unobservable would be equally valid. The argument therefore seems to generalize: combining foundationalism with the autonomy of our thought about a given topic forces a choice between intuitionism and skepticism about the topic in question.<sup>6</sup>

Since the standard argument is valid, any critic of ethical intuitionism must reject at least one of its premises. Only skeptics about ethical knowledge reject (S6). (This is a move I'll bracket in this paper.) Given that (S1) is a reasonable assumption, any non-skeptical critic of intuitionism must therefore reject either (S2) or (S4). But for my present purposes we can simply set aside the familiar "cheap" counterexamples to the autonomy of ethics and assume that (S2) is true. The objection to ethical intuitionism that is my concern in this paper challenges foundationalism.

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<sup>5</sup>This makes more explicit the argument as presented in Nicholas Sturgeon, 'Ethical Intuitionism and Ethical Naturalism', in Philip Stratton-Lake (ed), *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 184-211, at pp. 190-1. See also Roger Crisp, *Reasons and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), p. 72.

<sup>6</sup>In this paragraph I follow the discussion in Sturgeon, pp. 197, 202.

### 3 Intuitionism and the Autonomy of Ethics

The objection in question, which is due to Nicholas Sturgeon, is that we must reject ethical intuitionism because, given a certain plausible general rationale for the autonomy of ethics, its commitment to foundationalism leads intuitionism to an implausible epistemology outside ethics.

Sturgeon offers a naturalistic ‘rationale’ for the autonomy of ethics. He notes that ‘our thought about the natural world is highly populated by areas that are autonomous with respect to the evidence we bring to bear on them’ (Sturgeon, p. 201). We cannot reasonably infer, for instance, any conclusion about unobservables from premises that are entirely about observables, or any conclusion about psychological states solely from observations of behavior. This is because assessments of evidence for theoretical conclusions are ‘theory-dependent’. In deciding what to think, for instance, about a conclusion concerning unobservables in the light of some observed facts, we typically find ourselves having to rely not just on our understanding of the observed facts and the conclusion but also on a large body of auxiliary assumptions which will inevitably include some theoretical assumptions and some of which will concern unobservables. The autonomy of many areas of our thought about the natural world is plausibly explained by how theory-dependence of this kind pervades our reasoning in those areas. It is then plausible that the explanation for the autonomy of ethics is probably the same. Ethical intuitionists should agree, unless they can give a good reason to think that the autonomy of ethics requires an exceptional explanation. (Sturgeon, p. 201.)

Sturgeon then argues that this naturalistic rationale for the autonomy of ethics is available to intuitionists only at a high epistemological cost. The rationale commits us to the autonomy of our thought about the past, the future, the unobservable, the psychological, and many other topics. As we saw, combining foundationalism with the autonomy of our thought about a given topic forces a choice between intuitionism and skepticism about the topic in question. So, unless an ethical intuitionist who

accepts Sturgeon's rationale for the autonomy of ethics is a skeptic about such topics as the past, the future, the unobservable, and the psychological, she must be an intuitionist about them, too. This commitment would be a cost because it is 'not very plausible' (Sturgeon, p. 202). It is doubtful that we have non-inferential knowledge about the future or the unobservable, let alone that we have enough to provide the needed basis for all the rest that we know in these areas, contrary to foundationalism. So, if ethical intuitionists accept the autonomy of ethics on the basis of Sturgeon's rationale, then combining it with foundationalism commits them to an implausible overall epistemology.<sup>7</sup> But to give up foundationalism would be to give up ethical intuitionism.

In short, Sturgeon's main objection to the intuitionist view that some ethical beliefs constitute knowledge independently of whether one can reasonably infer them from other things one knows is that it implies an implausible epistemology outside ethics. The objection is already powerful, but it can perhaps be made stronger still by considering what beliefs count as inferentially acquired in the first place. We can distinguish between narrower and broader notions of inference. One fairly narrow notion is that a belief counts as being based on inference only if it is consciously drawn from premises that are explicitly noted as evidence.<sup>8</sup> One fairly broad notion applies 'to cases in which someone is unable to articulate the premises, and also to

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<sup>7</sup>More precisely, Sturgeon (p. 204) argues that ethical intuitionism creates a disjunctive commitment to either an implausible non-naturalist metaphysics within ethics or an implausible epistemology outside it. This complication needn't detain us, since I focus on the epistemological aspect of the argument. Some ethical intuitionists themselves claim that an intuitionist moral epistemology isn't committed to a non-naturalist metaphysics of ethical properties. See Robert Audi, 'Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics', in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons (eds), *Moral Knowledge?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 101-36; and Audi, *The Good in the Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), at pp. 55, 232 n. 47. Indeed, ethical intuitionism seems quite compatible with definitions of ethical naturalism like, for instance, the one given in David Copp, 'Why Naturalism?', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 6 (2003), pp. 179-200.

<sup>8</sup>See Audi, *The Good in the Right*, p. 45.



cases in which someone is unconscious of making an inference and perhaps even of accepting the premises' (Sturgeon, p. 209).

Those who endorse the autonomy of ethics tend to apply the doctrine in a way that deploys some relatively broad notion of inference.<sup>9</sup> For example, when someone seems to move from purely non-ethical premises directly to an ethical conclusion, we tend to think 'What terrible reasoning!' only when we think that we cannot plausibly interpret the person as having in some or other way relied on some ethical assumptions. Typically we think that those who make such an inference must in fact be relying on, or have been influenced by, further ethical assumptions. But to the extent that ethical intuitionists apply the autonomy of ethics in this familiar manner, they are already committed to working with some relatively broad notion of a belief's being based on inference. If so, then the validity of the standard argument for intuitionism requires that we interpret foundationalism in terms of a correspondingly broad notion of inference. On such a notion, however, it would seem quite plausible that those ethical beliefs that intuitionists would want to count as non-inferential knowledge count as products of inference in a broad sense in which a piece of reasoning might be unconscious or else not fully articulable. For analogy, consider a psychologically immediate theoretical belief 'There goes a proton' that a scientist might form upon observing a vapor trail in a cloud chamber. It seems implausible that such a belief could ever count as non-inferential knowledge.<sup>10</sup> This would be to recruit considerations of how ethical intuitionists tend to apply the

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<sup>9</sup>This paragraph canvasses the fuller discussion in Sturgeon, pp. 210-11.

<sup>10</sup>Sturgeon (pp. 202-3) cites epistemological similarities between physical and ethical 'intuitions' to support his claim about the ethical case. In this he follows Richard Boyd, 'How to Be a Moral Realist', in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (ed), *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 181-228. The proton case is due to Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 6. For an argument that ethical intuitions aren't in general products of inference from background beliefs, part of which relies on the autonomy of ethics, see Michael Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), at pp. 103-4.

autonomy of ethics in the service of putting further pressure on foundationalism.

More would need to be said fully to assess this addendum to Sturgeon's main objection to ethical intuitionism. For instance, Sturgeon grants that any broad notion of a belief's being based on inference needs ultimately to be justified on the basis of its role in a plausible epistemology and not merely by the above sort of dialectical considerations (p. 209). We would need to determine just how broad a notion of inference is required for applying the autonomy of ethics in the familiar manner. We might think twice if it turned out that it requires a notion that counts, for instance, ordinary perceptual beliefs as inferentially acquired if they are so much as acquired within a framework of background theory. It might also turn out that intuitionists have other vital philosophical interests that they can only protect by rejecting Sturgeon's broad notion of inference and those applications of the autonomy of ethics which require such a notion.<sup>11</sup> Hence rejecting broad notions of inference might be the most obvious line of response for intuitionists to take.<sup>12</sup> But whether there is some fairly broad notion of a belief's based on inference that would be epistemologically well-motivated is too early to say. Hence in what follows I assume that a 'yes' answer to this question is a live possibility. What is more, Sturgeon's main argument against ethical intuitionism is independent of dialectical considerations of how intuitionists tend to apply the autonomy of ethics. Even if some ethical beliefs in fact aren't inferentially acquired, the view that such a belief can count as knowledge independently of whether it is reasonably inferable from other things one knows might still lead to an implausible epistemology outside ethics. Sturgeon's main argument against intuitionism doesn't therefore require the claim that the

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<sup>11</sup>Audi refers to Sturgeon for 'a quite different view of inference' in the context of distinguishing 'conclusions of inference' from 'conclusions of reflection' (*The Good in the Right*, p. 210 n. 12 and p. 45, respectively). (Cp. note 25 below.) This distinction matters here only to the extent that we apply the autonomy of ethics in the familiar manner just to conclusions of reflection. Nothing that Audi says settles the extent to which this is the case.

<sup>12</sup>Thanks to an anonymous referee for this journal for suggesting that I address this possible line of response.

ethical beliefs which intuitionists would want to count as non-inferential knowledge are in fact based on inference.

## 4 Intuitionism and Ethical Perception

To begin assessing Sturgeon’s argument, let’s distinguish two forms of ethical intuitionism by their answers to the question, ‘Assuming we have ethical knowledge, *how* do we have it?’ According to *a posteriori ethical intuitionism*, some of our ethical knowledge is non-inferential a posteriori knowledge. According to *a priori ethical intuitionism*, some of it is non-inferential a priori knowledge. (The core notion of the a priori is that a proposition counts as being knowable a priori as long as no positive appeal to experience is needed in order for it to be known, beyond whatever experience one needs in order to understand it. This notion is minimal, in that it allows us to treat a priori knowledge as defeasible by experience.<sup>13</sup>) Each version finds adherents in the intuitionist tradition, often to the exclusion of the other. But in fact they are compatible: it could be that we have both a priori and a posteriori non-inferential ethical knowledge. (They do exhaust the intuitionist options, however, assuming that knowledge that isn’t a priori is a posteriori.) Let’s first consider whether a posteriori ethical intuitionism can escape Sturgeon’s argument.

The standard way to understand a posteriori intuitionism is to model at least some of our ethical knowledge on (quasi-)perceptual knowledge (where expressions like ‘ethical perception’ and ‘moral vision’ needn’t be taken literally). If we have any non-inferential a posteriori knowledge, presumably some of it is had by perception. Similarly, it might be that we have at least some ethical knowledge by something broadly like perception of ethical facts. (Since perception is of particulars, such

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<sup>13</sup>See, among many others, Laurence Bonjour, *In Defense of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ch. 4; Hartry Field, ‘Apriority as an Evaluative Notion’, in Paul Boghossian and Christopher Peacocke (eds), *New Essays on the A Priori* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 117-49; and Copp.

knowledge would presumably concern particular rather than general ethical facts.)

To make this more precise, one could say that one form of ethical cognition is perception-like in that it involves exercising a conceptually and intellectually sophisticated ability much like the ability to see that a person is in pain or amused, or the ability to see that one can checkmate in five moves, or the ability to hear that one of the pistons isn't firing or that a chord is C# minor. Consider this famous example from Gilbert Harman:

If you round a corner and see a group of young hoodlums pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it, you do not need to *conclude* that what they are doing is wrong; you do not need to figure anything out; you can *see* that it is wrong.<sup>14</sup>

Michael Watkins and Kelly Dean Jolley suggest that knowing that what the hoodlums are doing is wrong is like knowing that a particular wine is fine and that knowing the latter is like knowing that a wine has a start of herbs and dark berries: each can be known through exercising an acquired perceptual skill that is augmented by intellect.<sup>15</sup> If we think that tasting a start of herbs and dark berries is no less a result of perceptual training than tasting fineness in wine, we might well think that seeing that the hoodlums are torturing a cat for fun is no less a result of perceptual training than seeing that their action is wrong. We might well think that in both cases successful training improves our capacity to recognize qualities that reside in the objects all along.<sup>16</sup>

The problem with this perceptual form of a posteriori intuitionism as we so far

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<sup>14</sup>Harman, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup>See Michael Watkins and Kelly Dean Jolley, 'Pollyanna Realism: Moral Perception and Moral Properties', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 80 (2002), pp. 75-85, at pp. 77-8.

<sup>16</sup>For similar claims, see David McNaughton, *Moral Vision* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), at p. 58; Mark Johnston, 'The Authority of Affect', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63 (2001), pp. 181-214; and Terence Cuneo, 'Reidian Moral Perception', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 33 (2003), pp. 229-58.

have it is that ‘seeing’ an action to be wrong might still be an inferential way of knowing that it is wrong. Harman himself writes that ‘if you hold a moral view, whether it is held consciously or unconsciously, you will be able to perceive rightness or wrongness, goodness or badness, justice or injustice’ but that such observations are ‘theory-laden’ in that ‘what you see depends to some extent on the theory you hold’ (Harman, pp. 5, 4). Presumably trained perceptual abilities deliver observations that are theory-laden in this way. But in that case ethical observations that don’t require stopping to figure anything out may nonetheless always involve inference in some broader sense of the term.<sup>17</sup> (Given the autonomy of ethics, these would likely be inferences among whose premises are some ethical views that one already has.) This means that more or less everyone, not just oenological intuitionists, can say that one way of knowing that a particular wine is fine is tasting its fineness. And more or less everyone, not just ethical intuitionists, can say that one way of knowing that the hoodlums’ action is wrong is seeing it to be wrong.<sup>18</sup> By the same token, nothing in the perceptual form of a posteriori intuitionism as we so far have it rules out the possibility that the ethical knowledge we have by perception is nonetheless based, at least in part, by inference on other things we know. Hence a posteriori intuitionists have yet to show that perception gives us ethical knowledge that is non-inferential in some relevantly broad sense of inference.

Let ‘OTL’ be the claim that all observation is theory-laden. In responding to Sturgeon’s objection, a posteriori intuitionists must first contest the claim that, given OTL, none of one’s perceptual knowledge is based just on the experiences that one has but rather is always based partly on reasonable inference from some background beliefs one has. To get going, they might follow James Pryor in noting that there are many senses in which observation might be theory-laden:

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<sup>17</sup>For discussion, see Sturgeon, p. 205.

<sup>18</sup>For a discussion that reaches this kind of conclusion, albeit via a slightly different argument, see Sarah McGrath, ‘Moral Knowledge by Perception’, *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004), pp. 209-28, at pp. 221-22.

OTL1: What background beliefs one holds can causally affect what experiences one has.

OTL2: One needs to have certain background beliefs before one is able even to entertain or form certain observational beliefs.

OTL3: Background beliefs necessarily play a role in acquiring justification.

OTL4: Background beliefs can defeat any justification one gets from experience.<sup>19</sup>

A posteriori intuitionists can agree that ethical perception would be theory-laden in the sense of OTL1 and OTL2. OTL1 concerns how one comes to have the experiences one has in the first place, not about which transitions from experience to belief result in justified belief or knowledge.<sup>20</sup> Given OTL1, our prior ethical views can causally affect what we perceive. This is compatible with having non-inferential ethical knowledge by perceiving ethical facts. Similarly with OTL2. A non-inferentially justified belief needn't be a belief that one could be justified in holding without needing to hold any other beliefs. One might need certain background beliefs to possess the concepts necessary for even entertaining a given belief. But even when this is so, it doesn't follow that one's justification for holding the belief must be based even in part on whatever justification one has for holding those background beliefs.<sup>21</sup>

OTL3 rules out the possibility of non-inferential perceptual knowledge and justification. OTL4 allows for defeasible non-inferential justification; whether it rules

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<sup>19</sup>James Pryor, 'The Skeptic and the Dogmatist', *Noûs* 34 (2000), pp. 517-49, at pp. 540-1.

<sup>20</sup>As Pryor quips, your 'sunglasses causally affect your experiences, but none of your perceptual beliefs are justified to any extent by your sunglasses' ('The Skeptic and the Dogmatist', at p. 540).

<sup>21</sup>In this paragraph I largely follow Pryor, 'The Skeptic and the Dogmatist', pp. 533-4, 540-1. Like him, I ignore the question whether, and how, we can draw a distinction between 'observation' and 'theory'. That question deserves discussion, however, since it matters whether every ethical belief is a theoretical belief (and in what sense). Sturgeon seems to think yes, whereas Audi thinks not ('Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics', p. 110).

out non-inferential knowledge is a matter of dispute. But the above objection to the perceptual form of a posteriori intuitionism doesn't establish that ethical perception is theory-laden in the sense of OTL3 or OTL4. (Harman's claim that 'what you see depends to some extent on the theory you hold' implies only OTL1.) The objection is also compatible with the possibility that beliefs based on observations that are theory-laden in the sense of OTL1 or OTL2 don't depend for their status as knowledge on inference even if their causal etiology involves unconscious inference. Imagine, for example that you turn to me in a loud rock concert and I hear you say 'Awesome solo!' Suppose I come to have such an experience only because my brain merges auditory and facial movement signals into a unified experience (and uses context and prior knowledge in other ways, too) to repair degraded sounds and resolve ambiguities.<sup>22</sup> (I didn't hear you say 'Oh, some solo!') The process of 'multisensory integration' by which I come to have my speech perception then involves inference in some fairly broad sense. But my knowledge that you said 'Awesome solo!' could still be based directly on my experience and count as non-inferential in the relevant sense. Likewise, many people think that I can know non-inferentially that there are black marks on white surface in front of me on the basis of my visual experience of black marks on white surface. The evidence on the basis of which I know that you said 'Awesome solo!' or that there are black marks on white surface in front of me isn't distinct from my hearing you say 'Awesome solo!' or seeing black marks on white surface.<sup>23</sup>

Following this model, a posteriori intuitionists could modify the perceptual account to hold that we have some ethical knowledge by perceiving ethical facts, where this knowledge isn't based on distinct evidence.<sup>24</sup> The account implies that we have

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<sup>22</sup>See e.g. Lee M. Miller and Mark D'Esposito, 'Perceptual Fusion and Stimulus Coincidence in the Cross-Modal Integration of Speech', *Journal of Neuroscience* 25(25) (2005), pp. 5884-93.

<sup>23</sup>My formulation here reflects the view that evidence consists in some cognitive grasp of facts, propositions, or 'contents'. But I have no problem with the alternative view that evidence consists in facts or propositions and it is *having* evidence that consists in some cognitive grasp of them.

<sup>24</sup>I take the expression 'distinct evidence' from McGrath, who defends the view that we 'have

some ethical knowledge by perceiving ethical facts which depends for its status as knowledge neither on inference from distinct non-ethical evidence nor on inference from prior ethical views and distinct non-ethical evidence.

Two friends of mine illustrate a worry about whether we have the kind of non-inferential ethical knowledge that the modified perceptual account says we have. Consider Greg, a wine maker who reports that in tasting wine he seeks for certain non-evaluative qualities as a basis for judging whether the wine is fine. Compare Greg with Michael, a wine connoisseur who reports that he can taste fineness in wine. The modified account implies that when Greg and Michael both know that a particular wine is fine, they know this in very different ways: Greg's knowledge is explicitly based on distinct premises that are noted as evidence whereas Michael's isn't. But it would be surprising if their knowledge were so very different. It isn't because Greg is lacking in training, sensitivity, or discriminative ability that his knowledge is based on non-evaluative evidence that the wine is fine. A critic like Sturgeon might then suggest that Greg's and Michael's perceptual abilities aren't different in kind, but rather involve the same kinds of prior beliefs, expectations, training, and inferences from certain sensory inputs to certain evaluative conclusions. Greg and Michael might instead differ merely with respect to how explicit their inferences are. Then Michael's oenological knowledge would be no less inferential than Greg's in an epistemologically relevant sense.<sup>25</sup>

There is a reply to this worry. When, in Harman's example, I experience what moral knowledge by perceiving moral facts, and this perceptual knowledge does not rest on non-moral evidence' (p. 223). (She doesn't say what counts as 'resting on'.) For a related but more detailed position, see John Greco, *Putting Skeptics in their Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), at pp. 241-44. Neither McGrath nor Greco endorses foundationalism, however, since neither claims that all the rest of our ethical knowledge is based on perceptual ethical knowledge.

<sup>25</sup>This case might also cast doubt on the epistemological, as opposed to psychological, relevance of Audi's distinction between 'conclusions of reflection' and 'conclusions of inference' (*The Good in the Right*, pp. 45-6; cp. note 11.)



the hoodlums are doing as wrong, my experience represents their action as being wrong. Suppose for now that examples like this show that experiences can represent ethical properties as being instantiated, so that if there are ethical properties that are instantiated, then we can *correctly* represent them as being instantiated. (But note that it is a substantive question whether experiences can represent ethical properties in the same way that they represent colors, shapes, motion, and whatever else is plausibly represented in experience.) The reply I have in mind is to say that at least some experiences that correctly represent an ethical property as being instantiated are perceptions of that ethical property as being instantiated. (The relevant sense of ‘perceiving’ – and the corresponding sense of ‘seeing’ – is one where perceiving is factive.) This isn’t a trivial move, although discussions of ethical perception often make it without argument. Even if experiences can correctly represent that properties of kind *K* are instantiated, these experiences fail to count as perception unless their relation to what they represent is sufficiently direct. Thus, even if experiences that represent properties such as colors, shapes, and motion count as perceptions because in these cases the relation is sufficiently direct to count as perception, a substantive question remains whether the same is the case with ethical properties. (Parallel issues arise about whether experiences can represent causal relations, whether one can perceive causal relations or whether all one can perceive is a sequence of events minus its causal nature, and how direct the relation between the two is.<sup>26</sup>)

This reply speaks to the issue at hand. If we couldn’t perceive ethical properties as being instantiated, then those ethical beliefs that a posteriori intuitionists want to count as non-inferential knowledge would have to be based on perceptions of non-ethical properties. We couldn’t form ethical beliefs on the basis of perception in any sense that requires ethical properties to be properly attributed to contents

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<sup>26</sup>See Susanna Siegel, ‘The Contents of Perception’, in Edward N. Zalta (ed), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2005 Edition (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2005/entries/perception-contents/>), sec. 4.

of perception. We could only do so in the sense in which I believe that my neighbor is out of town on the basis of finding that her curtains are drawn, that her mailbox is overstuffed, and that repeated ringings of her doorbell go unanswered.<sup>27</sup> In that case any ethical knowledge that we might have by perception would have to be based at least in part on distinct non-ethical evidence. It seems, in other words, that perception can give ethical knowledge that isn't based on distinct evidence only if we can perceive ethical properties as being instantiated.

The cost of the reply is that establishing that we can perceive ethical properties as being instantiated is a tall order. We cannot establish this solely on the basis of such phenomenological data as that in cases like Harman's we seem to be 'just seeing' an action to be wrong. Such data alone don't even suffice to establish that reports like this are reports of perceptual experience. And everything we have said here so far leaves open the possibility that our experiences represent ethical properties but do so because we have experiences which represent certain non-ethical properties and which we tend to process, more or less unconsciously, through our prior ethical views and other background beliefs, expectations, and abilities that we have. Thus, even if we analyze cases like Harman's as involving experience that represents the hoodlums' action as wrong, what might be going on is that we infer, in some fairly automatic fashion, that the action is wrong from an experience that represents the hoodlums burning the cat or (more contentiously) causing the cat to suffer and die plus our prior views concerning the wrongness of causing a sentient creature to suffer and die. We cannot just assume that this kind of relation between our experiences and the ethical facts they represent would be sufficiently direct for them to count as perception. So, we cannot just assume that we can perceive ethical properties as being instantiated.

Still, if we could perceive ethical properties as being instantiated, then a poste-

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<sup>27</sup>This example is from Susanna Siegel, 'Which Properties Are Represented in Perception?', in Tamar Gendler and John Hawthorne (eds), *Perceptual Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 481-503, at p. 481.

riori intuitionists could argue that some ethical knowledge is non-inferential even if all observation is theory-laden in the sense of OTL1 and OTL2. To argue that the relevant ethical beliefs don't depend for their status as knowledge on inference, they could argue that what properties we can perceive is partly a function of what concepts, abilities, and training we possess. Could I not perceive that certain symbols mean 'That's a load of rubbish' even if someone who cannot read or doesn't know English couldn't?<sup>28</sup> Similarly, why couldn't the various cognitive dispositions that we have in virtue of our ethical training be among those that affect what properties we can perceive? If they were, then, for instance, accepting a principle to the effect that causing a sentient creature to suffer and die is wrong might well dispose me to perceive such actions as wrong. Dispositions don't seem to be the sort of things on which one can rely as premises in inference. But this kind of relation between experiences and what they represent might still be direct enough for them to count as perception.

Of course, this cognitive psychology is speculative. But it is a relevant alternative because Sturgeon's case that ethical beliefs are products of inference isn't empirical. He notes that we need to explain why 'the only people with physical intuition worth trusting are those with extensive knowledge of highly sophisticated, approximately true physical theory and lot of experience in applying it' and why such beliefs 'tend to be most reliable when the background assumptions on which they rest are true' (Sturgeon, p. 203). He then argues that these facts suggest that a belief such as that there goes a proton, which a scientist might form upon observing a vapor trail in a cloud chamber, must be based on inference if it is to count as knowledge. Since ethical beliefs are essentially similar to such beliefs with respect to the conditions under which they are reliable, we should treat the two in the same way.

The alternative that the a posteriori intuitionist offers is that we can perceive eth-

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<sup>28</sup>For an argument, illustrated with an example involving Cyrillic characters, that which concepts one possesses can causally influence what contents one's experiences possess, see Christopher Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 89.

ical properties as being instantiated because our ethical background beliefs endow us with cognitive dispositions to do so. If true, this would provide an epistemologically well-motivated account of why perceptual ethical beliefs tend to be most reliable when we have (at least approximately) true ethical background beliefs and why some of them can nonetheless count as non-inferential knowledge. And yet if we can perceive ethical properties as being instantiated, it doesn't follow that in the similar way perception also gives us non-inferential knowledge about topics like the past, the future, or the unobservable. Whether we can perceive properties of a given kind is something to settle largely on a case-by-case basis. Hence we also cannot assume that a parallel defense of a posteriori intuitionism about extra-sensory perception concerning the past, the future, or the unobservable would be equally plausible. That view stands or (more likely) falls with the issue whether our experiences can be sufficiently directly related to extra-sensory properties to count as perceptions of such properties as being instantiated. (It may also be helpful to keep in mind that Sturgeon is operating with a naturalistic rationale for the autonomy of ethics. Extra-sensory perception would seem to make for a less easy fit with a naturalistic view of the world than ethical intuitionism.)

To summarize: If we can perceive ethical properties as being instantiated, then a posteriori intuitionists can explain how there can be non-inferential ethical knowledge without thereby committing themselves to non-inferential knowledge in areas outside ethics where the existence of such knowledge would be implausible. This would undermine the kind of parity argument that Sturgeon runs against ethical intuitionism. But the question remains whether it would commit a posteriori intuitionists to an implausible epistemology within ethics. That depends crucially on what kinds of properties we can perceive as being instantiated and whether ethical properties are among them. Nothing that is said here settles these outstanding questions in philosophy of perception. But so long as these questions remain unresolved, our support for a posteriori intuitionism should be merely conditional.

## 5 Intuitionism and Self-Evidence

According to a priori ethical intuitionism, some of our ethical knowledge is non-inferential a priori knowledge. Most a priori intuitionists follow W. D. Ross in holding that such knowledge would concern self-evident principles of prima facie duty.<sup>29</sup> Self-evidence is an epistemic property of a proposition that characterizes a way of knowing it. A self-evident proposition is a truth any adequate understanding of which is such that (a) one has justification for believing the proposition in virtue of having that understanding of it and (b) if one believes the proposition on the basis of that understanding, then one knows it.<sup>30</sup> An adequate understanding of a self-evident proposition needn't depend on anything beyond itself for the knowledge it can give of the proposition's truth.

Many standard objections to a priori intuitionism fail because they construe the notion of self-evidence more strongly than this. Even coming to understand, let alone believe, a self-evident proposition may take time and serious reflection. A proposition may then be self-evident even if its truth isn't immediately evident or even if some who understand it don't believe it or find it obvious or compelling. Nor does adequately understanding a self-evident proposition require grasping its modal or epistemic status. For although self-evident propositions are a priori knowable, believing such a proposition is consistent with not believing, *of* the proposition, that it is self-evident, with believing that it isn't self-evident, and with lacking the concept of self-evidence. Hence various kinds of disagreement about whether some given ethical propositions are self-evident don't show that none exist. Likewise, even

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<sup>29</sup>See W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930, ch. 2; Audi, 'Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics' and *The Good in the Right*, ch. 2; and Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), ch. 11. For a form of a priori intuitionism which claims not to require that any moral truths be self-evident, see Huemer, p. 106.

<sup>30</sup>I take this definition from Robert Audi, 'Self-Evidence', *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999), pp. 205-28, at p. 206; and *The Good in the Right*, at pp. 48-9. Compare BonJour, p. 120.

if self-evident propositions are necessary truths, believing one is consistent with not believing that it is necessary. So the truth of a self-evident proposition could be non-inferentially knowable even if knowledge of its modal and epistemic status were inferential.<sup>31</sup>

What can defenders of this form of a priori intuitionism say in response to Sturgeon's objection to ethical intuitionism? There is an initial defensive move that is independent of the claim that the ethical propositions which we can allegedly know non-inferentially are self-evident. A priori intuitionists can complain that both a posteriori intuitionists and Sturgeon model ethical beliefs too closely on observation. Observation seems to be a poor model both for ethical judgments in actual cases of trying to determine what one ought to do and for judgments about hypothetical cases. We cannot know an action to be wrong by seeing it to be wrong if no action which we could see to be wrong is yet on the scene. We cannot model all ethical thought on spectator sports or arts. Moreover, Sturgeon's paradigm case of ethical intuition – seeing that what Harman's hoodlums are doing is wrong – concerns a particular ethical claim. But even if all particular ethical beliefs were based on inference, it wouldn't follow that all general ones (such as principles of prima facie duty) are likewise based on inference. By the autonomy of ethics, they cannot be reasonably inferred from purely non-ethical claims. It isn't clear why every general ethical claim would have to be reasonably inferable from some yet further ethical claims. But if not, then why should every general ethical claim that we know depend for its status as knowledge on whether that is the case?

Returning to self-evidence, a priori intuitionists can allow ample role for inference in belief formation without compromising the possibility of non-inferential ethical

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<sup>31</sup>For a fuller discussion of these replies, as well as other objections and replies, see Audi, 'Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics' and *The Good in the Right*, ch. 2; Shafer-Landau, pp. 250-65; and Philip Stratton-Lake, 'Introduction', in Philip Stratton-Lake (ed), *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 1-28, at pp. 18-23. See also Huemer, ch. 5.

knowledge. It is no problem if a proposition that is knowable solely on the basis of an adequate understanding of it may be knowable also by inference from premises. It is also no problem if being able adequately to understand a proposition may require the capacity to draw inferences that serve to bring out the content of the proposition, such as inferences concerning its application to cases. Since the inferences that one must thereby be able to draw are inferences *from* rather than *to* a proposition, the fact that coming to understand a self-evident proposition may involve inference doesn't show that believing it on the basis of understanding it is a product of inference. Nor does it show that the belief depends for its status as knowledge on inference from premises about the proposition's implications.<sup>32</sup>

A priori intuitionists can also accommodate various versions of Sturgeon's claim that ethical beliefs are theory-laden much in the way that physical observations are. They can accommodate an analogue of OTL2. We may indeed require certain background beliefs to understand a self-evident proposition. For example, understanding the proposition that gleefully flogging an infant to death is (prima facie) wrong may require theoretical beliefs about what pain and biological death are.<sup>33</sup> So, on analogy with OTL2, being able to understand certain propositions may require having certain background beliefs. But this doesn't show that any belief that is based on an adequate understanding of a self-evident proposition would have its status as knowledge based on reasonable inference from those background beliefs.<sup>34</sup> A priori intuitionists can also accommodate an analogue of OTL4. Nowadays a priori intuitionists tend to advocate accounts of the a priori which allow the possibility of

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<sup>32</sup>See again the references listed in note 31.

<sup>33</sup>See Audi, 'Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics', p. 112; and Shafer-Landau, p. 248.

<sup>34</sup>Certain background beliefs – such as theories that one holds about other, adjacent matters – may likewise prevent the manifestation of the belief-forming dispositions that one has in virtue of an adequate understanding of a self-evident proposition, thereby in effect 'masking' the manifestation of those dispositions. For what can serve as an example of this, see Audi, 'Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics', pp. 127-28.

having non-inferential ethical knowledge on the basis of adequate understanding of certain propositions, without any further positive appeal to experience, even if experience, background beliefs, or inferences are capable of defeating our justification to believe those propositions.<sup>35</sup> Even if one adequately understands a self-evident proposition, one may become subject to factors that render one's understanding of it inadequate or one may acquire stronger justification for believing an incompatible proposition.<sup>36</sup>

The upshot here is that insofar as a priori intuitionism escapes objections to the existence of self-evident ethical truths, it also escapes Sturgeon's argument against ethical intuitionism. The existence of self-evident ethical truths would explain how non-inferential ethical knowledge is possible. But thinking that there are self-evident ethical truths doesn't commit one to the existence of self-evident truths also about such topics as the past, the future, or the unobservable. Instead, whether there are self-evident truths in a given area is something that will have to be settled largely on a case-by-case basis. Ethical intuitionism carries no particular commitment in any of these other cases. In sum, then, if there are self-evident ethical truths, then one can accept both foundationalism and the autonomy of ethics without committing oneself to self-evident truths in areas where the existence of non-inferential knowledge that such truths can give would be implausible. A priori intuitionism isn't therefore committed to an implausible epistemology outside ethics.

Whether a priori intuitionism is committed, in virtue of its commitment to self-evident ethical truths, to an implausible epistemology *within* ethics is a more difficult question. Many intuitionists are able to offer at least some examples of ethical propositions that seem true to a broad range of subjects once they think they have understood the propositions in question but before they entertain arguments for or against them. Examples might be that enjoyment is better than suffering,

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<sup>35</sup>See again the references listed in note 13, as well as Audi, *The Good in the Right*, ch. 2; and Huemer, ch. 5.

<sup>36</sup>See Audi, 'Self-Evidence', p. 219.



that gleefully flogging an infant to death is pro tanto wrong, and that punishing a person for a crime she didn't commit is unjust. But it is unclear which of these propositions make substantive ethical claims. Are suffering or punishment, for example, concepts that yield substantive ethical claims? Unless there are *substantive* ethical truths that are knowable a priori and non-inferentially, intuitionists will have difficulty accounting for much of our ethical knowledge. We cannot reasonably infer substantive ethical claims just from such non-substantive claims as 'Murder is wrong'.

I have also yet to see a reliable test for determining whether a proposition is self-evident. Some ethical claims, such as perhaps the principles of equality that the Declaration of Independence declares to be self-evident, may be such that it is hard to know where to begin arguing for them. Instead we tend to make sure that those who disagree have understood the claim and aren't crazy. But such claims aren't supposed to exhaust the class of self-evident ethical propositions even by a priori intuitionists' own lights. We can also hardly assume that asking someone whether a proposition seems true to her once she thinks she has understood it but before she entertains arguments for or against it is a reliable test. Many propositions that are false or at least require argument may nonetheless seem true to us owing to the influence of such potentially distorting factors as partiality, prejudice, emotion, or certain kinds of upbringing.<sup>37</sup> A critic like Sturgeon could well also say that even when we aren't subject to distorting factors, our assessment of a given proposition is often influenced, in a broadly inferential way, by our background beliefs.

Even if we have no reliable test for determining which propositions are substantive self-evident ethical truths, such truths might exist all the same. Here I have nothing new or significant to say for or against the arguments that intuitionists have

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<sup>37</sup>Compare Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, 'Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology', in Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons (eds), *Metaethics after Moore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 339-66; and Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch. 9.

given for their existence.<sup>38</sup> But, in all fairness, since a priori ethical intuitionists aren't committed to the existence of substantive self-evident truths outside ethics, Sturgeon's argument doesn't by itself show that no such truths exist in ethics. For example, the naturalistic rationale that he offers for the autonomy of ethics is compatible with defeasible a priori ethical knowledge.<sup>39</sup> Against a priori intuitionism, then, Sturgeon's objection is at the very least incomplete in an important respect. A neglected worry remains, however, about the existence of substantive self-evident ethical truths. It reprises old worries about the synthetic a priori.

Most of those who think that there are analytic truths would have no objection to the claim that some analytic truths would be self-evident. But such apparently analytic truths as that murder is wrong aren't substantive. Substantive ethical truths should be synthetic. Hence a priori ethical intuitionism requires that there be self-evident synthetic ethical truths. But how is it supposed to be possible to have justification to believe substantive synthetic ethical truths solely on the basis of an adequate understanding of them? A priori intuitionists must explain how this can be.

A priori intuitionists argue that there is no general problem with synthetic self-evident truths by noting that on reflection such sentences as 'Nothing is both green and red all over' seem a priori and self-evident but not analytic.<sup>40</sup> But consider the best-known contemporary account of analyticity, Paul Boghossian's epistemic account: 'A statement is 'true by virtue of its meaning' provided that grasp of its

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<sup>38</sup>See Ross, ch. 2; Shafer-Landau, ch. 11; Audi, *The Good in the Right*, ch. 2; Huemer, ch. 5; and Crisp, ch. 3.

<sup>39</sup>For a form of ethical naturalism that is a case in point, see Copp.

<sup>40</sup>Audi says this after having argued that a self-evident truth may not be analytic in the sense of being a truth that is 'grounded in a simple containment relation of concepts' ('Self-Evidence', p. 222). Huemer says that the sentence in the text seems obvious on reflection although we have no analytic definition of 'red' and 'green', let alone a derivation of the sentence from them (pp. 111-12).

meaning alone suffices for justified belief in its truth'.<sup>41</sup> This counts 'Whatever is red all over is not blue' as analytic (Boghossian, p. 368). But now analyticity is effectively equivalent to self-evidence. How can a priori intuitionists then hold that we have some synthetic a priori knowledge in ethics based on an adequate understanding of self-evident propositions? They appear to have three options: (1) Argue that epistemically analytic claims can be relevantly substantive. (2) Argue that the epistemic notion of analyticity is somehow ill-founded. (3) Argue that an adequate understanding of a self-evident proposition may require more than grasp of its meaning.

Option (1) is too weak if there is a purely semantic explanation of a sentence's being analytic in the epistemic sense. Boghossian thinks that there must be. For 'something about the sentence's meaning, or about the way that meaning is fixed, must explain how its truth is knowable' by 'mere grasp of [its] meaning' (Boghossian, p. 366). Defending epistemic analyticity 'requires showing only that certain sentences are such that, *if* someone knows the relevant facts about their meaning, *then* that person will be in a position to form a justified belief about their truth' (Boghossian, p. 386). But simply knowing the relevant meaning-facts about substantive ethical propositions shouldn't be sufficient for having justification to believe them. Otherwise it is hard to see what role substantive ethical thought would play in finding out moral truths.

Option (2) might help a priori intuitionism if epistemic analyticity had nothing in particular to do with the slogan that analyticity is 'truth in virtue of meaning'. We might think that it won't if the relevant meaning-facts needn't be available to anyone competent in the language, since in that case it could be that a truth is analytic and yet not knowable by anyone who understands the proposition in question. For example, Boghossian includes facts about how 'meaning is fixed' among the relevant facts. But many terms (including terms that can figure in analytic truths) are such

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<sup>41</sup>Paul Boghossian, 'Analyticity Reconsidered', *Noûs* 30 (1996), pp. 360-91, at p. 363.

that one may not be, just in virtue of being competent in the language, in a position to know what fixes their meaning. This may be a reason to prefer an account of analyticity which makes it possible that a truth is analytic but has no particularly special epistemic status.<sup>42</sup> On such an account, substantive self-evident ethical truths could count as synthetic. But if a priori intuitionism rests on the rejection of epistemic accounts of analyticity, fully assessing it requires that we first resolve debates about analyticity in philosophy of language. We might also wonder what more, or other, than knowing the relevant meaning-facts would need to go into an adequate understanding of a proposition if the proposition were to have the kind of special epistemic status that is characteristic of self-evidence.

Hence option (3). Robert Audi says that the relevant notion of adequate understanding implies “being able to apply [the proposition] to . . . an appropriately wide range of cases, and being able to see some of its logical implications, to distinguish it from a certain range of close relatives, and to comprehend its elements and some of their relations”.<sup>43</sup> But this account fails to make a sufficient difference. While Boghossian doesn’t fully specify what knowing the relevant meaning-facts implies, he claims that ‘at least some of an expression’s inferential liaisons are relevant to fixing its meaning’ (Boghossian, p. 384). If that is right, then knowing the relevant meaning-facts about a proposition requires being able to see some of its logical implications, to distinguish it from a range of close relatives, and to comprehend its elements and certain of their relations. How is adequate understanding then meant to differ from grasp of the relevant meaning-facts? A priori intuitionists also still owe us an account of what more than knowing the relevant meaning-facts an adequate

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<sup>42</sup>For recent discussions of analyticity with this kind of thrust, see Brendan Jackson, *Species of Meanings: A Study of Semantic Kinds and Semantic Structure* (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 2005), ch. 2; and Gillian Russell, *Truth in Virtue of Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). See also Nathan Salmon, ‘Analyticity and Apriority’, *Philosophical Perspectives* 7 (1993), pp. 125-33, p. 130.

<sup>43</sup>Audi, ‘Self-Evidence’, at p. 208. See also the surrounding discussion and Audi, *The Good in the Right*, p. 50.

understanding of a proposition can require, if its truth is to be *self*-evident.

To summarize: If there are substantive self-evident ethical truths, then a priori intuitionists can explain how there can be non-inferential ethical knowledge without thereby committing themselves to non-inferential knowledge in areas where the existence of such knowledge would be implausible. This would undermine the kind of parity argument that Sturgeon runs against ethical intuitionism. But the question remains how an ethical (or any other kind of) proposition can be such that an adequate understanding of it puts one in a position to know that it is true but facts about its meaning or how that meaning is fixed don't alone explain why its truth is knowable solely on the basis of an adequate understanding of it. Nothing that is said here settles this outstanding question in philosophy of language. But so long as the existence of synthetic self-evident ethical truths remains unresolved, our support for a priori ethical intuitionism should be merely conditional.

## 6 Conclusion

Ethical intuitionism is the view that some of our ethical knowledge is non-inferential. We have considered the following objection to this view: If ethical intuitionists accept the autonomy of ethics on the grounds that assessment of evidence is in general theory-dependent, then their foundationalism about knowledge commits them to an implausible epistemology outside ethics. I have explained how both a priori and a posteriori ethical intuitionists can avoid an implausible epistemology outside ethics. But in both cases I have also argued that whether these responses provide intuitionists with a plausible epistemology *within* ethics depends on how certain unsettled issues in other areas of philosophy are resolved. The adequacy of a posteriori intuitionism depends on an outstanding issue in philosophy of perception, that of a priori intuitionism on one in philosophy of language. Which (if either) of these forms of ethical intuitionism one should prefer depends on which (if either) of these outstanding issues turns in favor of the philosophical commitments of each. I don't

know the answer to this question. Therefore I conclude that although ethical intuitionism escapes Sturgeon's objection, our support for intuitionism should for now remain merely conditional.

There are, of course, other recent objections to ethical intuitionism. For example, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong argues in great detail that we have no non-inferential ethical knowledge because: (a) we know, from empirical research, that very many ethical beliefs are partial, controversial, emotional, subject to illusion, or explicable by an unreliable source; (b) any given ethical belief of ours can count as knowledge only if we have reason to think that it is an exception to this general trend; but (c) we can have reason to think that a given belief is exceptionally not subject to distorting factors only if we are able to confirm the belief by inferring it from other beliefs (such as beliefs to the effect that the belief has been formed in a reliable way).<sup>44</sup> I cannot here settle whether ethical intuitionists can answer this objection. But I suggest that their responses will be subject to the same moral as I have drawn about intuitionist responses to Sturgeon's objection.

Ethical intuitionists allow that truths that can be known non-inferentially might also be known on the basis of inference. Hence the force of Sinnott-Armstrong's objection depends on how plausible it is that if very many ethical beliefs are subject to distortion, then any ethical belief counts as knowledge only when, and to that extent *because*, the believer is able to confirm that belief by inferring it from other beliefs. (Only when the belief derives its status as knowledge at least in part from the believer's having this inferential ability.) The truth of this claim is a general epistemological problem that has nothing special to do with ethical knowledge. Relevant to its solution are such issues as how, in general, a significant chance of

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<sup>44</sup>See Sinnott-Armstrong, 'Moral Relativity and Intuitionism', *Philosophical Issues* 12 (2002), pp. 305-28; 'Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology'; and *Moral Skepticisms*, ch. 9. For an intuitionist response, see Russ Shafer-Landau, 'A Defense of Ethical Intuitionism', in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (ed), *Moral Psychology, Volume 2: The Cognitive Science of Morality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, forthcoming).

the presence of epistemic defeaters bears on justification and knowledge, and how plausible certain general higher-order requirements on epistemic justification and knowledge are. The problem also bears on the philosophical force of those epistemic principles, favored by many contemporary foundationalists, according to which it is *prima facie* rationally permissible to assume that things are the way they appear.<sup>45</sup> Any solution to the problem will imply a stand on these general epistemological issues. We might also wonder whether an argument against intuitionism that has nothing special to do with ethics would generalize to support a more global skepticism. Might it show that no source of belief is a source of knowledge unless we have reason to trust the kind of beliefs in question?

I suspect, then, that any response to Sinnott-Armstrong's objection to ethical intuitionism will carry specific commitments in outstanding issues in general epistemology. If that is right, then our support for ethical intuitionism should for now remain merely conditional in this respect as well. The moral I draw is that in order fully to assess ethical intuitionism we must take a thorough account of various issues in other areas of philosophy – not only in epistemology, but also in philosophy of mind and language, and beyond. Our support for ethical intuitionism should accordingly remain conditional on how the relevant outstanding issues in these other areas are resolved. Thus ethical intuitionism depends for its viability less on anything special about ethics than on more general philosophical considerations. In this respect, at least, ethical intuitionism seems to be no different from other accounts of ethical knowledge that are currently on offer.

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<sup>45</sup>Among those who endorse such principles are Huemer, p. 99; and Pryor, 'The Skeptic and the Dogmatist'.