

Intuitionism

Sociology, Poverty



UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA. DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AN
ASSIGNMENT ON: THE THEORY OF INTUITIONISM A SEMINAR PRESENTATION
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF PHIL. 523 (MODERN
ETHICAL SYSTEM) BY ABAH, GEORGE . O. (REV. FR.) PG/MA/12/63875

LECTURER: DR. ENEH FEBRUARY, 2013 INTUITIONISM INTRODUCTION All the ethical theories imply some norm or standard of morality. They not only proclaim the fact that morality exists but also that there is some way of distinguishing the good from the evil, the right from the wrong. Ethical theories do not differ greatly in the actual codes of morality they adopt.

The list of approved and disapproved acts, despite some glaring exceptions, is in general much the same. Where they differ most is in their reasons for the approval or disapproval, in the principles on which they base their judgments about morality, that is to say, in the norm or standard by which they judge morality. Intuitionism, which is our concern in this discussion, is one of these ethical theories. The theory, which is in agreement about the facts with other theories, parts ways from them about the reasons and or the routes to getting and judging the facts.

Proponents of this theory think that we have a feel, a sense, an instinct, whatever one wants to call it, that immediately manifests to us what is good and what is evil in the moral sphere, and that this is basically the same in all of us. Our discussion below will unravel more on the teachings, history, and the criticisms for and against the theory. We shall as well attempt a summary and an evaluation of the concept before drawing our conclusions.

THE CONCEPT OF INTUITIONISM Intuitionism is an ethical theory that teaches that moral knowledge is direct, immediate or intuitive.

Making it clearer, Eneh (2001) states that “ Intuitionism in ethics is the view that some moral judgments such as goodness, rightness, are known to be by immediate or uninferred knowledge”. Hence, moral actions of a sort could be known to either be right or wrong by an uninterrupted intuition of either their rightness or wrongness, the value of their consequences regardless. It is therefore the doctrine that there are moral truths discoverable by intuition; the doctrine that there is no single principle by which to resolve conflicts between intuited moral rules; the theory that ethical principles are known to be valid through intuition.

Intuitionism is the meta-ethical doctrine claiming that moral principles, rules or judgments are clear and obvious truths that do not need to be supported by argumentation. Apart from this claim, intuitionism postulates a special faculty for the perception of right and wrong. The special faculty is distinct from the intellect. It is possible, the theory posits, to hold some direct, immediate, intuitive knowledge of morality without attributing such knowledge to any special faculty. The theory therefore reasons that any well-meaning person seems to have an immediate sense of what is right and what is wrong.

Many who have had hardly any opportunity for moral instruction do nevertheless have a basic moral awareness. The great value of moral instruction is to settle doubtful details, to supply one with cogent reasons, and to bring consistency into one’s moral convictions, but all this is not necessary for the formation of those convictions. Furthermore, the theory opines that people had moral ideas and convictions long before philosophers

developed a formal study of ethics. The pre-philosophical knowledge of right and wrong was not reasoned out and logically criticized.

It was therefore a spontaneous knowledge occurring to the mind without consciously directed reasoning, and hence it must come from some intuitive or insightful activity of the mind in recognizing the right and the wrong and discriminating between them. In the same light, our reasoning on moral matters, when we do use it, is subsequent and confirmatory to an initial direct perception of rightness or wrongness. We first see that the cause of action is right or wrong, as the case may be, and then look for reasons.

If our reasoning leads to an answer contradictory to our spontaneous moral judgment, we tend to let the reasoning go and stick to our simple moral intuition, which we consider a surer guide than our elaborate arguments, whose very elaborateness can arouse a suspicion of rationalization. To cap it all, the theory of intuitionism teaches that our reasoning can go wrong on moral matters as easily as on other matters. Though invincible ignorance excuses, we cannot allow it to govern so large a share of our lives that our moral responsibility is on the verge of vanishing.

We must have some way of deciding basic moral issues. That we cannot do so by reasoning, studying, and philosophizing is evident from the many contradictory schools of ethical thought. Therefore, we have to rely on some kind of moral instinct, insight or intuition, which can act as a sure guide.

HISTORY OF THE THEORY OF INTUITIONISM Ethical Intuitionism was popular in the early twentieth century, particularly among British analytic philosophers. H. A. Prichard gave an early defense of the view in his "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" (1912), wherein he contended that moral

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philosophy rested chiefly on the desire to provide arguments starting from non-normative premises for the principles of obligation that we pre-philosophically accept, such as the principle that one ought to keep one's promises or that one ought not to steal. This is a mistake, Prichard argued, both because it is impossible to derive any statement about what one ought to do from statements not concerning obligation (even statements about what is good), and because there is no need to do so since common sense principles of moral obligation are self-evident. Prichard was influenced by G. E. Moore, whose *Principia Ethica* (1903) argued famously that goodness was an indefinable, non-natural property of which we had intuitive awareness. Moore originated the term "the naturalistic fallacy" to refer to the (alleged) error of confusing goodness with some natural property, and he deployed the Open Question Argument to show why this was an error. Unlike Prichard, Moore thought that one could derive principles of obligation from propositions about what is good.

Ethical intuitionism suffered a dramatic fall from favor by the middle of the century, probably due in part to the influence of logical positivism, in part to the rising popularity of naturalism in philosophy, and in part to philosophical objections based on the phenomenon of widespread moral disagreement. Some recent work suggests the view may be enjoying a resurgence of interest in academic philosophy. Robert Audi is one of the main supporters of ethical intuitionism in our days. His 2005 book, *The Good in the Right*, claims to update and strengthen Rossian intuitionism and to develop the epistemology of ethics.

Michael Huemer's book *Ethical Intuitionism* (2005) also provides a recent defense of the view. Furthermore, authors writing on normative ethics often accept methodological intuitionism as they present allegedly obvious or intuitive examples or thought experiments as support for their theories. In all, Intuitionism as an ethical theory and a concept was introduced by George Edward Moore (1873-1958). It was he who projected the above ideas on intuitionism, and believed strongly that moral judgments were non-empirical – they are just “brute facts”.

G. E. Moore was an intuitionist as we can see by his claim that we have the non-natural ability to observe moral properties. Moore believed that moral knowledge about particular values is much like sense knowledge, but this is not necessary to intuitionism. He claims that principles, rules, or judgments appeal to our sense of reasonableness, and that we cannot imagine them to be false. Why because we can't understand what it would be like for the statement to be false. Hence general principles are intuitive.

CRITICISMS FOR INTUITIONISM The main advantage of intuitionism is that it is a simple philosophy positing simply for instance that “God is indefinable.” Moore said that “good” was like “yellow”, in that it cannot be broken down any further – “yellow” cannot be described in any other way than to say it is “yellow”. A “horse”, on the other hand, could be described as brown, large an animal and so on. The strength of intuitionism is that it appeals to the fact that some moral beliefs stand so firmly that they take on the look of data.

That it is wrong to murder or to abuse a child seems truer than any widely accepted theory. The intuitionist labels such judgments as ‘intuitions’. And they certainly appear to be immediate judgments. We do not need to give

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reasons about them. Judgments about murder and abuse are supported by basic moral principles and values. They have intuitive appeal, albeit, such judgments may arise because of socialized sympathy with others, or from basic moral education. CRITICISMS AGAINST INTUITIONISM Intuitionism, many observed, has a lot of difficulties and contradictions it show cases.

In the first place, “ Intuition” is Latin for “ Insight”, “ a looking in”, and therefore a very appropriate word for the direct activity of the intellect in grasping self-evident truths. But it has become associated with hunches, wild guesses, irrational inspirations, clairvoyance, and other fancies so lacking in scientific respectability as to give utterly the wrong impression. It should be clear that guesses and hunches are of no more value in the ethical sphere than in any other sphere. Also, we have no in-born set of moral rules with which we must compare our acts to see whether they are moral or not.

There is no evidence for the existence of any innate ideas in the human mind, including ethical ideas. All our knowledge comes from experience, and our moral ideas are likewise derived from experience. We do not have any faculty, not even conscience that automatically flashes a warning signal as soon as we think of doing something wrong. If conscience seems to act in this way, it is nothing but habit, by which we have become accustomed through training to avoid actions of a certain kind and to judge them to be wrong.

Such habitual action is quite different from instinctive action, and such judges need not be intuitive. Furthermore, an appeal to intuition has the disadvantage of being immune to objective criticism. One claims to see it, and no one proves that he or she does not; another claims not to see it, and <https://assignbuster.com/intuitionism/>

no one can prove that he or she does. The two claims are not contradictory, for each reports only his or her own experience. Such intuitive knowledge, if it exists, can be of benefit only to the possessor and cannot be used to convince anyone else.

Unless most people testify to having the same intuitive (as does happen, for example, regarding sense experience), this sort of private knowledge lacks the universal character of scientific knowledge. Since there is no common agreement on moral intuitions, an appeal to intuitionism, each following a personal moral code privately discovered by personal insights. Moreover, those who find that they do not experience moral intuitions are either left without any ethics which obliged to live ethically, or are obliged to develop an ethical theory on other grounds.

They have to judge both their ethical theory and the intuitionist theory on some basis other than intuition, which by hypothesis they themselves do not possess. The intuitionists, however, must either appeal to intuition to establish the truth of their own theory, thus convincing only themselves, or they must abandon intuition and resort to rational argument when it comes to establishing their theory. Either way shows the weakness of the method.

EVALUATION Despite these and similar criticisms of an intuitionist ethics, we can still ask whether it is possible to remove all intuition from ethics.

Certainly, we shall remove intuition in the sense of hunches and guesses, in the sense of a special faculty for the perception of morals, and in the sense of a direct apprehension of moral rules immediately applicable to particular actions. These illegitimate uses of intuition have tended to ruin the whole concept. However, there remains a legitimate use. Not all knowledge can be

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derived from previous knowledge. There must be some original knowledge, some primitive experience, and some immediate apprehension from which derived knowledge can originate. Thus, not all knowledge can be the result of a reasoning process.

Premises are proved by previous premises and these by others still more previous, but the process cannot go on forever or nothing will ever be proved. Somewhere, one must come to a direct experience (and this is intuition in the original meaning of the term) or to some principle that cannot be proved and needs no proof because it is self-evident. In ethics, there are two particular areas in which we must appeal to such direct and underived knowledge: one is the kind of knowledge of morals people had before developing a scientific ethics, and the other is the first or basic moral principle on which scientific ethics rests.

In other words, the development of ethics in history must have been preceded by an era in which people had ethical ideas that were not the result of reasoned proof, and even after they developed a scientific ethics, they still had to trace it back logically to some immediately known and underived principles for instance, connatural knowledge and first moral principles. Finally, if we are to hold on to the teachings of intuitionism, moral norms could be swept under the carpet since no standard rule stands to judge actions but subjective self-evident truths.

We know of course by simple logic that “ A” or “ not A” can be true, but both cannot be true at the same time. Intuitionists hold that it is possible to prove “ A” and “ not A” as long as mental constructions can be built which prove each consistently. In this sense, proof in intuitionist reasoning is not

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concerned with proving whether or not “ A” exists, but is instead defined by whether both “ A” and “ not A” can be coherently and consistently constructed as valid statements in the mind. This is against “ the law of the excluded middle” which states that either “ A” or “ not A” can be true, but both cannot be true at the same time.

If a person at one end operates on an intuition that stealing is good, and the other person at the other end stands on an intuition that stealing is bad. Intuitionists judge both actions as true at the same time since their positions result from their self-evident “ truths”. Such a proposition disposes a society to destruction. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION Intuitionism in general holds that humans have direct, immediate, or intuitive knowledge of morality, with or without a special faculty. Reasons for intuitionism is that people can tell right from wrong studying ethics, se reasoning to confirm their spontaneous judgments, and reject arguments that contradict their basic moral convictions. Reasons against intuitionism spring from the fact that the word is too vague to be of much use. We have no innate moral ideas or principles; intuition would be a purely subjective experience and scientifically useless, and the intuitionist can convince no one but himself or herself. Nevertheless, there is a legitimate use for intuition in the sense of an intellectual acceptance of self-evident truths. REFERENCES Aristotle; Posterior Analytics, bk. 11, ch. 19; Metaphysics, bk. IV, ch. 4.

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