Philosophia (2007) 35:233–247
DOI 10.1007/s11406-007-9070-z

Intuition as a Basic Source of Moral Knowledge

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Received: 12 November 2006 / Revised version received: 15 May 2007 / Accepted: 15 May 2007 /
Published online: 5 July 2007

Abstract The idea that intuition plays a basic role in moral knowledge and moral philosophy probably began in the eighteenth century. British philosophers such as Anthony Shaftsbury, Francis Hutcheson, Thomas Reid, and later David Hume talk about a "moral sense" that they place in John Locke's theory of knowledge in terms of Lockean reflexive perceptions, while Richard Price seeks a faculty by which we obtain our ideas of right and wrong. In the twentieth century intuitionism in moral philosophy was revived by the works of G. E. Moore, H. A. Prichard, and W. D. Ross. These philosophers reject Kantian deontological ethics and utilitarianism insisting that intuition is the only source of moral knowledge. Recently, there is a renewed interest in intuition by philosophers doing meta-philosophy by reflecting on what philosophers do, and why they disagree. In this essay we plan to take some of this recent literature on intuition and apply it to moral philosophy. We will proceed by (1) defining a conception of intuition, (2) answering some skeptical challenges, (3) delimiting its target, and (4) arguing that intuition is often a source of moral knowledge.

Keywords Intuition · Moral knowledge · Nonsensory perception

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[1]Someone might contend that Plato thinks we can have an intuition of the Form of the Good. But few would hold that Plato is an ethical intuitionist. According to William K. Frankena, Aristotle says there is no criterion or rule for determining the mean. "One can only tell this in each particular case by some kind of intuition, moral sense, or taste for excellence." Frankena, W. K. (1965). *Three historical philosophies of education* (p. 33). Chicago: Scott, Foresman. This suggests that Aristotle may be the first to broach some conception of intuition that he thinks of as a kind of perception. We owe this point to Allan Casebier.

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Hutcheson, Thomas Reid, and later David Hume talk about a "moral sense" that they place in John Locke's theory of knowledge in terms of Lockean reflexive perceptions,[2] while Richard Price seeks a faculty by which we obtain our ideas of right and wrong.[3]

In the twentieth century intuitionism in moral philosophy was revived by the works of G. E. Moore, H. A. Prichard, and W. D. Ross. These philosophers reject Kantian deontological ethics and utilitarianism insisting that intuition is the only source of moral knowledge. Recently, there is a renewed interest in intuition by philosophers doing meta-philosophy by reflecting on what philosophers do, and why they disagree. In this essay we plan to take some of this recent literature on intuition and apply it to moral philosophy. We will proceed by (1) defining a conception of intuition, (2) answering some skeptical challenges, (3) delimiting its target, and (4) arguing that intuition is often a source of moral knowledge.

The main theses of this paper are (1) that a conception of intuition in a specific situation in terms of a nonsensory perception of the right thing to do in that situation is a plausible analysis of such intuitions, (2) that skepticism about intuition as a genuine source of moral knowledge is often misconceived, and places unreasonable epistemic requirements on intuition that it does not place on other modes of belief acquisition, such as sense perception and inference, and (3) that there is good reason to believe that intuition is a source of genuine moral knowledge due to the works of writers like psychologist Marc Hauser and philosopher Alvin I. Goldman, and cross-cultural and religious agreement on basic moral values.

What is Intuition?

We must first ask exactly what intuition is. This is not an easy task at all. Here are some representative definitions:

1. "Some power of immediate perception of the human mind."[4]
2. "A power of immediately perceiving right and wrong."[5]
3. "A judgment that is not made on the basis of some kind of explicit reasoning process that a person can conceivably observe...The judgment flows spontaneously from the situations that engender them, rather than from any process of explicit reasoning."[6]
4. "We come to recognize (the obligation) immediately or directly...This apprehension is immediate, in precisely the sense in which mathematical apprehension is immediate... the fact apprehended is self-evident."[7]

[2]Sprague, E. (1967). Moral sense. In P. Edwards (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of philosophy* (Vol. 5, pp. 385–387). New York: Macmillan. By looking into his mind Locke thinks that all knowledge consists of perceptions, that we derive by one of two routes, sensation or reflection. The proponents of moral sense account for our knowledge of what is right and wrong in terms of what Locke thinks of as reflexive perceptions.

[3]Sprague, E. (1967). In *The Encyclopedia of philosophy* (Vol. 6, pp. 449–451). New York: Macmillan; Richard Price. We mention Price separately because he comes close to our conception of intuition as a kind of perception.

[4]Price, R. (1757). *A review of the principal questions of morals*. In R. B. Brandt (Ed.), *Value and obligation: Systematic readings in ethics* (p. 334). Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Brace, & World.

[5]Price R., Ibid., p. 335.

[6]Gopnik, A., & Scwitzgebel, E. (1998). Whose concepts are they, anyway? The role of philosophical intuition in empirical psychology. In M. R. DePaul & W. Ramsey (Eds.), *Rethinking intuition: The psychology of intuition and its role in philosophical inquiry* (p. 77). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

[7]Prichard, H. A. (1912). Does moral philosophy rest on a mistake? (*Mind*, *21*). In S. M. Cahn & P. Markie (Eds.), *Ethics: History, theory, and contemporary issues* (2002, 2nd ed., p. 471). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

5. "...getting face to face with a particular situation B, then directly apprehending the obligation to originate A in that situation."[8]
6. "...what I have to do is study the situation as fully as I can until I form the considered opinion (it is never more) that in the circumstances one of them [duties] is more incumbent that another; I am bound to think that to do this is my prima facie sans phrase in the situation."[9]
7. "When you have an intuition that A, it seems to you that A...'seems' is understood... as a term for a genuine cognitive episode...after a moment's reflection, something happens; it now seems true."[10]
8. "...when we have a 'rational intuition'...it presents itself as necessary: it does not seem that it could be otherwise..."[11]
9. "...intuitions are some sort of spontaneous mental judgments."[12]
10. "...when I contemplate doing this, I get an easily recognizable experience...the thought (even the conviction) that it would be wrong to do."[13]

In sifting through this welter of conceptions of intuition we shall adopt the view that in a specific situation, moral intuition involves a perception (1) and (2), it is noninferential and (3), immediate[14] (4), a perceived obligation (5) and (6), and a conscious episode (7), is spontaneous and mental (9), and is an easily recognizable experience that carries a conviction (10).

In particular, we will defend the view that intuition is a kind of perception or seeing that is mental in nature. This aligns us with Richard Price in (1) and (2). We need to say what we mean by "perception" and "seeing." *The Webster's New World Dictionary of the American language* says that "perceive" means both (1) to grasp or take in mentally, and (2) to become aware of through the five sense modalities. We think that both of these conceptions of "perception" will fit in with our conception of an intuition of what it is right to do in a particular situation.

We first want to distinguish between an intuition in a particular case or situation and an intuition of a putative ethical truth, statement, or proposition such as the principle "Help others when they are in need" and "Return good for good." Although we treat intuition of principles later in the paper, we have nothing new by way of an analysis of such intuitions in the way we do for intuitions in concrete cases in what follows.[15]

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[8]Prichard, H. A., Ibid., p. 476.

[9]Ross, W. D. (1930). *The right and the good*. In S. M. Cahn & P. Markie (Eds.), *Ethics: history, theory, and contemporary Issues* (2002, p. 479). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[10]Bealer, G. (1998). Intuition and the autonomy of philosophy. In M. R. DePaul & W. Ramsey (Eds.), *Rethinking intuition: The psychology of intuition and its role in philosophical inquiry* (p. 207). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

[11]Bealer, G., Ibid. We here register a doubt whether there are any such intuitions that cannot be otherwise. We think that all intuitions are highly fallible.

[12]Goldman, A., & Pust, J. (1998). Philosophical theory and intuitional evidence. In M. R. DePaul & W. Ramsey (Eds.), *Rethinking intuition: The psychology of intuition and its role in philosophical inquiry* (p.179). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

[13]Hare, R. M. (1997). *Sorting out ethics* (p. 84). Oxford: Clarendon.

[14]To clarify, the sense of "immediate" used here is noninferential. An intuition is immediate if it is not based on reasoning or inference.

[15]We do not deny that intuitions in specific situations are often stimulated by the application of a moral rule or principle. This is a psychological question, and it surely happens. If a moral agent has been inculcated with moral rules, they can apply them to a given situation. However, we think there is a distinction between intuiting what is right in a given situation, and intuiting the prima facie plausibility of a moral principle, such as "You ought to be kind to others." The latter constitutes a different target for our intuitions. This point came out of a question raised by Jerold Clack.

To better understand our position on intuition we relate an experience one of us had in a specific situation.[16] I was sitting in a chair at the end of a row of chairs in a barber shop. The row of chairs was occupied by men of different ages waiting to obtain less hirsuteness. An older lady came into the shop with a child that appeared to be her grandson who was comfortably asleep in a stroller. She parked the stroller at the end of the row of chairs and began looking for a place to sit down. Having observed this situation it occurred to me that I could give her my seat at the end of the row so she could sit next to her grandson. I promptly arose and gave her my seat.

We think it is reasonable to believe that in this situation I had an intuition of what the right thing to do was in that particular situation. In addition, we believe that situations similar to this one often occur in everyday mundane life. Other examples might be giving your seat to a handicapped person on a bus or helping someone who having trouble crossing the street. Nothing is novel about these examples.

Someone should not get the impression that moral intuitions always or usually lead to actions. Intuition of a mathematical truth, such that "2=2," does not usually lead a person to perform any particular action. Similarly, I can intuit that someone else should give an old woman a seat on a bus and there need be no action that flows from it.[17]

We shall defend the thesis that intuition is a basic evidential source of moral knowledge in many particular situations like the one above. In addition, we shall try to throw some light on how to conceive of intuition in such particular situations.

We shall begin by trying to throw some light on the nature of intuition in situations like the barber shop. Using the two senses of "perceive" above it is our contention that one uses both conscious and unconscious sense perception or perceptual cues, and, in addition, undergoes a conscious and unconscious *nonsensuous* taking in of the right thing to do in a particular situation.[18] This latter conception qualifies as a "seeing" or "perception" because there is something in the situation that is presented to, given to, prompting, or stimulating the subject into believing that this is the right thing to do in this situation. It is the fact of something in the situation itself that presents itself, or is given to the subject, that qualifies this as a "perception," even though the perceptual situation is not confined to the five sensory modalities. A nonsensuous perception is still a perception, or mentally taking in, and this definition comports well with the ordinary use of the term "perceive."[19]

One advantage of our conception of a nonsensuous seeing is that it is an aid to avoiding confusion that some philosophers have over the nature of intuition, and what is intuited. For example, Richard B. Brandt has a blurb on Richard Price in his anthology *Value and Obligation* where Brandt accuses Price of positing what Brandt calls "unobservable mental facts," which Brandt proceeds to disparage.[20] We think Brandt says this because he is confused about the notion of observation. He seems to mean by "observable" something that is perceivable only by the five senses. Then when Price says we immediately perceive

[16]We are assuming we do not have to characterize or analyze what it is to be in a "particular case," "situation," or "circumstance" except by example.

[17]We owe this point to a referee.

[18]We will shortly indicate that such taking in can be the work of unconscious inferences. This is due to recent work in empirical psychology.

[19]The reader may notice the relation between this conception of perception and William P. Alston's conception of nonsensory perception in his *Perceiving God: The epistemology of religious experience* (1991; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press). Alston does not take this to be a part of the ordinary use of "perceive."

[20]Brandt, R. B. (1961). *Value and obligation: Systematic readings in ethics* (p. 329). Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Brace, & World. See also Brandt, R. B. (1959). *Ethical theory* (pp. 189–202). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

right and wrong, Brandt infers that Price must be referring to unobservable objective "properties" of acts or situations. We think that noting the nonsensuous sense of "perception" in ordinary use clears up this confusion. It removes the necessity of positing unobservable "properties" or "moral facts" about the right thing to do and attaching such entities to situations.

We also agree that intuition is mental, spontaneous, and noninferential. It does not involve any reasoning. However, this raises a problem. It is the old problem of how we can tell whether somebody is making an inference or not. Inferences are usually made unconsciously, like rules of grammar that are followed unconsciously. A subject can use the rules of grammar correctly, or make correct inferences, without knowing or being aware that they are doing so. In fact, there is some reason to believe that subjects are rarely aware of their inferences.[21]

In reply to such forays, we shall adopt a first-person point of view. Accordingly, we think the phenomenology of intuition, from a first-person perspective, is authoritative and reveals the presence of actual intuitions quite frequently in everyday life. This is not incompatible with the subject undergoing some kind of subterranean, unconscious reasoning process that can be brought out using the experimental techniques of the science of psychology. If the subjects are almost never aware of making inferences, this leaves open the possibility that subjects are sometimes aware of intuitions, and that such intuitions are a genuine source of moral knowledge.

In fact, psychologists Marc Hauser and Daniel Goleman have done empirical research that indicates moral intuitions are the result of unconscious inferences. Hauser's central thesis is that human beings evolved with a moral instinct "designed to generate rapid judgments about what is morally right and wrong based on an unconscious grammar of action." These moral beliefs are independent of culture generally. Hauser explains how a universal and unconscious moral grammar influences our moral judgments.[22] Daniel Goleman has provided evidence of a moral basis for our snap empathetic social decisions that often allow us to feel the way others feel. Goleman says this accounts for such phenomena as love and empathy. For example, a mother smiles at a baby, and the baby immediately smile back. Goleman presents evidence of an instinct towards altruism and compassion for others as instances of what he calls "emotional intelligence."[23] We embrace such empirical studies. We think that moral intuitions can be the result of both conscious intuition and unconscious inference, and that empirical psychology is testimony to the prevalence of the latter.

To clarify, we are claiming that conscious intuition does not involve any conscious inferences for the agent, but that a conscious intuition may involve all sorts of unconscious inference, reasoning and calculations. We think this is the view espoused by the psychologist Marc Hauser, whose work we find congenial for our purposes.

Before embarking on the skeptical challenges to intuition as a source of moral knowledge we would like to offer a word of caution on the empirical findings of Marc

[21]Horowitz, T. (1998). Philosophical intuitions and psychological theory. In M. R. DePaul & W. Ramsey (Eds.), *Rethinking intuition: The psychology of intuition and its role in philosophical inquiry* (pp. 143–160). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. Horowitz shows that in cases of alleged philosophical thought experiments involving moral judgments based on intuition there is actually some kind of probabilistic reasoning or decision procedure going on in the subjects albeit unconsciously.

[22]Hauser, M. D. (2006). *Moral minds*. New York: Harper Collins. Hauser provides ample empirical evidence in this book to show it is reasonable to think that our moral intuitions are grounded in our biological make up, and that moral intuitions are common to all human beings.

[23]Goleman, D. (2006). *Social intelligence: The new science of human relationships*. New York: Bantam.

Hauser and Daniel Goleman. Peter Unger has a treatment of moral intuitions that is more guarded than those of empirical psychologists. Suppose that I get an envelope in the mail from the US Committee for UNICEF. After reading it I come to believe that unless I send a check for $100 30 or more children will die in third world countries, instead of living for many more years. I throw the material in the trash and send nothing.

Most ordinary people would react by saying that my conduct was not wrong at all. Rather than help people in need I think I only have a minimal obligation to rescue people who are in trouble in my immediate environment. Unger spends a goodly part of his book showing that this moral intuition is based on ignorance of many nonmoral facts such as mistaken views about physical proximity, social proximity, informative directness, and experiential impact. The author argues that if we knew the relevant facts, such an action would actually contravene our Primary Values where our conduct conflicts with what would be so morally obvious that any modestly cognizant moral agent would know what is required of him. Our Primary Values are the basic moral values of common sense that would make us care to lessen the suffering of innocent people in the world. An example would be helping someone who falls into water over their head and is drowning. We are motivated to help such an individual. We often don't realize that nonsalient cases are actually in line with our Primary Values, such as the Envelope example above. We ought to help people who are starving in other countries, and if we were fully informed, we would realize that not doing so contravenes our own Primary Values.

Unger is arguing that often times we do not know what we really ought to know, and even though we cause no direct harm to any individual, there is something morally wrong with our behavior. We fail to recognize our Secondary Values that concern how our conduct ought to be moved by knowing what really is the case morally.[24]

We find this analysis compelling, although it needs some modification as we will point out shortly. But we find Unger's work to be sufficient reason to doubt that the moral intuitions of the average person are generally as reliable as other types of knowing, such as sense perception and memory.

Another philosopher named John Bolender has made a distinction which bears on Unger's work. Bolender claims that moral reasoning in a normal and mature individual involves a two-tier cognitive architecture. One tier consists of an informationally encapsulated mechanism, or "module," that generates intuitions to specific cases. This is what we are calling a moral intuition construed as a nonsensuous perception in specific situations. For example, one's intuition that it is imperative to try to save a drowning child that catches sight of on a daily stroll. Such a situation is "informationally encapsulated" in that it searches only for a limited range of information.[25]

The other tier consists of mechanisms that can address a range of problems that have no principled limits. It is called moral reasoning by philosophers, and it is "cognitively penetrable." This means the mechanism has access to a wide range of mental faculties, such as memory and inference, in reasoning and devising moral judgments. Moral intuition is a rapid and automatic cognitive reaction to a specific situation, but moral reasoning/judgment involves evaluations of our moral intuitions in light of anything and everything one consciously believes.

[24]Unger, P. (1996). *Living high and letting die: Our illusion of innocence* (pp. 9, 31–33). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[25]Bolender's account of moral intuitions owes a debt to Jerry Fodor's treatment of modularity in Fodor, J. (1983). *The modularity of mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT.

Because our cognitive architecture is two-tiered, one's moral intuitions can conflict with one's considered moral judgments. An example is Kant's case of being tempted to lie to save someone from an unjust death. Bolender says that moral intuitions are low-level perceptual cognitions that automatically (unconsciously) follow an algorithm for reaching a result. Moral intuition applies to positive or negative perceptions of social situations that occur spontaneously, effortlessly, quickly, and as a result of unconscious processes. Moral judgments, on the other hand, are a result of conscious effort or deliberation. These latter often occur in moral theories and involve moral principles.[26]

We find that Bolender's two-tiered cognitive architecture is relevant to Unger's work. However, we do not endorse the modularity thesis for Primary Values. We think out considered moral judgments or moral reasoning can inform, guide, and revise our moral intuitions. In addition, we construe what Unger calls Secondary Values as not the result of further moral intuitions given all the nonmoral facts, but as the product of considered moral judgments on the level of Bolender's second tier that bring in all of our background knowledge, deliberation, and moral reasoning.

If the moral modularity thesis is the claim that we have the moral intuitions that we in fact have at any given instant of time, then it is trivial. Of course we have the moral intuitions we have at any time. But they can be influenced and revised by our considered moral judgments. Unger is, we believe, correct in saying that our moral intuitions can be affected by further knowledge and our actions by our will to act on that knowledge. We avoid moral dysfunction when our Primary Values are informed by our Secondary Values.

Elsewhere Bolender says that our moral intuitions are automatic emotional reactions of approval or disapproval in concrete social situations. Such automatic emotional responses help shape our moral principles, and serve as constraints on moral reasoning. In this same paper Bolender argues that moral intuitions are innate by using Noam Chomsky's poverty of stimulus argument.[27] We do not take a position on the innateness of moral intuitions, although we view them as an innate capacity, propensity, or ability. Nor do we regard moral intuition as just an emotional reaction. We agree that moral intuitions are often emotional, but we have nothing to say about just how that occurs, or what it consists of. We now turn to skeptical challenges to the epistemic worth of moral intuition.

Skeptical Challenges to Intuition

We will consider some skeptical challenges to intuition as a source of moral knowledge. Skepticism about the position in moral philosophy known as intuitionism has been rampant. We will concentrate on a couple of salient examples that we think are representative. The skeptics we will treat are Richard B. Brandt and Richard M. Hare—two able moral philosophers. These philosophers dispute the evidential credentials of intuitions as a source of real moral knowledge. They deny that intuitions should be given evidential support that they are usually credited with conferring in moral philosophy.

The grounds for skepticism are variable, but they usually concern the fallibility or disagreements between competing intuitions, either intuitions in general or moral intuitions of what to do in a give situation. Here are some of the criticisms.

[26]Bolender, J. (2001). A two-tiered cognitive architecture for moral reasoning. *Biology and Philosophy, 16*, pp. 335–348.

[27]Bolender, J. (2003).The geneology of moral modules. *Minds and Machines, 13*, pp. 233–255.

Richard B. Brandt, for example, asks how questions about intuitions can be appealed to by moral philosophy. First, how is it possible for there to be conflicting intuitions? I intuit that eating meat here and now is wrong, you intuit that it is all right to eat meat. Second, if intuitions are fallible, how do we distinguish reliable intuitions from the unreliable intuitions?[28]

Richard M. Hare has a good discussion of the first question in terms of the common argument against intuitionism in terms of the prevalence of moral disagreement. Almost everyone grants that there may be some things that most everyone agrees on morally. Hare gives an example of someone getting petrol at a gas station. Most people, Hare says, have some experience that they should not just drive away without paying. Intuitionism is on firm ground in such cases, and Hare says that there does seem to be intuitive experiences had by most of us. But Hare adds that these are probably not prevalent in moral philosophy.

Hare then asks what we are to do in cases where people's intuitions are at loggerheads. Smith has an intuition that he should not eat meat, and Jones intuits that it is all right to eat meat. So, the objection goes, intuitionism can yield no determinate answer to disputed moral problems.[29]

Bolender's distinction between intuitions and judgments is relevant here. A clash between judgments need not show that intuitions also clash. One can explain clashes between judgments simply enough by noting that different people can have access to different information. If one person learns more about factory farming than another, this alone could explain their different judgments about vegetarianism without having to say that their intuitions are at loggerheads.[30]

The intuitionist can say that Hare and others are correct that there are moral problems that cannot be solved by appealing to intuitions. What follows from this? First of all, one can point out that our moral problems, such as whether we should eat meat, have not been solved by any other way of knowing things, such as moral reasoning. Hare himself has put forward a plausible theory of moral reasoning that also does not solve all our moral disputes.[31] So, it is not a shortcoming of intuitionism alone that it cannot solve all of the problems in the moral sphere.[32]

Second, and more important for our paper, this criticism of intuitionism does nothing to show that we do not often have intuitive experiences of the kind delineated in this paper, or that such intuitions are not an evidential source of moral knowledge. Some knowledge is better than none.

Thirdly, disagreements are common in all realms of human knowledge. Look at the differing probability estimates that inductive arguments produce, the difficulty of agreeing on the truth of premises in a deductively valid argument, or the disagreements of eyewitnesses to an accident or crime. Yet we do not say that reasoning and sense perception are not evidential sources of knowledge just because there are frequent disagreements. The same considerations apply to intuition. We ought not to demand of intuition what we do not demand of other epistemic practices.

[28]Brandt, R. B. (1961). *Ethical theory* (p. 192). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. It should be noted here that we follow Brandt and others in distinguishing between genuine intuitions and apparent intuitions.

[29]Hare, R. M. (1997). *Sorting out ethics* (p. 88). Oxford: Clarendon.

[30]We owe this point to a referee.

[31]Neither Hare's, nor any other current moral epistemology, has solved ethical problems such as the problem of abortion, the problem of capital punishment, the problem of whether human beings should eat meat, and myriad others.

[32]The distinction we just made between intuition and judgment applies here as well.

Fourth, it is also possible that when intuitions conflict, the disagreement is not a genuine one. Sometimes dialogue between disagreeing people, and a further examination of the facts or situations can generate agreement. Bolender's distinction between intuition and judgment applies here as well.

Hare further gives a faulty assessment of intuitionism that we think should be addressed. Hare argues that intuitionism collapses into an unsavory kind of relativism, even when we have a consensus of intuitions, since our intuitions are relative to how we have been educated within a culture. A moral reformer, such as Nelsen Mandella, for example, can challenge any consensus, and the majority cannot justifiably appeal to the consensus to show he is wrong, since that is the very issue in question. Hare thinks this shows that intuitionism reduces to cultural relativism and cultural variations in moral upbringing.[33]

Again, the same argument applies to other epistemic practices. Sense perception is an epistemic practice prevalent in all cultures, but philosophers and psychologists have argued that sense perception, memory, and introspection differ from perceiver to perceiver. Although these topics are extremely controversial, so is the diversity of intuition. Marc Hauser argues from empirical data that there is much less intuitional diversity than there seems to be at first blush in moral situations among different intuitors. We will not go into this controversial issue in this paper. Suffice to say that Hauser provides evidence that moral intuitions show a degree of interpersonal uniformity, and do not differ all that much from person to person.

On the other hand, some considerations can be adduced to show that sense perception often differs from person to person. Consider the different reports that observers of an automobile accident can come up with. Sense perception, and other belief forming practices, are not immune to a certain amount of relativity from perceiver to perceiver as many a philosopher, such as George Berkeley, were fond of pointing out.

We will now address Brandt's second question of how we can tell when we have an incorrect intuition as opposed to a correct intuition. The first thing to notice is that the same question arises for other epistemic practices. How do we distinguish between a sense perception and a seeming perception? How do we distinguish between a correct memory experience and an incorrect one?

Second, we may not have to answer this question in order to show that intuition is a basic evidential source of moral knowledge. Suppose we are unable to distinguish experientially between apparent and genuine intuitions. The argument against intuition as a source of (moral) knowledge would presumably look something like the following:

(1) Our intuitions are sometimes incorrect.
(2) The experience of the correct intuitions is experientially indistinguishable from the experience of the incorrect intuitions.
(3) Therefore, our intuitions are not an evidential source of knowledge.

We couched the conclusion of the argument in terms of the denial of the thesis we are defending. The first thing to note is that the same argument can be given for sense perception, introspection, and memory. It certainly does not follow that they are not evidential sources of knowledge. Nor does (3) follow necessarily from (1) and (2). This is partly because there could be a further intuition of our own or others that corroborates any given intuition. The same logic applies to sense perception. If I have any reason to question a perceptual belief I can look again, be more careful, or ask someone else. Of course, we have to rely on some intuitions or percep-

[33]Hare, R. M., op. cit., p. 89.

tions, but we are not arguing that moral intuitions are generally true or that they are reliable, that is, true most of the time. We do not think this has been shown. We are maintaining that intuition is a basic evidential source of moral knowledge, and there frequently is a noninferential nonsensuous perception of the right thing to do in specific situations. Such nonsensuous perceptions are frequently a source of moral knowledge. It follows that moral intuitions are worth exploring.

Let us expand on this. By a basic source of evidence we mean that intuition is a legitimate epistemic practice or source of knowledge. Our apparent intuitions are often or frequently (have a tendency to be) genuine, and thus qualify as a basic source of moral knowledge. Intuition is a basic type of evidence. Other basic epistemic sources include sense perception, memory, introspection, deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning, and abductive reasoning (reasoning to the best explanation). In a paper we find valuable, Alvin I. Goldman says that these epistemic practices are all regarded, by most epistemologists, as bona fide sources of evidence. Yet many or all these sources may be basic in the sense that we have no independent way of establishing their reliability. That we have no independent way of establishing the reliability of basic sources of knowledge does not mean that they are not evidence conferring. Consider memory, for example. Memory is our basic way of forming beliefs about the past. All other ways of gaining access about the past depend on memory, so they cannot provide independent ways of establishing the reliability of memory. On pain of general skepticism, we assume memory and other sources of knowledge are reliable unless there is good a sufficient reason to believe otherwise.[34] William P. Alston has argued that it is practically rational to regard sense perception to be a reliable epistemic practice even though there can be no noncircular justification for doing so.[35] We do not argue that it is practically rational to regard moral intuitions as reliable, only that it is rational to regard intuition as a frequent and basic source of moral knowledge.

The argument for intuition as a basic source of moral knowledge is that there is almost universal agreement among different religions and cultures on certain basic moral truths. For instance, John Granoff has argued that compassion has universally guided every successful culture. When kindness and compassion rule our moral outlooks, we find that cultures tend to be more successful. This is because agreement on moral truths has survival value; hence, the existence of intuitional compliance has evolutionary support. Granoff cites 14 different religions that articulate some form of the golden rule. In addition, secular philosophers such as Plato, Socrates, Seneca, Bentham, Mill, and Kant are among the philosophers who claimed that some version of the golden rule was central to their ethical theories. Granoff says "the principle of reciprocity is the ethical and moral foundation of all the world's major religions."[36]

Many other philosophers and anthropologists have cited many moral values that all cultures have in common. These include protection of children, prohibitions against incest, telling the truth, and some antipathy to murder. Without these no society could flourish. Then there is the longevity of the Ten Commandments. We think that a consensus of moral intuitions or just seeing that certain things are right is a good explanation of why common folks accept these moral precepts prior to philosophical reflection and analysis. We think

[34]Goldman, A. I. (2007). Philosophical intuitions: Their target, their source, and their epistemic status (forthcoming). In C. Beyer & A. Burn (Eds.), *Grazer philosophische studien, special issue "Philosophical Knowledge – Its possibility and scope* (p. 7). Amsterdam: Rodopi.

[35]Alston, W. P. (1993). *The reliability of sense perception*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

[36]Granoff, J. (2005). Peace and security. In J. A. Boss (Ed.), *Analyzing moral issues* (3rd ed., pp. 696–699). New York: McGraw-Hill.

this shows that intuition is a frequent and prevalent source of moral knowledge.[37] We think that nonphilosophical moral agents do not seem to reason morally, and often are not able to cite reasons for their moral pronouncements. This fact is some evidence that non-philosophers are relying on moral intuitions. We offer this as a good explanation for their behavior and for the prevalence of basic agreements.

Marc Hauser's collection of empirical data showing uniformity of moral intuitions among subjects from diverse backgrounds is relevant here.

The Targets of Moral Intuition

Even though we said we are confining our analysis of moral intuition to noninferential nonsensuous perception or seeing in specific situations, and not to the intuition of moral principles or propositions, we are aiming at a certain level of generality. The individual cases are cases of a general account of moral intuition as applied to particular cases. As such, we think it is necessary to say what our analysis does and does not give an account *of*. What are the targets of the class of moral intuitions that we are singling out? We will examine three ways of construing the targets.

(1) Nonnatural properties
(2) Self-evident truths or principles
(3) Mental concepts taken in a personal sense[38]

The first two construals invoke entities that are not concepts. Each is a kind of non-conceptual entity that exists entirely "independently of the mind." According to the first construal, moral philosophy aims at obtaining insight into some external property of an act or situation that is a non-spatially-located entity. According to the second construal, moral principles are endowed with an external epistemic property of self-evidence.

The first construal was famously held by G. E. Moore. Moore construed an intuition as a complex mental act that involves an awareness of a property. Goodness, he believed, is something that attaches to, or latches onto, other extra-mental properties. He called this property a nonnatural property.[39] The only clarity he provides for what this might be is that it is not the subject matter of the natural sciences or psychology.

[37]We assume that most nonphilosophers do not explicitly reason morally the way that some philosophers construe moral reasoning in their ethical theories. Of course, this is an empirical question, but we think that ordinary folks often have moral intuitions, and that their intuitive judgments are often true.

These anthropological facts are factual descriptions of agreements in moral values among different cultures. This does not commit us to holding that the moral intuitions of individuals of another culture are moral facts. Although we think there are moral truths, and moral truths are moral facts, we do not think this is the place to launch on a theory of what constitutes a moral fact. We are only pointing out that it is a anthropological fact that almost all cultures have some prohibitions against murder. We do not have to say what "facts" are or what makes them "moral" facts.

[38]It should be pointed out that the anthropological facts alluded to in the discussion of Granoff do not fit into these three categories. We do not intend for these targets to be exhaustive. We thank a referee for pointing this out.

[39]Moore, G. E. (1962). *Principia ethica*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press. We assume that a nonnatural property of goodness is an abstraction. Moore never makes it clear what he means by a "nonnatural property." But he does say it is not part of the subject matter of natural science or psychology.

Alvin I. Goldman, in the paper alluded to above, has criticized Platonic Forms as legitimate targets for intuitions. We think his line of argument can be used against Moore. Following Goldman, the question we have for Moore and his conception of nonnatural properties is how such a mental state as moral intuition can provide evidence for such a property. Compare this case with perceptual seemings and memory seemings. In these cases we have some idea of the causal routes by which the property of an external stimulus can influence the properties of the visual or auditory experience. With this kind of dependency in place, it is plausible that variation in the experience will reflect variations in the stimulus. Similarly in the case of memory, what is presently recalled varies with what occurred earlier, so the specifics of the recall event can be a reliable indicator of the properties of the original source. But is there a causal pathway between Moore's nonnatural properties and any mental "registration" of them? A causal pathway seems to be excluded because these properties are nonnatural. Following Goldman, we here register the qualms that have traditionally harassed accounts of "apprehension" in terms of abstract entities. These accounts have too many mysteries. They tend to undermine the alleged reliability needed to support the acceptance of an evidential relationship between intuitions and their targets construed as mysterious properties.[40]

Let us now turn to construal (2), the principles or propositions of moral philosophy. This view was famously defended by Sir William David Ross.[41] Ross emphasizes that we can "apprehend" or "grasp" moral principles the articulation of which are self-evident. These moral principles are prima facie duties, and Ross enumerates a plethora of them, such as the duty to repay others for the good they do for you (duty of gratitude).

Ross describes our apprehension of what is right and wrong as an attitude towards particular acts, but he also wants to say that we intuit, or have insight into, what is prima facie right or self-evident, and he says that we are regarding this as a propositional attitude, or the intentional relation of a subject to some proposition, such as "Help your benefactors" or "Return good for good." Such a proposition is extra-mental or not in the head. It is "outside of the mind." Again, we would like to see an account of just how intuitions of the moral variety are related to principles or propositions of this ilk. Exactly what does such an intuition amount to?

An attempt to answer this question has been give by Ernest Sosa. Sosa says that introspection, sense perception, and intuition are three modes of belief acquisition. Intuition gives us a direct insight into the general and abstract.

Sosa claims that the intuition of an abstract proposition can be construed in the following way (assuming that *p* is an abstract proposition):

> At t, S has an intuition that p iff (1) if at t S were merely to *understand* fully enough the proposition that p (absent relevant perception, introspection, and reasoning), then S would believe that p; (2) at t, S does *understand* the proposition that p; (3) the proposition that p is an abstract proposition, and (4) at t, S thinks occurrently of the proposition that p.[42]

[40]Goldman, A. I., op. cit., pp. 9, 10.

[41]Ross, W. D. (1930). The right and the good. In S. M. Cahn & P. Markie (Eds.), *Ethics: History, theory, and contemporary issues* (2nd ed., pp. 477–493).Oxford: Oxford University Press. Quotations will be taken from the selection in Cahn and Markie.

[42]Sosa, E. (1998). Minimal intuition. In M. R. DePaul & W. Ramsey (Eds.), *Rethinking intuition: The psychology of intuition and its role in philosophical inquiry* (p. 259). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefied.

We find this problematic, since it is quite plausible to hold that, because understanding can involve inference, "understanding" has a wider application than intuition. Paul Ziff construed understanding in terms of being able to process data.[43]

This seems to leave room for inference. Julius Moravscik argues that understanding cannot be equated with intuition because understanding is such a basic notion that it does not allow further breaking down. Understanding is also accompanied by the ability to give explanations, thus it will not serve as an analysans for intuition.[44] We conclude that it remains an open question just what an intuition of a moral principle or proposition consists of.

We want to digress for a moment and ask what Ross means by saying that when we believe a moral principle or proposition such as "Return good for good" that the proposition is self-evident. Ross says that "when we have reached mental maturity and given sufficient attention to the proposition it is evident without the need of proof, or evidence beyond itself."[45] He compares the self-evidence of such moral principles or propositions to the (alleged) self-evidence of the axioms of geometry of arithmetic. Such propositions cannot be proved, but they need no proof.

We agree that moral intuitions secure moral knowledge independent of proofs or any inference, but we do not think it is illuminating to call moral principles "self-evident." If that just means that moral principles do not involve any sort of reasoning or inferences, it adds nothing to what has already been said to call the self-evident. So why use the term?

One might define the term "self-evident" in such a way as to add something to the noninferential feature of intuitions of moral principles by maintaining that these principles, when duly considered are epistemically obvious in some sense of "obvious." He would then mean that any self-evident proposition is one that is obviously true to anyone who carefully considers it. However, we do not think that any statement or proposition that is not the result of reasoning or proof is one that is obviously true. Consider the axiom in Euclidean geometry that parallel lines never intersect. That is not at all obvious to many mathematicians even though it is not the result of a proof or reasoning. We think there are many other such counterexamples, so we conclude that there is no good reason to regard ethical propositions that we intuit as being self-evident.[46] We now return from our epistemic digression.

This brings us to construal (3) that, following Goldman the targets of intuition are concepts in the personal psychological sense. Goldman construes a concept as literally something in the head,[47] such as a mental representation or category. By calling a concept "personal" he means the concept is "fixed by what is in the owner's head rather than in the heads of other members of the community." It is individual rather than social.

The chief advantage of construing concepts this way is that it handles challenges to the reliability arising from the variability or conflicts of intuition across subjects or persons. Under this construal of evidential targets, interpersonal variation in intuitions does not pose a problem of reliability, because each person's intuition correctly indicates something about their concept, such as whether it does or does not apply to the chosen situation.

[43]Ziff, P. (1972). *Understanding understanding.* Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

[44]Moravscik, J. (1992). *Plato and platonism* (pp. 17–19). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

[45]Ross, W. D., op. cit., p. 484.

[46]We also do not think that it is a necessary truth that if a person *P* has an intuition that act *A* is right in situation *S* that it is obvious that *P* should do *A* in *S*. Intuition does not entail obviousness. Nor is the notion of obviousness clear (or obvious).

[47]Goldman, A. I., op. cit., p. 18.

A person's intuition is "evidence" for a personal psychological concept if we assume that any evidential relationship depends on a relation of reliable indicatorship. Goldman argues that possessing a concept in the personal psychological sense inclines or disposes one to have pro-intuitions toward correct applications of the concept and con-intuitions towards incorrect applications-correct, that is, relative to the concepts that exist within one's head.

Goldman argues that when safeguards are in place,[48] a person's intuitions vis-à-vis his own personal concepts are highly likely to be correct. These safeguards include being sufficiently informed about the example in question, avoiding forgetting or losing track of the example while mentally computing the application of the concept, and by avoiding any false theory about your concept of the example.

We think that Goldman's analysis of the target concepts as personal psychological concepts in one's head can be applied to the concept of moral rightness in moral philosophy. If a subject classifies an act or situation as yielding the right thing to do, then possession of that concept can be partly defined in terms of intuition propensities. These intuition propensities incline us to have pro-intuitions toward correct applications of the concept, and a con-intuition toward incorrect applications of the concept. Contrary to what Goldman says about philosophical analysis of concepts, however, we think that in moral philosophy the analysis of the target intuition only indicates that such situations are often or frequently correct, not that moral intuitions are reliable or true most of the time.

The primary reason for doubting whether anyone has shown intuition to be a reliable source of (moral) knowledge is, as Alston has painstakingly argued, that no one has ever shown that the faculties of sense perception or memory are reliable sources of belief acquisition. We think that both sense perception and memory might *be* reliable although it has not been shown. But we see no reasons to regard intuitions to be as reliable as sense perception or memory. In fact, as we have seen, many philosophers believe the intuitive faculty is more suspect since there is a greater prevalence of disagreements than there are with sense perception and memory. We think that there is some reason to believe that intuition *is not* in fact reliable, so naturally we are skeptical of any philosophical attempts to show that it *is* reliable by using philosophical analysis. There is much more disagreement in philosophy and among different philosophical intuitions than there is in the sciences that rely on sense perception.[49] People can see that for themselves in an introductory philosophy course. Since we do not believe that sense perception has been shown to be reliable, that is, true most of the time, we are very skeptical about philosophical attempts to show that intuition is so reliable. We take this, along with Unger's worries about moral intuitions, to be a reason to be generally skeptical about the reliability of intuition in general. It may be a wish for something that there is little reason to believe is the case.[50] However, the empirical data cited by Hauser on the uniformity of moral intuitions, and the distinction by Bolender

[48]See our earlier discussion of Unger's work, where he emphasizes the potential ignorance and biases of relying on intuitions as a cautionary note here.

[49]It should be pointed out that the sciences reject most observation as unreliable. That is why scientists rely so heavily on scientific instruments and controlled conditions such as one finds in laboratories. Otherwise, instead of requesting such large grants, scientists could just gaze out their office windows and make observations. Scientific theories are based on careful observations that are reliable, as seen in their ability to predict with precision. The point is that observation is very reliable when it is selectively guided by reason. A similar point can be made about moral intuitions. We owe this paragraph to a referee.

[50]It should be pointed out that Goldman claims he is not giving an account of (the reliability of) intuition in general. So, he may agree with us about moral intuitions. We are simply using his construal of the targets of intuition as personal psychological concepts to throw light on the concept of moral rightness as being often or frequently true in many moral situations.

between clashes of intuition and the differences in information available to persons making moral judgments serve to mitigate the putative prevalence of disagreement in moral intuitions.[51]

We conclude that it is an open question as to whether intuitive experiences are reliable, that is, true most of the time. We have argued that it is reasonable to believe that apparent intuitions are frequently true based on the universal agreement among different cultures on some basic moral values necessary for the survival and success of any society. Applying Goldman's construal of personal psychological concepts to the concept of moral rightness in moral situations also tends to show that what we apparently intuit is frequently correct. In addition, I have cited some of the work in empirical psychology for the prevalence of universal moral intuitions and widespread emotional intelligence in all people.

It can be rational and practical to use moral intuitions as a guide to moral situations even if we cannot show that such intuitions are reliable most of the time.[52] As a matter of prudence we can follow our intuitions even if we have no reliable evidence for thinking they will generally hold up. The alternative is the pain of skepticism or doing without intuition altogether. It is not clear that we could do without moral intuitions. Moreover, no one has ever shown that our moral intuitions are not reliable indicators of moral truths, although Unger and Bolender have shown that intuition should be guided by reason. If so, then there is a similarity between moral judgment and scientific judgment.

How could we show that moral intuitions are reliable indicators of moral truths without appealing to further intuitions? We conclude that we have no good reason for abandoning intuition, and that it can be rational to act on our moral intuitions even though we cannot show them to be reliable or give any other rational justification for so acting. We conclude that it is rational and prudent to regard moral intuitions as a basic evidential source of moral knowledge, that we can have nonsensory perception of the right thing to do in specific situations, and that skepticism about moral intuition does not succeed in defeating moral intuition as a genuine source of moral knowledge.[53]

[51]We owe this reminder to a referee.

[52]This problem is a descendant of David Hume's challenge to find a rational justification for inductive inferences. The problem has spread to all modes of belief acquisition.

[53]We want to make it clear that we are not defending intuitionism as the only source of moral knowledge or the sole ethical theory. We approve of Kantian deontological ethical theory, social contract theory, and utilitarianism. We also endorse virtue ethics and the ethics of caring. Moral reasoning may be more important than relying solely on intuition. However, philosophical theories of moral reasoning may not be feasible for the nonphilosopher or the man in the street to employ over moral intuitions.