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Audi's Intuitionism*

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Robert Audi's new book[1] is the most up-to-date, sophisticated and comprehensive development of ethical intuitionism yet to appear. It ranges over a great amount of philosophical territory, and does so in a clear, and historically informed manner. Its timing nicely coincides with a renewed interest in intuitionism, and the book will serve as a required reference point for discussions of it in the literature.

Intuitionism is the name of both a normative ethical theory, and a kind of moral epistemology. In W.D. Ross's hands, as in Audi's, both of these elements are combined. The normative ethical view states that there is an irreducible plurality of basic types of prima facie moral duty. A prima facie duty identifies a special kind of ground for a moral duty. The ground is invariably morally relevant—its every instantiation constitutes a moral reason to undertake (or refrain from) an action. But the ground is not invariably morally determinative—its presence is not always morally decisive. Whether the ground gives rise to an all-things-considered duty always depends on the presence or absence of other morally relevant grounds.

The intuitionist's moral epistemology has been out of favor in philosophical circles for a long while. Its unpopularity is owing to its insistence that certain moral beliefs are self-evident—justified on the basis of adequate understanding alone. The appeal to self-evidence has seemed the epitome of an antiquated view of epistemic justification. Among the more familiar charges: (i) it appears to require a mysterious faculty of moral perception; (ii) it has no account of how to rationally adjudicate interpersonal moral disagreement; (iii) it fails to accommodate the general epistemic requirement that we have reasons to support our justified beliefs; (iv) it falls prey to a charge of parochialism—one person's self-evident truths are another's outdated superstitions; and (v) it offers no

* My thanks to Bill Tolhurst for vetting an earlier draft of this review.

1 Robert Audi, *The Good in the Right*. Princeton University Press, 2004.

explanation of how we discern our all-things-considered final duty in any given case. Audi has clearly chosen to fight an uphill battle.

One would never know it from the manner of his writing, however. Fair-minded and full of equanimity, Audi is never defensive in his manner of presentation. Nor does he spend any significant time engaging with the critics of intuitionism. Indeed, the book is almost wholly expository and constructive. There is far more space devoted to laying out various options, and developing possibilities, than there is to answering objections to the views. This is justified, in part, by the novelty of the views that receive development in the latter half of the book. But some will regret that Audi didn't spend more time explicitly arguing against the many opponents of intuitionism.

Audi's book has five chapters, each about forty pages long. The first of these provides a helpful historical overview of the work of the British intuitionists. We get a relatively quick trot through the views of Sidgwick, Moore, Prichard and Broad, and then settle down for a lengthier treatment of Ross's work, which is also the focus of the whole of the second chapter. Audi is most sympathetic with Ross's version of intuitionism, and retains many of its essentials in developing his own.

The remainder of the book sets out Audi's own version of intuitionism. Those who have read his recent work will find much that is familiar here. Indeed, the heart of the book—chapters two through four—is based very largely on material that has already been published. Audi does a better job than many at weaving a coherent narrative from such materials.

Audi's second chapter is devoted to his development of Rossian intuitionism. His emphasis here is in presenting a version of ethical pluralism, and an epistemology of self-evident moral principles, that is freed from some of the problematic aspects of earlier intuitionist views. His defense of pluralism, which I will return to, does not begin with an attempted refutation of monism. Indeed, Audi never offers anything like a general argument against the possibility or plausibility of ethical monism. Instead, he proceeds by assuming that pluralism is the more natural and credible alternative, and tries to dislodge objections to it that stand in the way of its acceptance. The assumption seems to be that people are driven to monism by the perceived inadequacy of pluralism, so that if the problems that generate this perception can be satisfactorily dealt with, we will have all we need.

On the epistemological side, Audi denies that justification entails infallibility. Nor is it the case that self-evident propositions are doxastically irresistible: it is possible, says Audi, to understand such a proposition and yet fail to believe it. For instance, one might initially believe such a proposition on the basis of a faulty proof, and when the error is

pointed out, abandon the belief. Or one might adequately understand its content, and yet also hold a defeating belief, awareness of which leads one to abandon a belief that is in fact self-evident. One might, for instance, initially and correctly think that there is a prima facie duty of fidelity, but then come to believe that act utilitarianism is true, and thus that there is no such duty. (The prima facie rules, on that account, would be good rules of thumb, but would not strictly speaking be true, since the grounding properties enshrined in such a rule would be only usually, and not invariably, morally relevant.)

Further, what is non-inferentially known in cases of self-evidence is the content and the truth of the proposition, rather than its self-evidence or its modal status. Seeing that a proposition is self-evident, or a necessary truth, is typically an inferential matter, one that requires a sort of philosophical sophistication that is unnecessary for non-inferentially knowing the truth that (say) it is prima facie right to repay kindnesses or to keep one's word. Audi also denies that there is a distinct faculty required to gain access to self-evident truths. These are truths of reason, and we can know them as we know other such truths. We don't need to postulate a special faculty responsible for our knowledge that things can't be red all over and green all over at the same time; neither do we need such a faculty to explain our knowledge of basic moral principles.

Moreover, self-evident truths need not be immediately obvious, or obvious at all. The adequate understanding needed to justify one's belief in such a proposition might come spontaneously—we can just see that two and two are four—but it might not. It may take a great deal of reflection to appreciate their truth. One may have to think a bit before coming to see that first cousins share a pair of grandparents (52), but that it takes some reflection does not vitiate the self-evidence of the proposition. Moreover, it might even be the case that an agent may have to undertake an inference in order to adequately understand just what a grandparent or a first cousin is. But this does not nullify the self-evidence of the proposition. Once one adequately understands what is being said, and believes it on that basis, one knows it. (49) That one must reflect, or even undertake inferences in order to understand the concepts employed in the proposition, is compatible with its being self-evident. The key point, for Audi, is that *however one arrives at an adequate understanding of a proposition*, some are non-inferentially justifiable: justifiably believable just in virtue of a non-inferential understanding of their content.

It is a weakness of Audi's presentation, I think, that he never spells out the nature of inference, and so the content of the claim that some beliefs are justified non-inferentially isn't fully clear. He does offer

some help, however, in contrasting conclusions of reflection with conclusions of inference. Careful attention to a variety of considerations may lead one to form a conclusion, say, that a letter writer is not as enthusiastic as he purports to be, or that a poem has a stilted character. (45-6) In these cases, as with many moral cases, one may draw a conclusion on the basis of considering a variety of factors, including the grounds that support the proposition under scrutiny. But such consideration need not involve inferences to the conclusion one reaches—one might (after reflection) *just see* that the poem is stilted, that the letter writer is unenthusiastic, that first cousins must share a pair of grandparents. This may be right, but whether such seeing is non-inferential is bound to be debated, and Audi would have helped his cause had he offered a more precise characterization of (non-)inferential justification.

A very important aspect of Audi's intuitionism is his rejection of Ross's claim that principles specifying our prima facie duties are unprovable. Ross had said that such principles are "propositions that cannot be proved, but that just as certainly need no proof." (1930: 30) Audi accepts the latter claim; we do not need to prove the truth of the principles of prima facie duty, in order to be justified in believing them. But that is compatible with these principles receiving such a defense. Indeed, as I'll shortly explain, Audi believes that a non-demonstrative defense is available. Those who appreciate the nature of the defense are doubly epistemically justified in their basic moral beliefs—justified by virtue of adequately understanding the content of self-evident principles, and justified as well by having derived them in the appropriate way from a yet more general moral proposition.

To this point (roughly, a third of the way through the book), Audi does very little in the way of arguing for his view. Most of his efforts thus far have been intended to clarify what intuitionism is (or is not). That is fair enough, since there are so many misconceptions in this area. Audi next turns to answering a series of perennial concerns about ethical intuitionism. The first is *the dissensus objection*. Why, if basic moral principles are self-evident, is there so much disagreement about them? Audi says, first, that some people may fail to really understand them, perhaps because they don't really appreciate the *prima facie* status of the Rossian duties. Further, what disagreement there is may focus on whether the principles are self-evident, but this is neither here nor there. What is directly apprehended is the truth, not the self-evidence, of Rossian principles, so any disagreement about the latter does not cast doubt on the former. Finally, when we consider the matter, we see that there really is near-universal agreement in reasons—that is, near-unanimity in our treatment of the grounds of Rossian principles as reasons, even if

we don't formally accept or conceptualize them as such. Indeed, Audi says that "the truth and non-inferential justifiability of the relevant principles explains, or at least comes closer to explaining than any competing hypothesis, the high degree of consensus among people in wide segments of their everyday moral practice." (63)

Audi is surprisingly reticent about the conceptual content of basic moral principles. He tells us that they are plausibly regarded as necessary and a priori truths. (53) But, as his discussion of disagreement clearly implies, those who reject his proposed principles must be evincing a conceptual failing. Indeed, though Audi never puts it this way, self-evident principles must, by his lights, be conceptual truths. Yet the ones we are interested in are quite different from analytic truths. It would have been helpful to have said more about just what kinds of conceptual failings beset those who reject his preferred principles.

Audi also tackles what he calls *the incommensurability problem*. The basic moral principles specify incommensurable grounds of moral duty, and, given this, it is difficult to see how we can have justified belief about what constitutes our final duty in a given case. As Audi rightly notes, incommensurability does not imply incomparability, but all this shows, I think, is that *the incommensurability problem* is a misnomer. The real problem is how we can be justified in making comparisons among incommensurables so as to ascertain our final duty, and on this vital matter, Audi has only a very little to say. He claims, again rightly, that intuitionism does not imply that we always, or even usually, have non-inferential knowledge about final duty. We sometimes do—Audi offers an example in which someone sees an adult whipping a young child with a belt, and judging, non-inferentially, correctly, and with knowledge, that such behavior is wrong. (56; cf. 68) But this isn't a case of perceiving a self-evident truth—*it was wrong of Jones to whip that boy* isn't a conceptual truth, since it relies on the contingent existence of Jones and his victim. Whether we reach knowledge of final duty inferentially or not, what we need is a detailed, plausible story about how to obtain this knowledge. Audi doesn't provide one.

Traditionally, intuitionists have done very little, other than invoke talk of judgment, discernment, and moral maturity, to do the necessary work in supplying the needed details of such an account. Audi claims that sometimes my final duty can be just obvious (64), that the difficulty of achieving knowledge in the presence of conflicting grounds is not peculiar to ethics (65), and that a judgment of final duty, when situated within a coherent network of beliefs in reflective equilibrium, can receive added support for this reason. (75-6) These three points are correct. But this is far short of anything like a positive account of how to gain knowledge of what one is all- things-considered bound to do.

A great deal of work is yet to be done before we have an adequate intuitionist account of final duty.

That said, Audi does have some help to offer here, and the assistance is of a quite novel kind. He suggests that we might systematize Rossian prima facie duties by reference to a Kantian categorical imperative—the Principle of Humanity. Audi doesn't spend time (except in passing) discussing the other versions of the categorical imperative, and, generally, avoids exegetical issues to do with Kant's work. Audi tells us that each prima facie duty might be seen as a way either to treat people as ends, or as a way of avoiding treating them as means. Audi believes that a greater systematicity in ethics can be obtained if we see prima facie principles as exemplifying the Kantian Principle of Humanity. In fact, the support can go both ways: Rossian principles can clarify the content of the very abstract Kantian imperatives, and the imperatives, being a source from which the prima facie principles can be justified, can insulate the Rossian view from the charge of arbitrariness.

This leads Audi to characterize the Rossian principles as *middle axioms*—"middle because they can be in some way systematized by an overarching moral theory, axioms because they are apparently self-evident and can ground propositions plausibly considered theorems deducible from them." (83) Audi deserves credit for seeing that this is a coherent picture; too many others had followed Ross in thinking that a principle's self-evidence entails its ungroundability in other considerations.

But does this make the resulting moral view more plausible overall? Audi says many suggestive things in the course of the forty pages he devotes to the Kantian intuitionism, but much of this is programmatic and awaits full development elsewhere. In this case, the devil is in the details, and without that fuller development, it is really impossible to render a verdict on the plausibility of the marriage of Kantianism and intuitionism. Perhaps the most important point that Audi seeks to vindicate in this chapter is that the addition of Kantianism will aid the intuitionist in resolving conflicts of duties. If so, the most worrisome problem for a Rossian view may be solved.

Whether Audi can achieve this much depends, first, on his ability to substantiate the claim that Rossian principles are really derivable from (or otherwise supportable by) the categorical imperative. If they are, then there is a genuine prospect of theoretical unification, and a justification for introducing the categorical imperative as a basis for adjudicating conflicts of prima facie duties. The relevant categorical imperative consists of two requirements—to treat people as ends, and to avoid treating them merely as means. Clearly these directives will

need to be unpacked before we can tell whether each Rossian prima facie duty can be derived from them. Audi tells us that to treat someone as an end is for the relevant act "to be motivated by a concern with the good, say the physical or psychological well-being, of the person for its own sake." (91-2) And to treat someone merely as a means "is for the relevant act toward the person to be motivated only by instrumental concerns and accompanied by an indisposition to acquire any non-instrumental motivation toward the person." (92)

One quite interesting implication of these characterizations is that it is possible to act towards another without treating her as either an end or merely as a means. If I break my promise to meet you for coffee, in order to attend to a family emergency, I needn't be using you to obtain some valued goal of mine, and so, by Audi's account, I needn't be treating you merely as a means. But neither am I displaying any direct concern for your good for its own sake. Such a gloss on the Principle of Humanity may do violence to Kant's understanding of it, but Audi rightly does not feel constrained to adhere to Kant's own take on things. This is an effort to develop a novel ethical theory, one that takes inspiration from Kant, without having to toe the Kantian line in all matters.

Still, Audi's statement of the nature of the two directives that comprise the Principle of Humanity is problematic, and that casts doubt on the ability of the categorical imperative (or this version of it) to play the role that he wants it to play. Both glosses make an agent's motivations quite central to the determination of whether he is treating another as an end, or merely as a means. But this either can't be right, or, if it is, it needs a great deal of argumentation to make it persuasive. I might care not a whit about your good for its own sake, and yet perfectly fulfill my duty to you. I can fulfill my duty to you even if I do so from mercenary motives, fear, resentment or spite. These motivations are important, certainly, to many moral assessments, but not to whether I am failing in my duty, which is what the directives are meant to govern.

We can gain assistance from the categorical imperative in resolving conflicts of prima facie duties only if the notions of treating agents as ends and merely as means can be given some determinate content. In addition to the worry just stated, there are two other concerns about the ability of the Principle of Humanity to do the work that Audi wants it to do. First, the example Audi uses to display the powers of the categorical imperative does not seem compelling. He has us imagine that he decides to fulfill a minor promise to keep an appointment, even though it means placing his daughter's health at risk. He says of this case that "I would apparently fail to treat her as an end in the relevant

sense. I would be putting her in serious danger for a less than weighty reason." (92) Yet he might consider his daughter's well being important for its own sake, and this, by his account, entails that he is treating her as an end. That he also thinks that keeping his promise is important in its own right, and in this case more important than his daughter's welfare, does not mean that he values his daughter's welfare only instrumentally. Further, Audi never provides us with a general measure of the seriousness of a reason, and does not, in particular, tell us how to derive such a measure from the demand to treat agents as ends. This is a major impediment to the categorical imperative's serving as an aid to resolving moral conflict.

Further, as Audi concedes (225, n. 63), the notion of treating another as an end probably cannot be given a wholly non-normative gloss. Still, "its explication may not require using moral concepts, and if so it can still help in clarifying Rossian duties without moral presuppositions." (225-6) The hope that Audi expresses here may yet be fulfilled, but Audi doesn't do anything to vindicate it. Moreover, what is really important, as Audi himself repeatedly recognizes, is that we be able to identify the natural, subvening features from which moral properties result. Having these in hand will allow us to justifiably determine whether a given act is moral or not, by determining whether its factual resultance base is realized. But a normative explication of treating agents as ends, even if it is non-moral, is still short of providing us with this information, unless we are able, in turn, to provide a factual specification of what this normative property (or set of properties) is. And this is work that is largely left undone within the book.

There are a number of interesting and suggestive points made by Audi in this chapter, though the programmatic nature of most of its discussions makes it difficult to assess the plausibility of the overall picture. Consider, for instance, one of the most extended discussions within it, that which focuses on the beneficence problem. How do we balance the prima facie duty of beneficence against the other prima facie duties? Just what are the limits of the moral demands of beneficence? Anyone familiar with the debates in the philosophical literature on this subject within the last generation or two knows that this is an incredibly difficult problem. Consequentialists tend to develop views that appear too demanding, and non-consequentialists have difficulty identifying a principled basis for stopping short of a demand as strenuous as that imposed by the consequentialists.

Audi devotes seven pages to this problem (94-101), and must know that he can't make a decisive argument in that amount of space. Nor does he seek to. His discussion is an effort, not to undermine consequentialism, but rather to see how plausible Kantianism can be made.

He does not attend much to the consequentialist literature, or provide arguments on its behalf and then criticize them. Rather, he seeks to show how Kantianism can provide a plausible defense of our commonsense understanding of where the limits of beneficence should be set. That is a fine task to set oneself, but the constituent arguments of this section are put forward in a very tentative, inconclusive manner. Audi claims that adhering to consequentialist demands would involve treating oneself as a mere means, and failing to treat oneself as an end. That is just what a Kantian must conclude. But the arguments to substantiate this view really presuppose the conclusion they are intended to justify. The notion of using as a mere means, and treating as an end, are at this point too unclear to be relied on to generate substantive, potentially controversial conclusions. Audi tells us that the kind of extreme subordination of one's own good that is allowed by consequentialism is something that rational persons would not agree to, at least if they were guided by the categorical imperative. (98) That may well be right, but it is really a statement of the point that needs defending, rather than a defense of the Kantian conclusion.

Audi here (and also at 99) relies on what a rational person would do, as a test of what is morally acceptable. Yet he hasn't at this point told us what constitutes a rational person, and so reference to such a person cannot, without further work, serve as a basis for justifying Kantian conclusions. Or, if a rational person is just one who would adhere to the categorical imperative, then reference to rationality here isn't doing any work, and we return to the need for a clearer explication of the central notions of what it is to treat someone as an end, or merely as a means.

Audi's announced hesitations and tentativeness of spirit, his reluctance to advertise his discussions as offering anything like decisive considerations, incline me to interpret his aim here as fairly modest. He isn't seeking to vindicate Kantian intuitionism, but rather to show how it might be made plausible, with a great deal of further clarification and argumentation. He is outlining a research program, rather than doing all or most of the work needed to vindicate it in detail. Those not already attracted to Kantianism, for instance, will not likely find themselves switching camps as a result of reading Audi's discussion. But those already attracted to intuitionism may well have been presented with a possibility they'd never dreamed of, and one worthy of further investigation.

Audi's next chapter is given over to axiology. Here he attempts to provide yet another layer of theoretical unification to his intuitionism, by trying to show that the Kantian intuitionism outlined in the previous chapter can be supported by a distinctive axiology. The basic idea

is to show that both the Rossian duties, and the categorical imperative, realize certain intrinsic values. Mirroring the structure of the relation of the categorical imperative to the Rossian duties, these intrinsic values will provide a theoretical grounding for the duties, but the duties, in turn, will also provide more determinate content to the very abstractly specified values, and so aid us in interpreting their application to particular cases. This added ability to systematize the Rossian and Kantian duties is potentially a great boon to the emerging theory; certainly it is another quite novel move on Audi's part.

Audi's avowed aim in this chapter, in addition to revealing the greater prospects for unification, is to satisfy the desideratum that "a good ethical theory should account for how morality contributes to human flourishing." (122) Unfortunately, Audi's discussions do not do that. He doesn't offer us an account of such flourishing, or try directly to establish that the fulfillment of Rossian duties makes our lives better off.

He does defend the intrinsic moral value of fulfilling our prima facie duties—there is something good, in itself, about (say) being kind to others, or being faithful to one's word. He asserts that whatever possesses intrinsic value provides a basic reason for action. (125) But Audi does not endorse the view that we have reason to do something (if and) only if it promotes our flourishing. So, without further argument, this path to substantiating the link between his intuitionism and such flourishing isn't available.

Audi may be seeking to forge the relevant link through his endorsement of axiological experientialism—the view that the only bearers of intrinsic value are experiences. Audi devotes almost a quarter of the chapter to its defense, but then, in an awfully concessive paragraph, allows that his main points (viz., that there is a plurality of intrinsic values, and that they entail reasons for action) could be coupled with a different account of what possesses intrinsic value. (129) Still, if experientialism is correct, then we can say at least the following. We flourish to the extent that our lives are intrinsically valuable. They are intrinsically valuable to the extent that they contain intrinsically valuable experiences. As Audi says, "what is significant about intrinsic value is that its presence in our lives is what makes living them worthwhile...and that the only basic bearers of it occur where it is truly realized: in our experiences." (123) But the connection between this conception of intrinsic value and its role in a flourishing life, and the fulfilment of Rossian and Kantian duties, was never made clear.

Rather than pursue the matter, let us consider some of the other more prominent theses that Audi offers in this chapter. He defends a distinction between intrinsic and inherent value—the latter is the sort

possessed by things that, if properly appreciated for their own sake, give rise to intrinsically valuable experiences. He defends a pluralism about intrinsic value, rejecting hedonism and other monistic theories in the area. He embraces a Moorean view of organic unities (136ff.), insisting that intrinsically valuable experiences, such as those of sadistic pleasure, might diminish the overall amount of value in a whole in which they are located. Overall intrinsic value isn't a sum of the incorporated intrinsic values, but is a function of the values and the relations they exhibit to one another. He asserts the anti-particularist claim that "pleasure and pain, as aspects of experience, and other basic axiological elements may be plausibly taken to be, a priori and necessarily, considerations having constant valence." (128) Audi doesn't do much to substantiate this claim, but he does tackle perhaps the toughest problem for it: sadistic enjoyment. Audi's diagnosis is interesting. He relies on the possibility of organic unities to claim that, here, an intrinsically valuable part contributes negatively to the whole (while remaining valuable in isolation). Further, what is wrong with sadistic pleasure is that a bad person gets something good, and undeserved. If there weren't anything good about pleasure, why would it be so bad if the undeserving get some? That's a pretty good question.

Perhaps the most important thesis of the chapter is Audi's contention that Rossian and Kantian intuitionism can be unified by reference to intrinsic value. Audi believes that we can properly see each of the Rossian prima facie duties, as well as the categorical imperative, as realizing the basic value of *dignity*. Audi finds it plausible to think of the Rossian principles, as well as the Principle of Humanity, as expressing prima facie requirements to respect the dignity of persons.

Given the major goal of the chapter—to show how a further level of theoretical unification was possible for Rossian duties—I was surprised at how little Audi did to develop the idea of human dignity. He tells us that agency, and the capacity to experience moral value, are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions of our possessing dignity. So too are our rational capacities and our distinctive kind of sentience. Perhaps together they are sufficient, but it wasn't clear from the discussion. (142-4) Indeed, given Audi's talents at conceptual clarification, it was odd that he didn't spend more time trying to reveal the nature of the concept that is to play such an important role in the overall intuitionist theory.

But, as was the case in the previous chapter on Kantian intuitionism, it turns out that Audi's goals are quite modest. He in fact does only a little to show how the Rossian prima facie duties can be grounded axiologically. It turns out, however, that he hasn't meant to show that, but rather that it is "at least a reasonable project" to try to do

so. (145) I think he has offered the beginnings of such a showing. But whether the notion of dignity can do much to clarify the content of the categorical imperative and the Rossian duties, and whether they can return the favor, is largely left open by the end of the enterprise.

Audi has a concluding chapter in which he clarifies the contents of the Rossian duties, and adds a couple to Ross's list. He discusses an interesting distinction registered in Chapter Four, that between the matter of a duty—what it requires us to do—and the manner in which it is fulfilled. We are required not only to (say) keep our promises, but also to do so in a *manner* that displays our respect for the promisee. "[I]t is morally insufficient, for instance, to keep a promise out of a sense of obligation if one does it in a mean spirit, with a patronizing attitude, or with visible resentment." (143) Audi is on to something here, something that virtue ethicists have also sought to capture, though not, typically, in the language of duty.

Audi also gives us, in this last chapter, a battery of remarks on dignity, treating others merely as means, the roles of merit and justice in the overall theory, and some links to the conduct of professional ethics. It is his effort to show how the intuitionism he has outlined can be applied to concrete normative problems.

To those familiar with Audi's other work, it will come as no surprise to say that he is certainly a man who knows his way around logical space. There are dozens of distinctions and conceptual clarifications entered in these two hundred pages, many of them illuminating and helpful. The book as a whole seems to me really a prolegomenon to a vastly larger project that will take the novel structure of the intuitionist theory on offer here, and develop it with the care and detail that it deserves. It is too soon to tell whether it will, in the end, withstand scrutiny. But it is surely the most developed version of ethical intuitionism to date.