

**David Kaspar**

*Intuitionism.*

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According to intuitionism, there are objective, non-natural evaluative facts. Moreover, many of them are known: as a result of having grasped these facts, we justifiably believe various general moral truths: e.g., that murder is wrong and that we ought to keep our promises. Kaspar's *Intuitionism* is a fast-paced, opinionated introduction to this theory.

In the Introduction and Chapter 1, Kaspar provides a quick overview of the intuitionist approach. From the outset, Kaspar's aim is to show that intuitionism can reply to a serious challenge: namely, that it lacks explanatory power. To the contrary, he argues, intuitionism can shed light on the content of commonsense morality, the nature of our moral reasons, the existence of both persistent agreement and disagreement in ethics, and much more. In Chapter 2, Kaspar sketches the rise, fall, and revival of intuitionism in the twentieth century. This involves outlining Prichard and Ross's accounts, some objections thereto, and the moves by Rawls, Audi, and Shafer-Landau that put intuitionism back on the map. Chapters 3-6 address epistemological problems for modern intuitionism. How, exactly, can intuition provide epistemic justification? To answer this question, Kaspar takes up a wide range of issues, including the notion of moral proof, the synthetic a priori, the supervenience of the nonnatural on the natural, and the problem of disagreement. Chapter 5 then offers a speculative metaphysical framework that's designed to show how moral knowledge is possible. In short, Kaspar maintains that moral actions are instances of moral kinds, which he takes to be intelligible abstract objects – i.e., universals. We grasp them through our experience with their instances, and are thus able to appreciate various self-evident moral truths. (According to Kaspar, a proposition is self-evident 'if it provides all the evidence necessary for believing it is true' (19). To understand a general moral claim, like 'Murder is wrong', we need to grasp the relevant moral kind; in so doing, we grasp the truthmaker for that claim, and thus have all the evidence we require.) Chapter 6 completes Kaspar's reply to the epistemological challenge by showing how intuitionists can use moral kinds to give an account of moral facts, including their relationship to the natural facts to which they are intimately related.

In Chapter 7, Kaspar argues that intuitionism is superior to Kantianism, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. By rehearsing some well-known objections to these views, he argues that their alleged advantages are just that: alleged. (Intuitionism can indeed provide moral explanations; intuitionism is no worse at providing action guidance.) Moreover, he contends that intuitionism is superior in that it is not vulnerable to moral counterexample: if an action seems wrong, that's evidence that it *is* wrong; the point of the view is that intuition (subject to reflection) is our only guide to those moral principles that we ought to adopt. So, while there might be a counterexample to a candidate principle, that wouldn't be a strike against intuitionism in the way that it would be, say, against utilitarianism. Chapter 8 concludes the book. It contains a rapid-fire discussion of several remaining issues: the true moral principles; the need for prudence in ethical reflection; the problem of moral motivation; an evolutionary challenge; and the relationship between ethics and theism (namely, that there isn't one).

It is difficult to know how to evaluate this volume. On the hand, Kaspar pitches the book to students: it is ‘something of an introduction to the intuitionist outlook’ (7); he writes in an admirably accessible style; he concludes each chapter with a summary of the main points; he refrains from interacting with minor figures in the literature; and he generally opts for breadth rather than depth. But the book has some unusual features for a student-oriented text: Kaspar doesn’t spend any time on pre-twentieth century intuitionism; he doesn’t offer general summaries of the views with which he engages (so, for example, you don’t finish the book having an understanding of Audi’s brand of intuitionism, though you might be able to reconstruct much of it from the various discussions of Audi’s ideas); and, by the end, it’s hard to avoid the thought that the entire volume is an attempt to establish intuitionism (or perhaps Kaspar’s own brand of intuitionism) as the best available moral theory. Admittedly, this last assessment is in tension with what we might infer from Kaspar’s stated methodology. He writes: ‘The question guiding my approach is, what if intuitionism is true? I am seeking to find out what a completed moral theory would be like’ (7). These sentences suggest that, rather than *arguing* for intuitionism, Kaspar is *assuming* it. If so, then the volume constitutes an exploration of that assumption’s consequences. But then consider the triumphant conclusion: ‘Our real thoughts about what’s right, our experience of morality in our lives, and the persistence of our core moral beliefs are best explained by the self-evidence of the intuitive moral principles. The case for intuitions of self-evident propositions is strong’ (188). If the book takes intuitionism’s truth for granted, where is that assumption discharged?

This confusion matters because it affects how we interpret a number of his arguments. Take, for example, his reply to the conventionalist. According to intuitionism, we have a priori knowledge of moral kinds: ‘complex, relational, mind-independent, generic, non-natural abstract wholes’ (99). Kaspar’s stock example of a moral kind is promising. The conventionalist complains that there is no such universal: the norms governing promising are constructed in response to local historical circumstances. Kaspar responds in two ways. First, he insists that it would be absurd to ask, ‘What is a lie in Bangladesh?’ On this basis, we’re supposed to infer that lies could not be contingent social creations. Second, he maintains that the conventionalist’s story fails the ‘Experience Test’: ‘I certainly was never taught the essential rules of promising. And I cannot imagine in what kind of teaching environment I could be taught them. So I possess the concept of the promise a priori. Being expose to some instances of promises was all I needed to understand the essential structure of promising’ (115).

On the face of it, neither response works. First, I’m not sure that it’s absurd to ask, ‘What is a lie in Bangladesh?’ But even if it is, that should be cold comfort to the intuitionist, since the conventionalist can explain cross-cultural agreement without positing universals: she can say that cross-cultural similarities between norms are evidence of circumstantial similarities (and, of course, similarities between the convention-makers themselves). Second, since the conventionalist denies that there *are* essential rules of promising, there’s no need for her to explain when we were taught them. At any rate, just as we were never explicitly taught most linguistic norms, which are obvious fabrications, we need not be explicitly taught the conventions that sustain our local customs.

If Kaspar intends for these responses to show that intuitionism is safe from the threat of conventionalism, then they are unsuccessful. But if they are supposed to show what’s wrong with conventionalism from the perspective of intuitionism, then perhaps more charitable evaluations are possible. It simply isn’t clear which we should prefer. And this interpretative problem crops up throughout: in his discussion of concepts that can and can’t be grasped by intellect alone (17-18);

in his response to the problem of moral disagreement (44-48); in his challenge to the skeptic (72); in his distinction between 'right' and 'ought' (134); in his challenge to theories that posit a supreme principle of morality (148f.); and in most of Chapter 8.

All that said, the book's constructive project is worthy of attention. Kaspar uses the many objections to intuitionism to pare the theory down to its essentials; then, he develops a framework that promises to solve the explanatory and epistemological puzzles that the view faces. His account of moral facts deserves further discussion; his observations about the centrality of moral relations to ethics are quite compelling; and his diagnosis of moral disagreement (in terms of different weightings of known prima facie duties) seems promising. Because of the volume's organization, I can't see using it in an undergraduate course to supplement primary texts. However, I certainly can see using it *as* a primary text. It's an engaging and accessible work, and if it raises some meta-level interpretative questions, all the better for classroom discussion.

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