1 Introduction

Moral intuitionism is the view that we can gain moral knowledge through our intuitions. It holds that we can tell or 'see' that a moral action was right or wrong before we start to analyse it. These intuitive seemings can justify our moral beliefs, which then lead to moral knowledge. In Section 2, I first outline the main features of this view and then explain a version of moral intuitionism proposed by Jeff McMahan which I think is the best account of how we gain moral knowledge. In Section 3, I address an objection from an alternative, the moral perception view, and argue that it falls short of explaining how we gain moral knowledge. In Section 4, I defend McMahan's moral intuitionism view from an objection based on moral disagreement and from one that questions the reliability of our intuitions. Finally, in Section 5, I briefly mention how non-naturalistic realism is an acceptable ground for moral intuitionism to be based on. I conclude that this view is the best account of how we gain moral knowledge.

2 Outline of Moral Intuitionism

For moral intuitionism, we can gain moral knowledge through intuitions. Intuitions are intellectual seemings: the way in which a certain situation, claim or proposition appears to us intellectually – instead of perceptually – before we try to assess it. How p 'seems' to us pre-theoretically, before any inferences, is our intuition that p. So, intuitive seemings are non-inferential and cannot be justified (Stratton-Lake 2020), because we have them before any reasoning takes place. Analogously, perceptual seemings, like how an object appears to us, are unjustifiable and also arise before we do any kind of reasoning.

Also, moral beliefs can be based on, and not inferred from, intuitions. These so-called *foundational* beliefs are non-inferentially justified by simply being based on our moral intuitions. Similarly, I can be (non-inferentially) justified in believing there's a book in front of me based on the (perceptual) seeming that there's a book in front of me.

But how can I be justified in believing p solely based on the intuition that p? Well, for moral intuitionism, there are *self-evident* propositions. This means that 'a clear intuition is sufficient justification' for believing the self-evident proposition 'on the

basis of that intuition' (Stratton-Lake 2020). In other words, a clear intuition that p justifies belief in a self-evident proposition p. So, one can know a true self-evident moral proposition by intuition when one has an adequate understanding of it.

Finally, for moral intuitionists, moral properties are not natural properties like mass or atomic number which 'can be known by purely empirical means' (Stratton-Lake 2020). Instead, moral properties, like 'being good', are non-natural properties of a distinctively different kind, which can be known through our moral intuitions. Also, moral intuitionism rests on realism: it tries 'to capture [a moral reality] that is out there independently of our thinking and talking about it' (Enoch 2017: 38). For realism, moral facts are independent of our attitudes, and moral intuitionism aims at knowledge of these mind-independent moral truths.

So, according to moral intuitionism, our intuitions allow us to form (foundational) moral beliefs which are based solely on them. We can be justified in holding these beliefs when they are self-evident. Such moral beliefs can them aim at moral knowledge, by revealing to us true moral principles and by us using them to infer true moral judgements from non-moral claims.

The moral intuitionism view I will argue for, and defend, was proposed by Jeff McMahan (McMahan 2000) and is both a foundationalist and coherentist view – which holds that a belief is justified 'just in case [it] coheres with a set of beliefs' (Erik 2021) which then form a consistent system. We start by having moral intuitions about a given situation. Upon conflict with our other intuitions and beliefs (or other's) upon reflection, we try to account for these intuitions by appealing to 'general principles'. These are 'claims of a higher generality that imply or explain the intuition' (McMahan 2000: 111) and can be foundational. They are *based on* our intuitions (and hence are non-inferentially justified) and can become self-evident when we understand them (and the relevant intuition). Also, they highlight the most important and essential parts of our intuitions and can, in turn, *explain* these intuitions. Then, by testing a general principle against our current intuitions and principles, the new principle is rejected or 'admitted', possibly with some of our pre-existing intuitions and principles getting removed. So, they are not arbitrarily chosen: any new principle is 'well integrated within a larger network of mutually coherent beliefs' (McMahan 2000: 112) and is consistent with all our beliefs in this network. We continue revising and

modifying our intuitions and principles until we have a steady, coherent system of foundational beliefs (general principles), intuitions, and resulting beliefs.

By aiming at this coherence, we '[facilitate] the discovery of deeper values' (McMahan 2000: 112) and try to arrive at some 'core principle in its full generality' (McMahan 2000: 113). When we obtain these true, deeper, general principles, we can then use them to infer from non-moral facts and claims to true moral judgements. By incorporating foundational principles into our broader network of beliefs and revising them for achieving a more coherent system, we aim at knowledge of the underlying, deeper moral facts and use them to arrive at moral knowledge.

3 An Objection from the Moral Perception View

The first objection comes from proponents of the moral perception view, who hold that 'moral properties are relevantly similar to other complex non-moral properties' (Cullison 2010: 160). Like how a shepherd can 'see' how old one if his sheep is, we can directly perceive whether an action is right or wrong. Instead of positing a faculty of 'intuition', they claim that 'moral knowledge [can be] basic empirical knowledge' (Cullison 2010: 159).

They claim that intuition-based general principles are very context-sensitive and too many conditions need to be met for them to apply. For example, the question of becoming a vegetarian is too complex to be captured by a single, intuitive general principle. So, it is hard to see how our intuitions, which seem to operate quickly in the sub-conscious, can account for this complexity. Therefore, such principles are too complex to be known through our intuitions. They claim, instead, that we perceive (natural) moral facts, and then use this knowledge to modify our held general principles, without positing a 'mysterious' moral intuition.

However, the moral intuitionism view outlined above does not suffer from this objection. Because our beliefs must cohere with each other, our general principles and intuitions change over time to maintain a consistent system of beliefs. When considering new moral dilemmas or problems, we can arrive at some new general principle that fits our network of beliefs more coherently. We might have to kick out some previously held principles and/ or beliefs to make way for the new principle that makes our system more consistent (instead of holding on to these 'outdated' beliefs).

As we participate in more moral situations, our intuitions get revised and replaced by more reliable ones. Over time, we acquire a finer and more developed intuition that incorporates previously complex principles. Situations that seemed complex before can now be explained by more comprehensive principles.

An analogy might help. When I start playing chess games as a beginner, new situations can seem complicated because of the many factors I may need to consider: all my different moves available, the many tactics and strategies I can pursue, the opponent's potential moves and so on. My intuition cannot yet manage this complex network of different factors. But as I play through more games and new scenarios, I start changing and improving the intuition-based principles I previously held so that when I'm an advanced player, a previously complicated situation becomes an easy position to play. Similarly, encountering new moral situations (and variants) develop our moral intuition such that scenarios which seemed complex initially can now be resolved intuitively.

To continue, because of the empirical nature of the moral perception view, it is hard to see how we can know that p solely based on the perception that p, independently of any moral principles. Without there being any self-evident claims for clear perceptions to justify (by understanding them), foundational beliefs merely based on perceptions are insufficient for gaining moral knowledge. So, since for them we don't arrive at our moral beliefs via general principles, but rather we perceive moral facts *directly*, the moral perception view fails to account for how we can gain moral knowledge.

4 Two Further Objections

The next objection claims that moral intuitionism's self-evident propositions are not compatible with the presence of moral disagreement. Intuitionism rests on self-evident moral propositions which one can know, once understood. If such self-evident truths exist, and people can have moral knowledge of them, they should agree on which moral facts are true. However, there is widespread and persistent moral disagreement, so self-evident moral claims do not exist. Therefore, intuitions cannot justify any moral claims, and hence one cannot gain moral knowledge through intuitions.

But our intuitions are not infallible (McMahan 2000: 105). We can have conflicting intuitions due to influence from other moral beliefs or prejudices, and we also accept/reject certain intuitions at different points in time. Since not all of them are true, they can mislead us, and so understanding them don't always lead to true, self-evident claims. So, these intuitions do not reflect any self-evident claims, and this allows for moral disagreement over the beliefs they lead to. Similarly, perceptual seemings can justify beliefs like 'that [water-submerged] pencil is bent', even though they may be false.

Also, as proposed in Section 2, we can develop our intuitions over time. Many of our initial intuitions can be conflicting, but as we consider new scenarios, we develop more reliable intuitions. When we reach 'sufficient mental maturity and have given sufficient attention to [a] proposition it is evident without any need of … evidence beyond itself' (Ross 1930/2002: 29). Moral disagreement exists when our intuitions are under-developed, but such disagreement could dissolve, after acquiring more refined intuitions and a better understanding of them, at Ross's point of 'mental maturity'.

Another objection questions how much we can rely on our intuitions. Our intuitions can often be biased or distorted in different ways. Intuitions can be 'tainted by their origin' (McMahan 2000: 116); they can arise out of self-interest, and be influenced by our religious beliefs and political views. They can also be distorted by non-moral factors like how a moral problem is presented to us (framing and priming effects), and what things we might associate with the morally irrelevant contexts (association), as empirical psychology has shown (Stratton-Lake 2020). So, our faulty intuitions 'cannot be reliable guides to the discovery of foundational moral principles' (McMahan 2000: 117) and hence moral truths.

On the proposed moral intuitionism view, however, it's difficult for these 'distorted' intuitions to have any authority. As outlined in Section 2, when we have an intuition about a given case, we move to general moral principles that these intuitions justify, and which centre on 'features of the case that are morally salient' (McMahan 2000: 112). So, morally irrelevant factors, like the psychological phenomena mentioned, are discarded when we move to these general principles. For these principles to focus on the morally important aspects of intuitions, contingent factors must be put aside.

These general principles must be coherent and consistent with our other principles, intuitions, and beliefs. For this, they must be at a certain level of generality. Very diverse sources like personal self-interest and our religious beliefs can be very difficult to reconcile. Even if such divergent factors could co-exist in our system, this would certainly be at a cost of some consistency. Also, stronger and more persistent beliefs, like our political views, would require a wider range of beliefs to be consistent with (otherwise, its large effect would lead to a lot of undesirable incoherence). So, there would be no way for these 'distorted' principles to get incorporated into our system of beliefs in the first place, because they would make this system incoherent (or less coherent). We could only hold general principles which capture the morally important and relevant parts of our intuitions, meanwhile excluding the ones which would be incompatible. So, we will still be able to gain moral knowledge through these reliable general principles.

5 Non-Naturalistic Realism

An anti-realist may claim that 'our system of evaluative judgements [like what is good or morally right] is thoroughly saturated with evolutionary influence' (Street 2006: 114), and so our intuitions have been shaped by evolutionary forces. Since intuitions aim at promoting survival and enhancing fitness, which come apart from moral truth, intuitions don't lead to mind-independent moral facts.

However, we can have 'intuitions that are contrary to those that evolutionary theory would predict' (McMahan 2000: 118), like jumping into the cold sea to help a drowning stranger. We may also have intuitions which are completely detached from any evolutionary goals, like identifying features of an abstract mathematical function. So, not all our intuitions are influenced by evolutionary forces, and therefore some can aim at moral knowledge.

Also, non-naturalist realism is considered as the 'default position' (Enoch 2017: 39), and opponents of non-naturalist realism spend a lot of time giving alternative explanations of situations that support non-naturalism (Enoch 2017: 41). This shows that the burden of proof might lie on the naturalist's side. So, unless a strong argument can be put forward against it, 'we should stick to the non-naturalist realism starting point' (Enoch 2017: 41).

Likewise, I note that we usually rely on our general principles, based on our intuitions, to justify moral judgements, and opponents of intuitionism spend a lot of time trying to account for our intuitions as well. So, intuitionism can be seen as the 'default position' in moral epistemology. Therefore, the anti-intuitionist needs to give strong reasons for us *not* to use our intuitions, instead of the intuitionist needing to give strong reasons *to* rely on intuitions. The 3 objections given in Sections 3 and 4, I have argued, are reasons not strong enough.

6 Conclusion

To conclude, I first outlined McMahan's moral intuitionism view, which I think is the best account of how we gain moral knowledge. Then I replied to an objection from the moral perception view that claimed that intuitionism's general principles are too complex, arguing that our intuitions change over time to integrate these initial complexities. I also pointed out a problem with it. Next, I defended the moral intuitionism view from an objection claiming that it's incompatible with moral disagreement, and another claiming that it's unreliable because of our intuitions being distorted. I argued for the developmental nature of our intuitions that general principles capture the morally important parts of, and which eventually dissolve moral disagreement and eliminate distorting influences. Finally, I mentioned why non-naturalistic realism can be supported, completing my defence of the moral intuitionism view.

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