

Intuition, self-evidence, and understanding

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Intuition, Self-evidence, and understanding¹

Philip Stratton-Lake

Robert Audi's work on intuitionist epistemology is extremely important for the new intuitionism, as well as rationalist thought more generally. He has done more than anyone to defend and develop the traditional intuitionist thesis that basic moral propositions are self-evident. Part of that defence is his account of self-evidence which, like previous accounts, grounds our knowledge of basic moral truths in our understanding of them, but makes progress over earlier accounts by arguing that an adequate understanding justifies, rather than compels, belief in self-evident propositions. Despite his important contributions to an intuitionist epistemology I think his account of self-evidence is mistaken. I will put forward an alternative account of self-evidence in what follows, and argue (in a rather Socratic style) that once we have a good understanding of this notion we can see that it plays no distinctive epistemological role. Since the idea that certain moral propositions are self-evident is so controversial I suggest that intuitionists do best to avoid this notion. Before I begin, however, it will help to sort out some terminological matters.

First, intuitions are a certain sort of mental state. The nature of this state is disputed. Some claim it is a certain sort of belief,² a disposition to believe,³ a felt

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented to audiences at the University of Reading, the University of Warwick, The New Intuitionism, Gdansk, June 2014, and the Wisconsin Metaethics Workshop, September 2014. I have learned a lot from these discussions and believe the paper is much better as a result. I have also benefited greatly from the very helpful comments from OUP's anonymous referees. I am grateful to everyone who has helped me to try to get clear on the issues I address here.

² Audi (1997, 40).

³ Earlenbaugh and Molyneux (2009).

attraction to assent,⁴ or an intellectual seeming.⁵ At this stage this doesn't matter. The point is simply to distinguish intuitions from their content, and this will apply to any account of intuitions.

The sort of intuitions I am interesting in are intuitions which have propositions as their content, rather than say, properties, or concepts. These propositions are intuitive propositions. What will count as an intuitive proposition will vary according to one's account of intuitions. It may be a pre-theoretical proposition that is such that it can be justifiably be believed non-inferentially, or simply a proposition that is disposed to present itself as true to someone who has an adequate understanding of it. For the moment, however, I will rely on an intuitive grasp of the notion of an intuitive proposition.

I can however distinguish intuitive propositions from other things that they may be confused with. Intuitive propositions are not the same as obvious propositions, since not all obvious propositions are disposed to present themselves as true to someone who understands them. That there are mountains in Switzerland, and that an object will fall to the ground if I drop it, are obvious, but are not intuitive in the sense in which I am interested. Also not all intuitive propositions are obviously true to everyone who understands them. Indeed, many people may deny the truth of intuitive propositions. For instance, moral error theorists deny the truth of many intuitive moral propositions.⁶ So error theorists would deny that any moral proposition is obviously true, since they think that all such propositions are false. For similar reasons intuitive propositions are not the same as common sense propositions.

⁴ Sosa (2007, 60).

⁵ Bealer (1996), Chudnoff (2013), Huemer (2005).

⁶ Error theorists need not deny all moral intuitions. For instance, an error theorist could accept his intuition about the transitivity of better-than.

Since intuitions may not be beliefs, it is useful to distinguish intuitions from intuitive beliefs or judgements⁷. An intuitive belief is simply one that has an intuitive proposition as its content. It may be thought that the distinction between intuitions and intuitive beliefs collapses if intuitions turn out to be a certain sort of belief – e.g., beliefs that are pre-theoretical, firmly held, and non-inferentially believed. But even if intuitions are a certain sort of belief, it does not follow that all intuitive beliefs will be intuitions. For a start, an intuitive proposition may be believed on the basis of some argument. Since the proposition is believed by means of inference (from an argument) the belief will not count as an intuition. Also if one has a certain degree of conviction as a necessary condition of an intuition then not all intuitive beliefs will be intuitions, as some of these beliefs may lack the required level of conviction. So no matter what one’s account of intuition is, it is worth distinguishing intuitions from intuitive beliefs.

Audi follows all classical intuitionists in claiming that some moral propositions are self-evident.⁸ Audi’s account of self-evidence makes significant progress over earlier accounts, as he can allow that someone can have an adequate understanding of a self-evident proposition yet not believe it. I will lay out Audi’s account of self-evidence in due course. For now, all I want to note is that self-evidence is a property of a proposition rather than of a mental state. So strictly speaking only propositions are self-evident. We can talk of self-evident *beliefs*, so long as we remember that these are just beliefs in self-evident propositions, and that strictly speaking it is not the belief that is self-evident but the proposition believed.

Self-evidence

⁷ In this paper I make no distinction between beliefs and judgements, so everything I say about beliefs should be taken to apply to judgements also. But nothing hangs on this.

⁸ 1997, 2004.

Classic ethical intuitionists tended to understand self-evident moral truths as ones that compel assent if properly understood. This understanding has the problem that many moral philosophers who seem to have an adequate understanding of what the intuitionists call self-evident propositions do not assent to them. Audi's account of self-evidence gets around this problem by claiming that self-evident propositions justify, but do not compel belief if adequately understood. He claims that self-evident propositions are

“truths such that (a) adequately understanding them is sufficient justification for believing them..., and (b) believing them on the basis of adequately understanding them entails knowing them”.⁹

I'll focus on the first conjunct in what follows, but everything I say about this will apply to the second. Although I have followed Audi's account for some time, I have come to think that the idea that our understanding of a proposition can justify us in believing it is rather odd. Our understanding just seems a very peculiar thing on which to base a belief. If I asked you why you believe a self-evident proposition I would be very surprised indeed if you replied “because I understand it”, or “my reason for believing it is my understanding of it”. In answering my question you are explaining why you believe this proposition, but the relevant sort of explanation would track what you take to justify your belief. So the oddity of this answer illustrates the oddity of the view that an understanding of a proposition can justify belief in it.

I think the oddity of the idea that our understanding of a proposition can justify us in believing it, has two sources. The first is that epistemic justifications need to be

⁹ 2008, 478. See also 2011, 178.

appropriately linked to truth, and in the case of synthetic propositions, the appropriate link to truth of a justifier and the belief it justifies is that the former must constitute evidence for the truth of the latter.¹⁰ Call this the evidential criterion of epistemic justification. The second source is that our understanding of a proposition does not provide evidence for its truth (apart from a few self-referential examples, such as that “I understand this proposition”). These two claims imply that our understanding of a synthetic proposition cannot justify us in believing it.

This argument does not mean that I will have to deny that understanding justifies belief in analytical propositions¹¹. My claim is that there has to be a constraint on what sort of thing can justify belief, and that that constraint is an appropriate link to the truth of the belief justified. In respect to synthetic propositions the link to truth is evidence, understood as something that raises the (epistemic) probability of the truth of the proposition for which it is evidence. This applies not only to synthetic a posteriori propositions, but to synthetic a priori propositions also, which is the sort of proposition in which ethical intuitionists are interested. One might think that evidence is out of place with regard to analytic propositions, but evidence isn't the only appropriate connection with truth. Since analytic propositions are true in virtue of their meaning, their meaning is their truth maker. The meaning of some analytic proposition is grasped by our understanding of it, so in such cases our

¹⁰ One might think that pragmatic considerations such as the fact that believing p will make my life go better is a reason to believe that p. I agree with Parfit and others who maintain that such pragmatic considerations are really reasons to desire that I believe p, and to take steps to make it the case that I believe p, rather than reasons to believe p. In other words these are not reasons to believe at all, but are reasons to desire and to act in certain ways.

¹¹ My thanks to Daniel Wodak, who suggested the following argument to me, and helped me get clear on what I am and am not committed to.

understanding is suitably linked to the truth-maker of the proposition understood, and so is appropriately linked to truth of such propositions. Because our understanding of analytic propositions is suitably linked to the truth of those propositions, our understanding may well be able to justify us in believing analytic propositions.¹² This is not true of synthetic propositions, because these propositions are not true simply in virtue of their meaning, even if they are a priori. So my claim that our understanding of synthetic truths cannot justify us in believing them remains unaffected by the acknowledgement that understanding might be able to justify us in believing analytic truths.

It may be claimed that synthetic a priori truths are conceptual,¹³ but the term conceptual is used to mean different things. Sometimes philosophers treat ‘conceptual truth’ as synonymous with ‘analytic truth’. So understood it is false that synthetic a priori truths are conceptual truths. Sometimes a conceptual truth is understood as one that anyone with a clear grasp of the relevant concepts would endorse. I don’t think the synthetic a priori truths which intuitionists are interested in can be understood as conceptual truths in this sense either. I do not think Sidgwick or Moore showed a lack of understanding when they denied the truth of certain deontological principles. The same is true of those who raise doubts about the transitivity of “better than”. Even those who claim that understanding does justify belief in self-evident moral propositions only claim that an adequate understanding of them justifies belief – this

¹² One might think that even with regard to analytic propositions, the idea that it is our understanding of them that justifies us in believing them still sounds odd. But since my concern in this paper is with the justification of synthetic a priori propositions I will not defend what I say about analytic propositions here by responding to objections to it.

¹³ Audi sometimes seems to suggest that, e.g., (2015, 68)

understanding does not compel belief, which I think it would have to if these were conceptual truths.

But if understanding cannot justify us in believing synthetic self-evident moral propositions, what can? There are limited options. One possibility would be the content of what is believed – the self-evident proposition itself – but I don't think that can be right. P does not, I believe, justify belief in P.

Another possibility is that our intuition of the self-evident proposition justifies us in believing it. Whether this idea will work out will depend on how we understand intuitions. Intuitions cannot justify belief in self-evident propositions if they are understood as Audi understands them. But I think there is good reason to reject Audi's understanding of intuitions, and to accept an alternative account that does permit this justificatory role.

Audi's account of intuition.

Robert Audi understands intuitions primarily as beliefs of a certain sort, i.e., beliefs that are non-inferred, firmly held, pre-theoretical, and based solely on an understanding of their content.¹⁴ A belief is non-inferred if it is not (at the time) based on a premise or argument.¹⁵ This allows that there can be an argument for the intuitive proposition, and that one can believe it on that basis. It's just that if one did believe it on the basis of the argument, one's belief would not constitute an intuition, even though it had an intuitive proposition as its content.

The second necessary feature of an intuition, according to Audi, is that it is "a moderately firm cognition".¹⁶ At a bare minimum this means that one must have come down on the matter. Indeed, Audi seems to endorse Ross's view that intuitions

¹⁴ 1997, 40-41.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 40.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 40.

are ‘convictions’¹⁷ – that is beliefs with a relatively high level of firmness. Their firmness means that they would be relinquished “only through such weighty considerations as a felt conflict with a firmly held theory or with another intuition”.¹⁸

The third condition is that “intuitions must be formed in the light of an adequate understanding of their propositional objects”.¹⁹ This is the positive correlate of the negative claim in the first condition. The first condition tells us what intuitions must not be based on. The third condition tells us what they must be based on. This condition involves getting the relevant proposition clearly in view, and this might require reflection, consideration of particular cases, and an ability to make certain inferences. It may also require, as Ross claimed, a certain degree of mental maturity.²⁰ When Audi says that intuitions must be formed in the light of an adequate understanding of their propositional objects I understand the phrase “formed in the light of” normatively as meaning “justified by” rather than non-normatively as “explained by”.

The fourth requirement is that intuitions must be pre-theoretical. By this Audi means that “they are neither evidentially dependent on theories nor themselves theoretical hypotheses”.²¹ I’m not sure that this condition is needed, as it does not seem to add anything to the first condition. If some belief I have is based on some theory then it will be inferred. Similarly theoretical hypotheses, if they are not intuitive, will have some sort of argument for them, and will presumably be believed on that basis, flouting both the first and third condition. Given that the very idea of a pre-theoretical belief is controversial, I think Audi is better off discarding this

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 40.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 40.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 41.

²⁰ Ross, (2002, 12, 29).

²¹ Audi (1997, 41).

condition and sticking with his first three. Henceforth I shall refer to his three conditions, rather than his official four.

As was noted earlier, Audi's doxastic account of intuitions does not negate the difference between intuitions and intuitive beliefs, since a belief in an intuitive proposition may not satisfy his three conditions. But in cases where the intuitive belief satisfies all of Audi's conditions, there is no difference between it and an intuition with the same content.

If Audi is right that intuitions are a certain type of belief, then our intuition of a self-evident proposition cannot justify us in believing that proposition. This is because an intuition is, on this account, a certain type of belief, and my belief that p cannot justify my belief that p . There are a few exceptions to this claim. My belief that I am believing can justify itself, as can the belief that I exist, that I have mental states, and so on. But these exceptions do not help the ethical intuitionist who wants the intuition that, say pleasant experiences are better than agony, to justify us in believing that pleasure is better than agony. My belief in such propositions can never justify me in believing them.

Audi's account is vulnerable to another objection that is independent of our concern with self-evidence – namely that it cannot make sense of the recalcitrance of intuitions. By recalcitrance I mean that many intuitions continue even when the agent does not believe them. For instance, I have the mathematical intuition that there are more natural numbers than even numbers. When I consider the two series I have the very strong intuition that there is twice as many numbers in one than in the other. I know this intuition is false, so I do not believe that there are more natural numbers than even numbers. Nonetheless I still have this intuition. The same is true of my

intuition that .9 recurring does not equal 1. I have this intuition yet do not believe it as I have seen and accepted the proof that .9 recurring does equal 1.

There are plenty of moral cases that illustrate the recalcitrance of intuitions. I have the intuition that if it is permissible for A to Φ , then it is at least pro tanto wrong for others to try to stop A from Φ ing. But I do not believe this is true. It is permissible for strikers in a game of football to score goals: in fact it is their job. Nonetheless, defenders do nothing wrong at all if they try to stop strikers from scoring goals. That's their job. I suspect many act consequentialists continue to have deontological intuitions even though they do not believe them. I am sure they feel the force of the apparent counter examples to their moral theory, but do not believe their intuitions, because they are convinced by their overall normative theory. In *The Right and the Good* Ross had the intuition that he has no obligation to enjoy innocent pleasure for himself when he can, but he did not believe this.²² Someone might have the strong intuition about the transitivity of 'better than' but not believe this (because she is persuaded by Temkin's arguments).²³ Finally, I am certain error theorists continue to have all sorts of moral intuitions, even if they don't believe any of them. This would be the moral analogue of someone for whom the world is presented as coloured but who, for theoretical reasons, does not believe there are any colours.

Audi's view cannot capture this recalcitrance. Although on his account it is possible to believe that p without having an intuition that p, it is not possible to have an intuition that p without a belief that p. So he cannot capture the common phenomenon that we have intuitions that we do not believe. The best he could do is maintain that in such situations the individual has contradictory beliefs – she believes that p and she believes that not-p. But that is a complete distortion of what is going

²² Ross (2002, 25-6).

²³ Temkin (2012).

on. Someone who has an intuition that p but does not believe it (because she thinks that p is false) does not have the most coherent set of mental states. But it is too much to say that she is so irrational as to have explicitly contradictory beliefs. Furthermore, it is one thing to capture the fact that some people have intuitions which they think are false, and another to capture the fact that people have intuitions they do not believe. His doxastic account cannot capture the latter in any way.²⁴

Since neither Audi's nor any doxastic account of intuitions can capture the epistemic role of intuitions and their recalcitrance, I think we should reject this account. What account of intuitions should intuitionists endorse? There are a number of options, and this is not the place to go into the detail of the debate about the nature of intuitions. I will, however, make a few quick points to motivate my own preferred view.

One option is to think of intuition as a disposition or inclination to believe. That would capture recalcitrance, since I may be inclined to believe some proposition even when I do not believe it. But not everything I am inclined to believe is an intuition. I am inclined to believe propositions that fit with various theoretical commitments I already have, but I have no intuitions about these.

This view might be modified to deal with this objection. It could state that intuitions are inclinations to believe that p upon considering just p . When I am inclined to believe some proposition that fits with other theoretical commitments I already have, I am not considering just that proposition, but am also considering my theoretical commitments and its fit with them. But even in this modified form it is

²⁴ In an article published after I wrote this paper (e.g., Audi, 2015, 62) Audi does acknowledge recalcitrance and accepts a type of non-doxastic, episodic intuition that makes sense of it. He also agrees that the non-doxastic intuition can justify doxastic intuitions – what I have called intuitive beliefs. He seems to continue to hold onto the account of self-evidence that I argue must be rejected.

unclear how intuitions can justify beliefs based on them, for the mere fact that I am inclined to believe these things seems to grant no justificatory force to them even when I consider them alone. Whether it does will depend on why I am inclined to believe them. If I am inclined to believe some proposition just because it is, e.g., flattering, then that inclination will provide no justification for believing the flattering proposition. There may be a more legitimate ground of this inclination, but then the justification will flow from this ground rather than from the inclination that it grounds. For instance, if I am inclined to believe that certain things are coloured because they present themselves to me as coloured, then it will be these visual presentations that justify my colour beliefs rather than the fact that I am inclined to have these beliefs as a result of these visual presentations.

A similar point can be made against an account of intuitions as a felt attraction to believe. Like the dispositional account, this account captures recalcitrance well. Phenomenologically it seems accurate to say that we might feel the attraction of some proposition even when we do not believe it, and this attraction may well be what this recalcitrant intuition is. But whether this felt attraction can justify belief in the attractive proposition will depend on why we are attracted to it and, as in the dispositional account, in the good cases it will be what grounds this attraction rather than the attraction itself that justifies belief in the attractive proposition. If it is attractive because it seems true, then we will *pro tanto* be justified in believing the proposition. If it is attractive because it is flattering, then we will not be justified. And in the good case it will be the seeming true, rather than the felt attraction that justifies belief in the intuitive proposition.

The best account of intuition is, in my view, that offered by George Bealer. According to this view, intuitions are not beliefs or judgements, but a distinct mental

state that he calls intellectual seemings. Intellectual seemings are understood as occurrent mental states, distinct from judgement, guesses, or hunches, whose phenomenology is relevantly similar to that of perceptual seemings. Just as the world can present itself to the mind perceptually as being a certain way, such as being red, or square, so certain propositions can present themselves to the mind as true. They do not always do this immediately. Sometimes they require reflection. Bealer gives the examples of De Morgan's laws. When first considering this there may be nothing like it's seeming true. But after reflecting on it for a few moments it is like a light going on. Suddenly this proposition presents itself to the mind as true (1996, 5). The same is true of certain intuitive moral propositions, such as the transitivity of better than. When one first hears this, one has to think for a moment – to get the proposition clearly in view, as it were – but once it is clearly in view it just strikes one as true.²⁵

Understood as intellectual seemings, intuitions may plausibly be said to justify beliefs with the same content. Just as something's seeming blue may justify me in believing that it is blue, so a proposition's seeming true may justify me in believing it. The justificatory role of intuitions is disputed, and this is not the place to enter that debate. All I am saying here is that, unlike Audi's account of intuitions, Bealer's account at least makes sense of the idea that intuitions are the sort of thing that can justify beliefs with the same content. This putative justification is both pro tanto and defeasible. If I learn that I have been given a drug that makes all false moral propositions seem true and all true ones false, then the fact that some moral proposition seems true will give me no justification at all for believing it. On the contrary, in such a case its seeming true will justify me in believing that it is false. Even absent undercutting defeaters, the justification for some proposition provided by

²⁵ By getting a proposition clearly in view I mean pretty much what Audi calls having an adequate understanding of it. (See, e.g., 2015, 66)

one's intuition of it is only *pro tanto* – that is, it may be outweighed by other considerations, so that all things considered I am not justified in believing the intuitive proposition. But it is plausible to believe that, absent reason to distrust some intuition, or to disbelieve them, we may believe that things are the way they seem intellectually, just as, absent undercutting defeaters, we may believe that things are the way they seem perceptually.

Although intuitions understood as intellectual seemings can be explained, they cannot be justified, whether this is non-inferentially or inferentially (by means of some argument). We can explain why some proposition presents itself to the mind as true, or seems true, but we cannot justify its seeming true. The same is true of perceptual seemings. Like intellectual seemings, we can explain why something seems a certain way, but we cannot justify its seeming that way. To attempt to justify a seeming would be to commit a category mistake.

Although intuitions cannot be justified, intuitive beliefs can be justified, either inferentially (by means of argument) or non-inferentially, on the basis of an intuition with the same content. One might also say that intuitive propositions can be justified, although that seems slightly odd to me. Propositions can be true or false, but it sounds odd to me to say that they can be justified. The proposition that $2+2=4$ is true, but is this proposition justified? We can ask this of our *belief* that $2+2=4$, but it seems rather peculiar to ask it of a proposition. An intuitive proposition could be the conclusion of an argument, but the argument would justify belief in the proposition, it would not justify the proposition. Nothing I go on to say, however, hangs on this last point.

The phenomenological similarity of intuitions with perceptual seemings captures the recalcitrance of intuitions well. There is a certain degree of passivity involved in seemings. We have already covered part of this passivity in noting that we

cannot reason to a seeming. In this way they are not under our rational control. Another way in which they are not under our rational control is that they tend to persevere even when we decide that things are not as they seem. This is certainly true in relation to perceptual seemings. If I reasoned to the view that there are no such things as colours, this view would not stop the world seeming coloured. Similarly, my knowledge that two lines are of the same length in a Muller-Lyer illusion does not stop the lines seeming unequal. If intuitions are intellectual seemings then we would expect the same sort of recalcitrance of our intuitions, and as I have already noted, that is exactly what we find. In some cases we can train ourselves so that things no longer seem to be the way we believe or know they are not. A consequentialist may try to lose his deontological intuitions by avoiding deontologists, reading only consequentialist philosophers and by mixing only with other consequentialists. But the same is true of certain perceptual seemings. I may, over time, be able to train myself so that the lines in a Muller-Lyer illusion no longer appear different to me. (One of my graduates claims she has done this.) The point is one of degree rather than of kind. The idea is that intuitions are more resistant to our beliefs about their truth than beliefs are, and this is just what one would expect if intuitions are seemings.

In his more recent work Audi allows that some intuitions are intellectual seemings, although he prefers to call these “intuitive seemings” rather than “intuitions”.²⁶ What I have argued is that he should abandon his doxastic account of intuitions and endorse Bealer’s view that all intuitions are intellectual seemings. This would not only better fit the epistemological and psychological facts, but would also enable him to solve a certain problem with his account of self-evidence to which I now turn.

²⁶ Audi, (2011, 177).

An alternative account of self-evidence

I have argued that the account of intuitions as intellectual seeming has certain advantages over the doxastic account which would allow intuitions to play the role of justifier of a belief with the same content. So endorsing the seeming account of intuitions gives intuitionists what they need to fill the place vacated by understanding in their account of self-evidence. With this account of intuition we can offer the following revised account of self-evidence:

Self-evident propositions are truths such that (a) a clear intuition of them is sufficient justification for believing them, and (b) believing them on the basis of a clear intuition of them entails knowing them.

This account does not rest on the idea that understanding is a justifier, but it can allow that an adequate understanding of a proposition can have an epistemic role. Suppose, for example, there is some proposition *p* of which I do not have a very good understanding, and which consequently does not seem true to me when I consider it. Now suppose that I have some brain implant which has the effect of making *p* seem true to me when I consider it, even though my understanding of *p* is not improved.²⁷ It seems to me that epistemically I am in no better a position than I was earlier. That *p* now seems true to me does not add any justification for believing *p* as it would if *p* seemed true at least in part as the result of a better understanding of *p*. So an adequate understanding of an intuitive proposition can have a bearing on how we stand epistemically towards that proposition even if our understanding of that proposition

²⁷ I borrow this example from Markie (2013).

does not justify us in believing it. This thought experiment suggests that understanding is a necessary condition of a seeming having the sort of justificatory force it has by figuring in the right sort of explanation of why that proposition seems true. Some other explanations of why a proposition seems true, such as the brain implant, will either attenuate or negate completely the default justification provided by the seeming.

It may look as though this account of a self-evident proposition makes all intuitive propositions self-evident. But it does not. First, not all intuitions will have the relevant degree of clarity. For example, our intuitions about trolley cases leave all sorts of issues unstated, such as why the people are on the tracks, why they can't get out of the way, their age, etc. Second, not all intuitions would be sufficient to ground knowledge. Intuitions about scenarios, such as trolley cases, justify us in believing their content, and this justification may be sufficient for belief, but it is not sufficient for knowledge, even if one's belief is based on that intuition. I would not claim to *know* that it is right to pull the lever in a standard trolley case, but (pace error theorists) I would claim to know that pleasure is better than agony. So I would say that the latter but not the former is self-evident. The former is merely intuitive.

It is true that whether some intuition is clear, and whether it provides justification that is sufficient for knowledge will be disputed and sometimes vague. I do not, however, see this as a problem, since philosophers, including ethical intuitionists, argue about which propositions are self-evident, and our account should make sense of this disagreement²⁸.

²⁸ We may, nonetheless, use certain features as defeasible justification for believing that some intuitive proposition is self-evident. One such criterion is that the proposition presents itself as necessary, ie, is what Bealer calls an a priori intuition.

Are intuitions evidence for their content?

Someone might claim that intuitions do not satisfy the evidential condition on epistemic justification, and so as far as that goes, are in no better shape than understanding. Chudnoff argues that the link between justifiers and evidence is either trivial, as there is no distinction, or false. Evidence, he maintains, may be understood either as whatever justifies, or as considerations that count in favour of or against your having certain beliefs.²⁹ If the former is correct, then saying that justifiers for a belief must be evidence for the proposition believed is simply trivially true, so doesn't add a substantive constraint on what justifies. If the latter is correct, then justifiers are not evidence, for intuitions are experiences, he claims, not considerations. Since only considerations constitute evidence, and intuitions are not considerations, then intuitions cannot constitute evidence. But, he maintains, they do justify.³⁰

This does not damage my argument against the view that understanding cannot justify. Even if evidence and justifiers were the same thing, it is very implausible to suppose that our understanding of some proposition constitutes evidence for its truth. If we were very confident that our understanding of a proposition justifies us in believing that proposition, then we might bite the bullet and insist that it just follows from this (on the account we are considering) that our understanding constitutes evidence for the truth of the belief understood. But I for one have no firm conviction that our understanding justifies in this way. So even if justifiers and evidence were the same thing I could still maintain that understanding does not constitute justification on the ground that it does not constitute evidence.

²⁹ Chudnoff (2013, 147).

³⁰ *Ibid*, (147).

Furthermore, it is not clear that intuitions are not considerations that count for or against having certain beliefs. That will, of course, depend on how we understand a consideration. On one plausible view a consideration is something that should be considered in deliberation, and it is very plausible to suppose that our intuitions should be considered in our deliberation no matter what their nature. So if evidence for a belief is a consideration that counts in favour of that belief, then intuitions could be evidence.

Even if Chudnoff's two accounts of evidence did cast doubt on the idea that intuition justifies, he has hardly exhausted the way in which we may understand evidence. We might understand evidence as something that raises the epistemic probability of the truth of that proposition for which it is evidence. That 'something' may be a consideration (however considerations are understood), but it need not be. It might be an experience or mental state, such as an intellectual seeming. An intellectual seeming looks like it is the sort of thing that can raise the epistemic probability of the truth of the intuitive proposition, just as perceptual seemings can. Unless I have reason to doubt that things are the way they seem, the fact that something seems red to me increases the epistemic probability that it is red. The same is true, I think, for intellectual seemings. So on at least this view of evidence intellectual seemings may be, and I think are evidence, which is just how much of the philosophical literature regards them. If that is right then, unlike understanding, they can satisfy the evidential constraint on justifiers, and so can justify belief in their content.

Some intuitionists deny that intuitions constitute evidence for their content. Huemer is one. Huemer understands intuitions as intellectual seemings, and claims that intuitionists

should not say that intuitions function as a kind of *evidence* from which we do or should infer moral conclusions. He should say that for some moral truths, we need no evidence, since we are directly aware of them, and that awareness takes the form of intuitions.³¹

Well it may be that we need no evidence beyond that provided by the intuition of the proposition in question but that hardly rules out the idea that our intuition is evidence for a belief with the same content. If it were the belief would be based on that intuition, but it would not be inferred in the relevant sense.

Tropman makes Huemer's point in a slightly different way. She writes:

I do not infer, says Huemer, that killing is wrong on the basis of noticing that it seems wrong. This inferential picture is mistaken because it inappropriately treats appearances as the objects of belief and then supposes that we infer moral claims from premises about how things appear to us. For Huemer, it is the appearances themselves, and not our beliefs about them, that ground belief.³²

³¹ Huemer (2012, 121–122)

³² Tropman (2014, 183–4). See also:

“For there to be a basing relation between appearances and belief, the believer must appreciate in some sense the logical support that the appearance provides for the belief. This appreciation need not be explicitly noted in consciousness, but it must at least be tacit in the believer's thinking, as evidenced by a disposition to cite the appearance as his or her reason for the belief. Unfortunately, this means that the belief would be held on the basis of premises or reasons, undermining its alleged non-inferential character.” (2014, 186).

If we regard intuitions so understood as evidence, must we believe that they are evidence and infer our belief that things are as they seem from that belief? I do not see why we should take this extra step. If I regard some intuition as evidence for its content, i.e., as counting in favour of the truth of that content, then I will believe that it constitutes such evidence. But we need not accept that my belief in that content is inferred from the belief about the evidential status of the intuition. If I believe the intuition counts in favour of its content then I will base my belief in that content on the intuition. That is after all what I believe supports that intuitive belief. So why think the intuitive belief is supported by another belief, rather than the thing that I regard as evidence for it?

This point can be made clear in the case of perceptual seemings. If asked why I believe some object is blue, I would say “because it looks blue”, or factively “because I can see that it is blue”. I would not say “because *I believe* it looks blue”, or “because *I believe* that I can see that it is blue”, unless I wasn’t sure that it did look blue. This suggests that I regard the perceptual presentation as counting in favour of the truth of the proposition – that is as evidence – not my belief that I am having the perceptual presentation. The same is true of intellectual seemings.

Intuitionists certainly should not claim that if we base an intuitive belief on anything, then we are inferring it from that thing. If they did they would rule out in advance the possibility of a non-inferential justification for an intuitive belief, or at least basing our belief on that justification. So far, then, we have seen no reason to suppose that intuitions cannot be evidence for their content.

What follows from this account?

One conclusion one might draw from my revised account of self-evidence is that the choice between what Bedke calls the ‘self-evidence theory’ and the

‘intellectual seemings theory’³³ sets up a false dichotomy for intuitionists. For by defining self-evidence in terms of intuitions (understood as seemings), there is no longer opposition between these two approaches.

Although attractive, and conciliatory, this conclusion would, I think, be the wrong one to draw. The right conclusion would be that intuitionists should give up talk of self-evident moral propositions. I think that once the notion of self-evidence is properly understood, we can see that it has no important epistemic role to play. Once we learn that it is our intuition of some self-evident proposition rather than our understanding of it that justifies us in believing it, we can see that all of the epistemic work is done by moral intuitions. They are the things that do the justifying. We can call a subclass of intuitive propositions self-evident, but once we get clear on what that means, all we are saying is that that proposition is such that an intuition of it justifies us in believing it, and provides a strong enough justification to ground knowledge. But all of that could be said without using the term ‘self-evidence’. We do not learn that there is something else that provides a distinctive sort of justification for belief – namely, an appropriately rich understanding – but merely report that our intuition of that proposition provides a strong justification for believing it. All of the justificatory work is done by the same thing that does the work in non-self-evident intuitive propositions – namely our intuition of them.

So understood the epistemic role of the self-evident would be relevantly analogous to the normative role played by goodness according to the buck-passing account.³⁴ According to this account of goodness to be good is, roughly, to have features that give everyone reason to have a pro-attitude towards that thing.³⁵ So

³³ Bedke (2008, 254ff).

³⁴ See Scanlon (1998, 95-100)

³⁵ For a more detailed account see Stratton-Lake (2006, 2013, and 2016).

understood it is not goodness itself that has a distinctive normative role, but the reasons it reports. This is not a form of eliminativism about goodness. It is not saying that there is no such thing as goodness: there are only reasons. It is saying rather, that there is such a thing as goodness, and it is to be understood in terms of reasons. Similarly, my account of self-evidence does not say that there is no such thing as self-evidence: there are just intuitions. It says, rather, that there is such a thing as self-evidence, and this is to be understood in terms of intuitions. But like the buck-passing account of goodness my account of self-evidence makes us aware that self-evidence does not identify a different sort of reason-giving feature, but rather reports the presence of reason-giving features that we are already familiar with, in this case, intuitions.

Abandoning self-evidence as a significant epistemic category would mean that an intuitionist moral epistemology would not have to claim both that moral intuitions justify, and that certain substantive moral propositions have the special epistemic status of being self-evident and so engage a different sort of justifier. All they need defend is the first claim, and that the justification provided by some intuitions is sufficient to ground knowledge. I maintain therefore that a clear understanding of what self-evident propositions are should lead us to abandon this notion. The plausibility of intuitionist epistemology will, then stand or fall with a more general debate about the role of intuitions in philosophy. All intuitionists need add to this is that there is no good reason to suppose that moral intuitions should be treated any differently from other a priori intuitions.

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