In the previous lecture, I explained how, at the beginning of the twentieth century, G. E. Moore identified two main views about ethics: naturalism and intuitionism. He argued that naturalism was to be rejected, and this left intuitionism holding the field. Needless to say, few philosophical theories die completely, or forever, and various spruced up versions of naturalism will reappear in these lectures later. But as things now stand, intuitionism might seem to be the main, indeed, the only, contestant sanding. It is time to take it closer look at it.

Objectivist intuitionism takes many forms. We can trace the view back to the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato. An early modern proponent was the eighteenth century philosopher, Thomas Reid. At the end of the nineteenth century, a version was advocated by Henry Sidgwick. In the twentieth century, important versions were adopted by G. E. Moore and, a bit latter, by W. D. Ross. The idea is this. Objectivist intuitionism is a form of moral realism. Intuitionists embrace metaphysical moral realism, that is, objectivism. In some way or other, there are “objective” moral facts. They are not rooted in human conventions, or even necessarily in the will of God. And they embrace semantic moral realism, that is, cognitivism. Moral sentences are true or false. They are true when they correctly describe the moral world, and otherwise false. Further, they embrace an epistemological thesis. We have a faculty of the mind able to detect these facts with some, though not perfect, accuracy. This faculty is called many things including “conscience,” the “moral sense,” “reason” and “moral intuition.” Some believe that there is a special moral sense with the specific job of detecting these moral facts. Others think
that the faculty that detects moral facts is the same one that lets us detect many other truths so
that there is no special moral sense.

Objectivist intuitionists often explain moral intuition in terms of one or another of two
models. Some say that it is much like sensory perception. What they have in mind is that the
objects of moral intuition are very particular the way the objects of sensory perception are. Thus,
we intuit that this or that act is right or wrong much as we see that this or that frog is red or
green. The other model makes moral intuition more like mathematical intuition, and some
intuitionists think it is one and the same faculty. On this view, what we intuit are general moral
truths much as we intuit the general truths of mathematics. For example, we intuit that, at least
in general, killing is wrong just as we intuit that one and one equal two. Some philosophers
combine the two approaches and say that we intuit some general and some particular moral
truths.

**Intuitionistic Methods of Moral Reasoning.**

Objectivist intuitionism says that there is an objective moral reality that can be accessed
by the use of moral intuition. Now, iff every moral truth could be known by a direct application
of intuition, and if moral intuition were easy to use, then moral knowledge would be easily
available without special methods. But most intuitionists deny this picture. There are several
things to say about this. First, the use of intuition might not be easy, so some methods might be
employed to ensure it is used accurately. Second, intuitionists do not generally believe that we
can directly intuit all moral truths. Rather, we intuit some and reason our ways to others. So
intuitionism requires tools for reasoning from intuited moral truths to others that we cannot
directly intuit. This is not surprising, for the situation is actually exactly the same in, for
example, the empirical sciences such as biology and astronomy. Empirical science rests on
experiment and observation, which are analogous to moral intuition. But even simple scientific
observations can be hard to make accurately. All sorts of things get in the way and scientists
spend a lot of time trying to improve the accuracy of their data collection for example, through
the use of the double blind experiment which is designed to reduce the chance that the scientist’s
biases will affect her observations. Further, most interesting scientific truths are not known by
direct observation. Rather, they are known by complicated forms of inference from what we can
observe. For example, no one actually sees subatomic particles, or, for that matter, the core of
the earth. But we can infer that they exist and a good bit about their nature from various
observations, combined with a host of subsidiary scientific theories. Thus science needs both
methods to ensure accurate observations, and also methods to get from observable truths to truths
that cannot be observed. Most intuitionists say that morality is in the same boat. It is difficult to
make direct, intuitive moral judgments, what are sometimes called moral observations, by way
of analogy with scientific observations, with accuracy, and though some moral truth can be
discovered by direct moral intuition, much of our moral knowledge must be obtained by
inference from intuitions. This means that there are two general methodological problems for
moral intuitionists, just as for scientists. First, they need ways to get accurate intuitions. Second,
they need ways to move from moral truths that are directly intuited to those that are not. Here I
will focus on the first issue and consider suggestions as to how to obtain accurate intuitions of
those truths that can be directly intuited. The methods intuitionists use to move from intuited
truths to others are not unique to intuitionists and I will not go into them here.

One thing that intuitionists often to focus on is the training of moral intuition. The idea is
that moral intuition can and must be trained much like we train vision. This involves practice, often with the guidance of someone who is more experienced. For comparison, consider a case of ordinary vision. Several kayakers are sitting in a small eddy at the top of the Grim Reaper rapid on the Lochsa River in Idaho. Spread before them is a mess of white foam hiding swift currents, rocks, and nasty holes, any of which can put a serious crimp in one’s dinner plans. Even worse, the rapid is so steep at the top that very little of it can be seen from the eddy. A horizon line forms just twenty yards ahead of the boaters as the river drops out of sight. Two of the boaters peal out of their eddy and enter the rapid, dropping over the horizon line and into the maelstrom. One, with relatively little effort, finds her way through the rapid, barely getting her helmet damp. The other unknowing heads straight for a huge ledge hole, and, with a look of horror, falls headlong into it where he proceeds to be thoroughly hammered before being rudely evicted without boat, paddle, or dignity. After dragging the waterlogged now ex-boater from the river, his amused companions ask him why he headed straight for the gigantic hole. “I couldn’t see it!” he wails. “It was below the horizon line, everything was solid white, and I couldn’t see it was there till I was in it!!” And he was right. It was just below the horizon line and everything was white. And yet his fellow boaters saw the hole and avoided it. For some, it was so obvious that they registered it with a tiny part of their minds, and focused on other things, or perhaps daydreamed their way through this not very difficult rapid. Most could not say how they knew it was there, how they sorted it out of the complex patterns of white water with only seconds to do it in. Yet they all did it. Their vision, and other sense, had been trained through a great deal of experience.

This ability to sort out the features of a rapid is not foolproof, but it is real. Some people
are good at it. Others are poor. But even the best had to learn it. They sometimes learn it by explicit instruction. Our bedraggled friend might be told by the more experienced boater: “Well, I thought it was a hole, and not just a wave, since it formed a line and nothing seemed to splash up behind it. I thought it was a ledge hole--a particularly nasty kind of hole--since the line was straight and not curved. All this was confirmed when I saw you fall in it and not come out!” But they also learn from practice. Fall into a few of those ledge holes, and sooner or later, you figure it out, or give up boating. Or they learn just by following people down the river. Practice, practice, practice.

In the same way, one must practice the use of moral intuition. Somehow, just as a skilled kayaker can sort safe and dangerous routes through complex rapids with some hope of getting it right, so can we, with practice, learn to find our way through the maelstrom of our moral lives with some hope of getting it more or less right. Often this is through explicit instruction. Other times it is trial and error. Yet other times, we simply follow others, and learn to see what they see. These are themes that run through the intuitionist literature.

Besides the training of moral intuition by practice, intuitionists have pointed out that conditions might be favorable or unfavorable for the accurate use of intuition. One who has been well trained might not use it accurately under poor conditions, and one who is poorly trained might do well under favorable conditions. Return to our vision analogy. Relevant conditions are both external to the observer and internal. Examples of external conditions which can interfere with visual observation include insufficient light, or the object’s being far away or obscured in some way. One can be trained to see better under those conditions, but even trained vision generally improves with proper light and distance. Again, what one thinks one sees is often
affected by a factors internal to the observer, especially biases and preconceptions. You see someone in the distance. It is John or Fred. If you had no prior expectations, you might correctly pick him out as Fred, but if you were expecting John, you might incorrectly identify him as John.ii To avoid these problems, when we are talking about ordinary visual judgments, we devise techniques to help ensure that conditions favorable to observation occur. First, we might try to minimize the negative impact of external conditions. For example, because of the obscuring power of the earth’s atmosphere, it is difficult to make accurate astronomical observations. We avoid this problem by using the Hubble space telescope. Second, we devise techniques to overcome biases and preconceptions. For example, a scientist who knows exactly how he expects an experiment to come out might hire assistants who know nothing of the goals of the experiment to perform the observations.

In the same way, conditions might be favorable or unfavorable for moral intuition. Some philosophers have developed methods for improving conditions. These methods have been used by nonintuitionistic philosophers as well, but for the moment, we will view them as tools to help the accuracy with which we use intuition. First, for moral intuition to be accurate, we need adequate factual information, and that can be hard to get. Does nuclear power really increase the background radiation enough so as to increase cancer deaths, and if so, how many extra deaths are likely to occur? It is hard to know. Second, intuitions are more likely to be accurate if delivered in a cool, calm moment, without undue passion, and when one’s own self-interest is not deeply engaged. Third, intuitions about simpler cases are more likely to be accurate than intuitions about complex cases. Complexity leads to confusion for several reasons. Few people are able to keep a large number of features accurately in mind and different people will focus on
different features of a case. Also, it is not always easy to tell how to weigh competing considerations we do keep clearly in mind. Intuition can bog down in complex cases just as vision can when the visual field is too complex, as in a difficult rapid. And even when intuition speaks clearly in such a complex case, there is a further problem. It is not always easy to tell what more general conclusion to draw from the case. If, in a complex case, I judge an act is wrong, it might not be clear what makes it wrong. It might therefore be hard to draw conclusions for other cases that could vary slightly. Fourth, intuitions about ordinary cases are less probative than intuitions about unusual ones. This is because we are likely to have biases about ordinary cases we come across in ordinary life. These biases can be strong even if formed under less than ideal conditions and in less than ideal ways. Unusual cases, on the other hand, are thought to be less infected by bias. A case we have rarely come across in ordinary life is one about which we are unlikely to have a prior bias. Fifth, if we are engaged in a controversy about a particular topic, say, euthanasia, we are engaged in that controversy because we have uncertain intuitions about it, or intuitions differ from person to person, so it is wise to try to resolve the issue by eliciting intuitions about a different but similar topic. Hopefully, we can find neutral ground that is not particularly controversial. Judgments about that ground might be used to try to resolve the controversial area. Sixth, as in scientific observation, so in moral intuition, any particular person might make mistakes. It is therefore important that intuition be repeatable.

These six methods, if that is not too grandiose a term for these suggestions, are not all equal in the intuitionistic literature. Some are more central than others. The focus on judgments made in a cool calm moment when one is not personally involved in the issue is practically universal, while the interest in simple, unusual cases is less so. But it is interesting that in
recent years, the applied ethics literature, which is often intuitionistic, is filled with examples which are extremely simple, abstracting from as many factors as possible, and which range from the unusual to the bizarre. Further, we see essays dealing with one topic, seemingly out of nowhere, taking up other topics. We can now see why all this happens. Striving to overcome the problems with intuition, a philosopher struggling with, say, the problem of euthanasia will feel pushed to take up rather different cases, often strange to the point of science fiction, and often unrealistically simple, to try to resolve the

**The Intuitionism of G. E. Moore and its Methods**

I will take a more detailed look at two of the most important intuitionists of the twentieth century and the methods they employ in moral argument, G. E. Moore and W. D. Ross. I begin with Moore. As I mentioned several times, Moore has a special status for twentieth century moral philosophers. We are often in the habit of thinking that when the calendar clicks over to a new century, things change. This allows us to speak of the philosophy of the seventeenth century, or the art of the eighteenth century. It would be odd, however, if the mere change in the century really made such a difference, in philosophy or anywhere else. However, in the realm of moral philosophy, there is some sense in thinking that things changed at the start of the twentieth century. For it was in 1903 that G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* was published. *Principia Ethica* has an uneasy status in modern philosophy. Few of us have much patience, nowadays, for Moore’s crabbed and repetitive writing style, his declamations in favor of clarity immediately before a particularly obscure passage, or his pronouncements that this or that is “obvious” or “demonstrably certain” when the objects of his praise seem obviously, if not demonstrably, false. Yet, *Principia Ethica* has had a profound impact on philosophical thinking about ethics. In large
part, Moore defined the nature of the debate in metaethics which is still influential today. For over a hundred years, moral philosophers have been arguing in terms of a classification of moral theories that we get from Moore. And over the years, new metaethical options were typically developed as additions to or corrections of Moore’s classification. It is common, even today, for certain central philosophical debates in ethics to proceed with the aid of phrases like “What Moore saw . . .” or “What Moore failed to see. . .” In other words, even if Moore did not get things right (and you would be hard pressed to find anyone today who embraces any but a handful of things Moore said about ethics), his approach gave us a framework to interpret the previous history of moral thought as well as for the development of the debates of the twentieth century.

For Moore, “scientific ethics” is concerned with two general topics, the theory of the good (and bad) and the theory of the right (and wrong). Scientific ethics about the good involves two questions. First, it is mainly concerned with how “good” is to be defined, that is, what is meant by “good.” Moore thinks this is the most fundamental question in all ethics. For Moore, strictly speaking, the word “good” is indefinable save, perhaps, in rather unenlightening ways such as “the good is what is best.” The word refers to a simple, unanalyzable property, something that can only be known by direct acquaintance. In this respect, the word “good” is like the word “yellow,” and different from the word “horse.” “Yellow” is simple and unanalyzable and the meaning of the word can only be understood by acquaintance with the color. “Horse,” on the other hand, can be defined in terms of four legs, flowing tail, and so on. One can know what the word means without ever having seen a horse. However, there is a difference between “yellow” and “good.” The word “yellow” refers to natural property, while
“good” refers to a non-natural property. I will not try to characterize what he means by a non-natural property, but suffice it to say, non-natural properties are different from the properties of our ordinary sensory experience. The second question about the good that scientific ethics is concerned with is what general categories of things are good in themselves. Moore believes that there are a number of different kinds of things that are good in themselves that have nothing in common save that they all have the non-natural property of goodness. His view as to what is intrinsically good changes over time, from his *Principia Ethica* to his later *Ethics*, and it is rendered complex by his doctrine of organic unities, which is discussed below. But the basic idea is this. First, like classic utilitarians, Moore thought pleasure and pain were generally good and bad respectively, but he thought pain was a greater evil than pleasure was a good.\textsuperscript{iv} He also argued, contrary to his influential predecessor Henry Sidgwick, that not all goods had to be states of consciousness. In particular, he argued that beauty was intrinsically good (135-36). However, elsewhere, he also said that beauty, on its own, has little or no intrinsic value considered in isolation, and that all goods do involved some state of consciousness.\textsuperscript{v} But even this is tricky. Appreciation of beauty that really exists has far greater value than the erroneous appreciation of beauty, so good does not rest solely in the subjective, that is, on states of consciousness independent of the larger world. Whatever his flip flops and complexities, as John Maynard Keynes said, Moore’s chief goods were states of mind that “were not associated with action or achievement or with consequence. They consisted in timeless, passionate states of contemplation and communion, largely unattached to ‘before and after’.”\textsuperscript{vi} Central here is the contemplation of beauty, but also personal love, which, Moore thought, also involved contemplation, especially contemplation of the beloved’s good states of mind.
The second part of a scientific ethics involves what is right. Moore’s basic thesis about the right is that to assert an action is morally required is to assert that it will produce the greatest amount of good in the universe. Thus, for Moore, the theory of the right is dependent on the theory of the good. To determine what is right, we must first determine which things are good in themselves, and then determine how best to attain those goods in the greatest quantity. Moore is therefore a kind of utilitarian. Most utilitarians, such as Bentham and Mill, think that there is only one kind of good thing, for example, pleasure or happiness. Since Moore thinks that there are a number of different kinds of things good in themselves, he must be distinguished from most utilitarians. For this reason, he is sometimes called an “ideal” utilitarian, though the term “pluralistic” utilitarian might more clearly capture what he has in mind.

Moore thinks it is important to keep questions of the good and questions of the right clearly separated since the kinds of evidence we need to answer them are very different. No evidence is possible that something is good in itself. Rather, these things are self-evident. He adopts the word “intuitions” for these most basic of ethical propositions. On the other hand, evidence is possible that an act is right or wrong, that it does or does not produce the best possible consequences. This is often scientific evidence. However, so many considerations are relevant that even attaining probability, let alone certainty, can be difficult in determining what is right. Still the kind of evidence that is relevant is clear. We need to know which things are good in themselves, and we need to know what consequences our actions are likely to have with respect to those goods. For Moore, then, the only distinctively philosophical contribution to moral methodology deals with the determination of which things are good or evil in themselves.

Moore’s use of “intuition” is different from that of some other intuitionists in two
respects. First, many intuitionist believe that propositions about which actions are right can be intuitions. Moore denies propositions about right and wrong are intuitions. Only propositions about things good in themselves can be intuitive. Second, unlike some authors, Moore does not think that intuitions are certain or necessarily free of falsehood. Rather, he reserves the term simply for those propositions (moral or otherwise) that we can know but which are not capable of proof or disproof. He writes,

Again, I would wish it observed that, when I call such propositions “Intuitions,” I mean merely to assert that they are incapable of proof; I imply nothing whatever as to the manner or origin of our cognition of them. Still less do I imply (as most Intuitionists have done) that any proposition whatever is true, because we cognise it in a particular way or by the exercise of any particular faculty: I hold, on the contrary, that in every way in which it is possible to cognise a true proposition, it is also possible to cognise a false one. (page?)

For example, Moore attacks hedonism, the doctrine that only pleasure is good. But he denies that appeals to intuition can prove whether hedonism is true or not, where the word “proof” implies certainty. Rather, he adopts a phrase from J. S. Mill: we can find “considerations capable of determining the intellect” to reject hedonism. Someone might object that lack of proof on such ultimate questions is a serious problem, but Moore denies this. For one thing, he sometimes seems to deny that proof in the strict sense is possible in any area. For example, at one point he says, rather paradoxically, “indeed, who can prove that proof itself is a warrant of truth?”(76). Nor does he think that lack of proof is what usually bothers people since we happily accept all sorts of things without proof. What really bothers people, he says, is not lack of proof, but rather
disagreement, and given this, our goal should be not proof, but rather to get agreement. Our goal should be to convince one who disagrees with us “by shewing him that our view is consistent with something else which he holds to be true, whereas his original view is contradictory to it. But it will be impossible to prove that that something else, which we both agree to be true, is really so; we shall be satisfied to have settled the matter in dispute by means of it, merely because we are agreed on it” (75). Of course, complete agreement on controversial matters might be beyond us, but he suggests it is at least possible that, were we all clear what our questions mean, and were our worst mistakes pointed out, we might all come to agree on which things are good in themselves much as we come to agree in mathematics (145). Unfortunately, he says, because of the intricacy of its subject matter, this agreement is harder to obtain in ethics than in math.

**Moore’s Method of Absolute Isolation.** For Moore, the, questions of ultimate goods are not open to proof, or even evidence, and in that sense ultimate ethical prepositions are self-evident. But this does not mean that there are no methods appropriate for dealing with these questions. For Moore, one of the leading causes of error on such questions is to confuse one question with another. To guard against error, the most important thing is to have clearly before our minds only the relevant question and not some other question it might be confused with. In the context of determining which things are good in themselves, we do this through a kind of thought experiment that he calls his “method of absolute isolation.” This method is not of merely historical interest since variations on it (though often less extreme) are common today. He says,

In order to arrive at a correct decision on the first part of this question [that is, what
things have intrinsic value], it is necessary to consider what things are such that, if they existed by themselves, in absolute isolation, we should yet judge their existence to be good; and, in order to decide upon the relative degrees of value of different things, we must similarly consider what comparative value seems to attach to the isolated existence of each. (187)

Here is a characterization specifically in the context of hedonism, the doctrine that pleasure and only pleasure is good.

The method which I employed in order to shew that pleasure itself was not the sole good, was that of considering what value we should attach to it, if it existed in absolute isolation, stripped of all its usual accompaniments. And this is, in fact, the only method that can be safely used, when we wish to discover what degree of value a thing has in itself. (91)

Moore employs this method many times, for example, to deal with the question of whether natural beauty, as distinct from the appreciation of beauty, has value in itself. Moore notes that his intuitionistic predecessor, Henry Sidgwick wishes to limit the things that can be considered good in themselves (81ff). For Sidgwick, it is only reasonable to seek such things as beauty and knowledge, as well as external material things, in so far as they are conducive to happiness or to the perfection of human existence. Sidgwick says that though we judge things good that possess beauty, no one would consider it rational to aim at producing beauty in external nature apart from any possible appreciation of it by humans. Moore disagrees. He thinks it is rational to produce beauty in external nature even apart from any possible human appreciation of it.
... let us see if I cannot get any one to agree with me. Consider what this admission really means. It entitles us to put the following case. Let us imagine one world exceedingly beautiful. Imagine it as beautiful as you can; put into it whatever on this earth you most admire — mountains, rivers, the sea; trees and sunsets, stars and moon. Imagine these all combined in the most exquisite proportions, so that no one thing jars against another, but each contributes to increase the beauty of the whole. And then imagine the ugliest world you can possibly conceive. Imagine it simply one heap of filth, containing everything that is most disgusting to us, for whatever reason, and the whole, as far as may be, without one redeeming feature. Such a pair of worlds we are entitled to compare: they fall within Prof. Sidgwick’s meaning, and the comparison is highly relevant to it. The only thing we are not entitled to imagine is that any human being ever has or ever, by any possibility, can, live in either, can ever see and enjoy the beauty of the one or hate the foulness of the other. Well, even so, supposing them quite apart from any possible contemplation by human beings; still, is it irrational to hold that it is better that the beautiful world should exist, than the one which is ugly? Would it not be well, in any case, to do what we could to produce it rather than the other? Certainly I cannot help thinking that it would; and I hope that some may agree with me in this extreme instance. (83-4).

Moore does not deny that, in the present state of the world, there are goods more important than beauty. Nor would he deny that a beautiful world would be better still if there were humans in it to appreciate it. But that does not change the fact that beauty is good in itself.

Moore believes that many mistakes in ethics are due to our failure to use the method of
absolute isolation in forming intuitive judgments. There are several reasons for these mistakes. First, it might be clear that something is good, but it might not be clear what about it is good. By isolating the features of the case, we can sometimes avoid mistakes about the source of the value. Moore is even more concerned about errors due to the phenomenon of “organic unities.” Because of this phenomenon, if we do not use the method of absolute isolation, we are likely to make errors in our judgments of value. The principle of organic unities says that the value of a whole has no regular proportion to the sum of the values of its parts. The parts of a whole might, considered individually, have little or no value, and yet the whole might have great value. Again, the parts might, individually, have great value, and yet the whole have little value. How is this possible? Consider a case in which the principle is obviously true: a musical composition. A melody might be extraordinary, by whatever standards one brings to the music. And yet, the individual notes and silences that compose the melody might be nothing more than quite ordinary notes and silences with no special value. Moore believes that the principle of organic unities applies not just to artistic value, but to all value. And because of this, failure to use the method of absolute isolation can lead to errors. Suppose we intuit that a certain whole consisting of two components is good. Suppose also that we intuit that one of the parts has little or no value. We might then feel entitled to conclude that the value of the whole is due entirely to the second part. But this inference is fallacious. Given the principle of organic unities, it is possible that the whole has great value even though neither of the parts has. To reason that all the value must be due to the second part is like arguing that since a melody with five notes is beautiful, and since the first four notes, considered individually, are quite ordinary, all the beauty must reside in the fifth note.

16
To determine whether the remaining component is in fact valuable, we must test its value in isolation. If the whole is valuable, and the one part is not valuable, the only way to determine whether the second part is valuable is to actually perform a thought experiment in which it is isolated from all other components. Moore writes,

[The fact is] that, since the whole may be organic, the other element need have no value whatever, and that even if it have some, the value of the whole may be very much greater. For this reason, as well as to avoid confusions between means and end, it is absolutely essential to consider each distinguishable quality, in isolation, in order to decide what value it possesses. . . It is, in fact, always misleading to take a whole, that is valuable (or the reverse), and then to ask simply: to which of its constituents does this whole owe its value or its vileness? It may well be that it owes it to none; and, if one of them does appear to have some value in itself, we shall be led into the grave error of supposing that all the value of the whole belongs to it alone (93).

So far, this has all been presented as a mere theoretical possibility, but Moore thinks that failure to take into consideration the principle of organic unities and to use the method of absolute isolation has lead to errors in moral philosophy. In particular, this is why many philosophers stupidly adopt a hedonistic theory of value, the idea that pleasure and only pleasure is good in itself. These philosophers notice that most valuable, complex wholes include pleasure as one of their components. When they see that the other components of these wholes have no value in themselves, they then fallaciously conclude that all of the value of these wholes must come from the pleasure. Noticing a few such cases, it is easy to for them to end with the view that pleasure and only pleasure is good. But Hedonism can easily be refuted, Moore thinks, by
means of the method of absolute isolation. Moore admits that pleasure is a necessary constituent of most valuable wholes, but he denies it is the only thing that has value. We must test it using the method of absolute isolation. When “reflective judgment” is applied either to pleasure or the consciousness of pleasure, using the method of isolation, we end with a different result.

Moorean thought experiments are not always easy to carry out. But try this. Imagine a world in which nothing existed by a vast quantity of pleasure, perhaps orgasmic in character. Perhaps we must also imagine something existing having that pleasure, a giant perpetually orgasmic blob.

Well, that's the best I can do. Moore now writes, “[C]ould we accept, as a very good thing, that mere consciousness of pleasure, and absolutely nothing else, should exist, even in the greatest quantities? I think we can have no doubt about answering: No. Far less can we accept this as the sole good” (94).

The Intuitionism of W. D. Ross and its Methods

I want to say that a few introductory things about Ross. First, Ross seems to me to be philosophically alive as a moral philosopher to a greater extent than Moore is. Moore may have set the ground rules of twentieth century debate, but you would be hard pressed to find a real Moorean on ethics. Ross, on the other hand, makes intuitionism, or something more or less like his version of it, seem quite plausible, and it is not hard to find proponents. But second, though Ross's writing seems clear and straightforward compared to Moore's, that is to some extent deceptive. It is not in the least uncommon for this or that champion of Ross to declare others to have misunderstood him in some fundamental way. I myself have embraced at least three different readings of the text over the years, and have only stopped there since I got bored with Ross interpretation. As an aside, philosophers divide into two categories. The first consists of
those for whom the details of textual interpretation, perhaps of a very small number of texts, can entertain them for a lifetime. The second might well enjoy textual interpretation to a point, but once that point is reached, reruns of Seinfeld become for them more compelling. I am of the second kind. With that in mind, I dip into the explanation of Ross being quite convinced that I am largely wrong about him.

There are two closely related components of Ross’s view, a normative ethic and a metaethic. I begin with a brief comment on his normative ethic. The basic idea is simple, though there are a lot of details we will pass over, else we get stuck in the mucky part of interpretation. Ross believes that there are seven independent, basic moral principles.

a. Duties of fidelity which are duties based on promises, explicit or implicit.
b. Duties of reparation which rest on a previous wrongful act.
c. Duties of gratitude for past favors.
d. Duties of justice to upset distributions not in accordance with merit.
e. Duties of beneficence, that is, to do good for others.
f. Duties of non-maleficence, that is, to avoid doing harm to others.
g. Duties of self-improvement

Ross introduced some distinctive and now widely used terminology to talk about these principles and the resulting duties. He says that each of the principles is a *prima facie* principle and generates a *prima facie* duty. When several of these *prima facie* duties conflict, only one can be what he calls our “actual duty,” our duty “sans phrase” or our duty “tout court.” We can think of performing an act as being a *prima facie* duty because it has some characteristic which produces a tendency to be our actual duty. When *prima facie* duties conflict, and we are forced to go with
one, that does not simply remove the overridden *prima facie* duty. When we think we are justified in breaking a promise, for example, we do, nevertheless, feel some “compunction” and recognize that it is our duty to make it up to the promisee for the promise we broke. A final point. The *prima facie* duties are compounded in complex ways, for example, the duty to obey the laws of one’s country arises partly from the duty of gratitude, partly from the duty of fidelity, and partly from the fact that law can be an instrument of the general good. (94)

Let us now turn to Ross’s intuitionism. It differs from Moore’s in important ways. For Moore, we intuit that certain things had the non-natural property of goodness. It is then up to us, using the methods of science perhaps, to figure out how to get the most good possible. Ross does not accept the existence of non-natural properties so they are not the object of moral intuition. There are, for Ross, two uses for moral intuition. First, it is used to determine the list of *prima facie* duties. These principles, he thinks, serve the same function as, and have much the same character as, mathematical axioms, though there are certain differences which will be explained below. The moral order expressed in the *prima facie* duties, and discovered by intuition, is as much a part of the fundamental nature of the universe as is the structure given by the axioms of geometry. Further, these moral principles have all the certainty of mathematical axioms and are self evident. What does self-evidence involve here? Ross denies that they are evident from the start of our lives, or even that they are evident as soon as we attend to them. Rather, like mathematical axioms, they come to be evident to those who have adequate maturity of thought and who give it time. Further, as with mathematics, we come to see the self evidence of the general principles through contemplating particular cases. We come to see in this and that particular case that a promise should be kept. Only when we mature to the point that we can
think in general terms do we come to see that, at least *prima facie*, we ought to keep all promises, that promise keeping has a tendency to make our acts right.

The second use of intuition, for Ross, is to determine what to do when *prima facie* duties conflict. For example, what do we do when the duty to keep promises or the duty of beneficence conflicts with the duty of non-maleficence? There are several routes people might take here that Ross rejects. For example, one might specify some sort of second order or priority rules. They might take the form “when duties of this kind conflict with duties of that kind, the former always win.” Thus, some have thought that duties of justice always trump duties of gratitude or beneficence. Others have thought that priority rules must be more complex. For example, one might say that when non-maleficence conflicts with beneficence, go with non-maleficence under conditions X, Y and Z, and otherwise with beneficence. Ross rejects this approach, both in its simple and complex form. He does not believe that there are priority rules of the sort we just described, save some very vague and not very helpful ones that resolve very few cases. He rejects what is called a strong “codifiability” thesis according to which moral truth can be captured by a set of rules that can be followed in a more or less mechanical way by any reasonably intelligent person, or perhaps any reasonably intelligent person in possession of all the facts of the case. Instead, Ross thinks that in cases of conflict, we must apply our intuition to the case in hand. This requires a careful study of all the details of the case, and all the ways the various *prima facie* duties interact. There is no mechanical way to determine the right answer. As Aristotle said, we must rely on “perception” of what is right and wrong in the particular case. Such very particular moral judgments lack the certainty of judgments about *prima facie* duties. This yields a difference between the moral axioms and mathematical axioms.
Moral axioms, and the resulting *prima facie* duties, can conflict. When they do, the resolution is by perception, that is, intuition, not reasoning. Mathematical axioms cannot conflict. All their interactions have to do with reasoning, not perception.

It will help us to understand Ross to see an example of his moral reasoning. I will use his attack on utilitarianism. Some people have thought that the right is what maximizes utility or welfare. As we saw, J. S. Mill was a kind of hedonistic utilitarian. Though he flopped around a good bit on the details, the basic idea is that the rightness and wrongness of actions is determined in some way by the happiness and unhappiness involved with those actions. Moore was also a kind of utilitarian, though he thought that there were a number of different kinds of good things and not just happiness. Ross, of course, gives some weight to happiness and other kinds of goods, but he does not think that the right can be reduced to it in any utilitarian fashion. His focus on utility, or the good generally, is found in his principles of beneficence and non-maleficence, but these are only two *prima facie* principles among others, and they can be outweighed by other principles. He engages in thought experiments of rather simple kinds which seek to isolate the crucial features case, a method reminiscent of Moore’s method of absolute isolation, though not as extreme. He considers the following examples. First, suppose the fulfillment of a promise to John would produce 1000 units of good for him while breaking it and doing something else would produce 1,001 units of good for Sue to whom I have made no promise, all else being equal. We would not think it self-evident that we should do good for Sue here. Only a much greater disparity would justify breaking my promise. Again, Suppose George were a good person and Barbara a bad person, and that there were no promises made to either. Would it be self-evident, other things being equal, that I ought to produce 1001 units of good for
Bad Barbara rather than 1000 for Good George? The answer is no. Hence, by the test of intuition, the production of good cannot be the whole of morality. Whether I made promises and whether the recipients are good or bad, and a number of other things, must also be taken into account. In the first case, the obligation to keep promises outweighs the obligation to produce utility and in the second, the obligation of justice outweighs the obligation to produce utility.

*The Foundation of Ethics in “What we really think.”* Ross is an intuitionist. We already saw he compared moral axioms (the *prima facie* duties) and the way we come to know them, to mathematical axioms. He also compares morality to science. He claims that “The moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people are the data of ethics just as sense-perceptions are the data of a natural science.” He often puts this in terms of “what we really think” about moral issues. This raises immediate questions. Why think intuition, “what we really think,” has any objective status at all? Why not think that it is just culturally created biases, or some such? And if it is, why should we take it seriously? Why not view it as the subject of critique rather than as the foundation of moral knowledge? Many people think that we should not just expound our current moral consciousness, but critique it in light of theory of some sort.

Is moral intuition to be trusted as revealing moral truth of some sort? Ross actually has the sketch of an argument which was more fully developed by the eighteenth century philosopher, Thomas Reid, which I will discuss in more detail later. Ross argues that our confidence in the statements of *prima facie* duty rest on reason in just the same as mathematical knowledge rests on reason.

“In our confidence that these propositions are true there is involved the same trust in our
reason that is involved in our confidence in mathematics; and we should have no justification for trusting it in the latter sphere and distrusting it in the former. In both cases we are dealing with propositions that cannot be proved, but that just as certainly need no proof.” (p. 95).

On the other hand, like Moore, Ross rejects the infallibility of moral intuition. In this respect, moral intuition is just like mathematical or scientific foundations. There are grounds to reject particular intuitions, but only grounds of particular kinds. He writes:

“The moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people are the data of ethics just as sense-perceptions are the data of a natural science. Just as some of the latter have to be rejected as illusory, so have some of the former; but as the latter are rejected only when they are in conflict with more accurate sense-perceptions, the former are rejected only when they are in conflict with other convictions which stand better the test of reflection. The existing body of moral convictions of the best people is the cumulative product of the moral reflection of many generations. Which has developed an extremely delicate power of appreciation of moral distinctions; and this the theorist cannot afford to treat with anything other than the greatest respect. The verdicts of the moral consciousness of the best people are the foundation on which he must build; though he must first compare them with one another and eliminate any contradictions they may contain.”

On this view, we can reasonably reject an intuition when it conflicts with another intuition much as we come to reject a sense perception when it conflicts with other sense perceptions (though he does not say much about how to determine which intuition, or sense perception, is to be rejected). However, Ross is skeptical about the possibility that critique of intuitions might come
from, say, philosophical theorizing. No doubt theory can play some critical role, but only a limited one. The reason for this is that no theory is likely to be as evident as our most considered moral convictions.
Endnotes


ii A famous example of self-deception in what would seem to be a simple sort of observation is that of N-rays. In the early twentieth century, a number of important French scientists claimed to see a kind a ray they dubbed the “N ray.” Many papers were published in prestigious scientific journals about these rays. The problem is that the rays did not exist and have never again been “observed.” For some discussion, see Robert T. Lagemann, “New Light on Old Rays: N Rays,” *American Journal of Physics* 45 (3): 281-284 (March 1977)


v *Ethics*, 103-04, 148, 153.


vii Get reference