

## About intuitionism

### Intuitionism

## PIP's discussion topic on 30th August at the Fat Pug

Intuitionism teaches three main things:

- There are real objective moral truths that are independent of human beings.
- These are fundamental truths that can't be broken down into parts or defined by reference to anything except other moral truths.
- Human beings can discover these truths by using their minds in a particular, intuitive way.

Intuitionism does not mean that all moral decisions are reached by relying on intuition. Intuition enables the discovery of the *basic* moral truths, and everyday moral decision-making then involves thinking about the choices available and making moral judgements in an ordinary sort of way.

A leading UK intuitionist was the Cambridge philosopher G E Moore (1873-1954) who set out his ideas in the 1902 book *Principia Ethica*.

If I am asked, What is good? my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked How is good to be defined? my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it. But disappointing as these answers may appear, they are of the very last importance. My point is that good is a simple notion, just as yellow is a simple notion; that, just as you cannot, by any manner of means, explain to anyone who does not already know it, what yellow is, so you cannot explain what good is.

**G E Moore, *Principia Ethica***

Or to put it at its simplest: 'Good' means 'good' and that's all there is to say about it.

Moore objected to something called 'the naturalistic fallacy', which states that moral truths can be analysed in terms of physical or psychological things which exist in the natural world. Moral truths were moral truths, and that was that.

Moore was a university professor, and his idea of what things were good, such as friendship and the appreciation of beauty, was limited by his quiet and academic life. His writings didn't demonstrate that his theory was likely to help deal with serious ethical dilemmas.

Other leading intuitionists were H A Pritchard (1871-1947) and W D Ross (1877-1971).

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## Bad points of intuitionism

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Philosophers object to intuitionism because:

- they don't think that objective moral truths exist
- they don't think that there is a process of moral intuition
- there's no way for a person to distinguish between something actually being right and it merely seeming right to that person
- if intuitionism worked properly, everyone would come to the same moral conclusions, but they don't

## Objective moral truths don't exist

Many philosophers don't think that there are such things as objective moral truths. For them, moral statements are not factual statements about how the world is.

Furthermore, it might be claimed that we could never *know* the truth, even if it existed objectively, because knowledge requires testing in a properly scientific fashion, and that is not available for moral statements.

## Moral intuition doesn't exist

The idea that human beings have something called moral intuition is superficially attractive, but doesn't easily stand up to inspection.

Is it another sense like sight or hearing? Probably not, since the moral truths that moral intuition should detect don't seem to be out in the physical world.

Nor is it a process of reasoning, because intuitionists usually rule that out, too.

Perhaps it shows itself in moral emotions, like feelings of guilt? But although human beings certainly have such feelings, the feelings could be the result of breaking internal mental rules of conduct or breaching cultural rules, rather than of breaking objective moral rules.



Intuitionism says humans can find moral truths for themselves. Photo: Jonathan Hillis ©

## Seeming right may not be the same as being right

When an intuitionist ponders a problem the only things they have to work with are their feelings, thoughts and attitudes.

Working with these entirely subjective things the intuitionist arrives at moral intuitions, which he then puts forward as objective truths.

But how does the intuitionist get from the subjective to the objective?

## People reach different ethical conclusions

If there are real objective moral truths, then they are presumably the same for everyone. Yet different people come to different conclusions faced with the same ethical problems.

Some people say that these moral truths are 'self-evident', but this just leaves the problem of different things being self-evident to different selves!

The topic for 30th August is Intuitionism and is to be led by Phil and some questions arising from the four "bad points" above are:

- 1 - How can anything that "you" feel be anything but subjective.  
Is there any way that subjective truths can be utilised?
- 2 - A "Process" is something that "Science" requires.  
Does Philosophy have to have processes?
- 3 - If you use Intuitionism at a personal level, can it help you?  
Can/does Intuitionism work at a group level?  
(Like minded people get together and agree to a set of rules based on their common feelings)
- 4 - This statement treats Intuitionism "scientifically" and implies that it can't be useful because it's unscientific.  
From where does Science draw the authority to make this statement?