

## Ethics

### Discussion

Reply to Fred Seddon, "Recent Writings on Ethics" (Spring 2007)

# On Behalf of Ethical Intuitionism

*Michael Huemer*

I would like to thank Fred Seddon for his very useful and fair review (2007) of my book (2005). In the review, he raises a few objections that I wish to respond to here.

First, Seddon takes me to have advanced a false trichotomy according to which the good either (1) is a property of the object, (2) is a property of the subject, or (3) does not exist. He proposes the fourth alternative that the good is relational. Seddon takes this apparent oversight on my part to undermine the central argument of my book, which seeks to show that all the alternatives to ethical intuitionism are fatally flawed. My argument does not, however, rely on the false trichotomy that Seddon identifies. Although I frequently refer to goodness as a "property," I did not intend by this term to exclude relational properties. This is revealed, if nothing else, by my discussion in Chapter 3 of subjectivist theories, all of which treat value as relational. More importantly, none of the arguments against ethical reductionism in Chapter 4 turns on whether the properties to which value is said to be reducible are relational or intrinsic. One cannot, for example, escape from Hume's Law or the Open Question Argument merely by invoking *relational* descriptive properties.

The trichotomy that I in fact relied on was this: goodness is either objective, subjective, or nonexistent. On my definition, goodness is "subjective" if and only if: whether a thing is good constitutively depends on the psychological attitudes of observers towards that thing (Huemer 2005, 2). Goodness is "objective," on my definition, if and only if: whether a thing is good does *not* constitu-

tively depend on the psychological attitudes of observers towards that thing. Without hearing any further details, one can see from those definitions alone that there is no further alternative, no middle ground in between subjectivity and objectivity. If goodness exists, then it either does or does not depend on observers in the specified way. Whatever false dichotomies might exist in the philosophical world, the law of excluded middle is not one.

Second, Seddon finds my most shocking page to be page 120, where I observe that even philosophers who criticize intuition themselves rely on intuitions, albeit without *calling* their premises “intuitions.” Seddon takes this remark to imply that all philosophers are really *intuitionists*, which would make it puzzling why I needed to write a book defending intuitionism. Seddon further suggests that my remark cannot be true, since anti-realists would deny that they even have any ethical intuitions. There are several things to say about this:

(A) By “intuition,” I did not mean to refer solely to *ethical* intuitions. “Intuition,” in my usage, is a general term that applies to any initial, intellectual appearance, as explained on pages 99–103. For example, in arguing that there is no such thing as value, John Mackie (1977, 40) relies on, among other things, his intuition that it is not possible for a belief about an objective fact, by itself, to motivate action. Thus, Mackie relies on a non-ethical intuition, among other things, to justify rejecting all ethical intuitions.

(B) “Intuitionist” does not mean “person who sometimes relies on intuitions” or even “person who sometimes relies on ethical intuitions.” To be an intuitionist, one must do more than merely *use* ethical intuitions; one must endorse the *metaethical theory* that I advance in the book. One must believe that value is objective and irreducible, and that our knowledge of it depends upon ethical intuition.

(C) Seddon is mistaken to think that anti-realists would deny having ethical intuitions. Even the most extreme anti-realists—nihilists such as Mackie—would most likely admit to having ethical intuitions in my sense. They simply believe that those intuitions are not to be trusted.

Third, Seddon correctly observes that I neglected to defend my implicit assumption of foundationalism. This is mainly because I sought to focus on metaethical issues in the book, rather than general epistemology. I have defended foundationalism and criticized its

rivals in other writings (1997; 2003; forthcoming). I consider the case for foundationalism to be both straightforward and compelling, so much so that foundationalism ought to be the default assumption in philosophical discourse. Nor is foundationalism out of favor in the profession as Seddon suggests. By my count, almost every prominent contemporary epistemologist is a foundationalist.<sup>1</sup>

Fourth, Seddon thinks I unfairly criticize Tara Smith for attacking only the weakest form of intuitionism. As Seddon notes, Smith refers to many prominent ethical intuitionists in the course of her criticism of intuitionism (Smith 2000, 20–28). What Seddon overlooks, however, is that none of those authors, with the possible exception of H. A. Prichard, appears to have actually held the doctrine Smith attributes to them—that is, that all ethical truths are self-evident. But leave aside the question of whether those specific authors were treated fairly. This is the important point: Smith presents no argument against the view that *some* ethical truths can be known on the basis of intuition, while others—perhaps the great majority—require a process of reasoning. That is the most natural view and the one that would need to be refuted to successfully defend Objectivism against the Intuitionist alternative.

Finally, a word about how my view relates to Objectivism. Essentially, I understand Objectivism as a version of ethical reductionism, one according to which goodness may be explained as the property of promoting an organism's life. As such, I take the Objectivist view to be refuted by the arguments against reductionism in my Chapter 4. Exactly what mistake Rand and other Objectivists have made in attempting to derive evaluative truths from non-evaluative truths depends upon how one interprets the central argument of "The Objectivist Ethics" (Rand 1964). On what I take to be the most plausible interpretation, Rand makes the very sort of mistake that proponents of Hume's Law most often warn of, that is, deriving an evaluative conclusion from descriptive premises by implicitly *presupposing* one or more values. In Rand's case, I believe that what is presupposed is the value of life itself. My own view, naturally, is that this implicit premise of the goodness of life is something that comes from ethical intuition. This is not the place for an extended discussion of that, however. What is clear, whatever the correct interpretation of Rand is, is that she did not present a sound

derivation of a non-trivial evaluative conclusion solely from non-evaluative premises. The proof discussed in my fourth chapter (2005, 79–83) (originally due to Toomas Karmo) establishes the general impossibility of such a derivation.

## Notes

1. The list includes, for example, Laurence Bonjour (formerly among the most prominent defenders of the coherence theory), William Alston, Robert Audi, Richard Fumerton, Alvin Plantinga, Alvin Goldman, Richard Foley, John Pollock, and Paul Moser, among others. While one sometimes hears rumors of the demise of foundationalism in the twentieth century, these rumors are difficult to understand except as the product of wishful thinking by opponents of foundationalism.

## References

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