

*Intuition, Theory and Anti-theory in Ethics*  
edited by Sophie Grace Chappell  
Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, pp. 232

Fabio Mancini

*Intuition, Theory and Anti-theory in Ethics* edited by Sophie Grace Chappell, is a collection of thought-provoking essays that shed light on the role of intuitions in ethics and on the role, if any, played by moral theory. This review shall give an overview of the collected papers, before looking at three in particular.

In “Scepticisms about Intuition” James Lenman argues against a naïve conception of intuitions as “untutored gut reaction of the folk” (25) and defends an expressivist view for which intuitions are a sort of desires. Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge in “Obvious Objections” and Alan Thomas in “Should Generalism be Our Regulative Ideal?” present two opposite views on the topic of obvious intuitions. On the basis that determining which cases are obvious is far from an easy task, the former cast doubt on the possibility that the appeal to obvious intuitions can constitute a reason to reject a theory, because morality presents lots of non-obvious hard cases: “the less obvious morality is, the less obvious it should be what is morally obvious” (53). On the contrary, Alan Thomas’s paper presents arguments on behalf of moral particularism, arguing against a transcendental argument previously presented by McKeever and Ridge (2006). From a Kantian point of view, Sergio Tenenbaum argues in “Moral Faith and Moral Reason” that moral theory does not simply systematize our moral intuitions but provides explanation for the epistemic warrants of our moral judgements. In “Factual Mistakes, Epistemological Virtues and Moral Errors” Catherine Rowett shades the distinction between facts and values by appealing to Augustine, who claimed that the evil made is not, strictly speaking, theoretical ignorance but failure in love: “one cannot correct errors of belief without correcting the misdirected love that had led one to avoid the truth” (149). In “Theory of Intuition in a Broken World” Tim Mulgan argues that in a “broken” world where there are worse conditions for life than in our own that our basic intuitions, such as those concerning the most basic rights, would also be modified. In “Self-Evidence Theory and Anti-theory” Simon Kirchin considers an objection put forth by Gaut (2002) for which fundamental principles of ethics are not self-evident because there is no long-term consensus

on them and provides some interesting considerations on what it is needed for adequately understanding a self-evident proposition; understanding is made of the individual personal experience that play a role in determining at least an agreement on the moral terms, without which a successful communication would be difficult and disagreement a probable outcome. “Literature, Moral Thinking and Moral Philosophy” by Edward Harcourt closes the collection with three claims: that moral thinking is more widespread than it is generally expected; that literary texts constitute examples of moral thinking and that they should be therefore included in the philosophical canon.

Let us now focus the attention on three papers.

In “Intuition and Genealogy”, John Cottingham presents a genealogy of intuition, whose role in epistemology is lead back to the visual paradigm of truth put forth by Plato and, in the modern age by Descartes, “early example of moral intuitionist” (10). Cottingham underlines that the appeal to intuitions in ethics and epistemology, notably in the tradition of ethical intuitionism, is rooted in a theistic paradigm for which the truths grasped by intuition are eternal verities: as Descartes maintains, a *lumen naturale* given us by God enables us to see them. Accordingly, Cottingham’s core thesis is that contemporary ethical intuitionism is anything but a “theistic outlook” into a secular framework. In fact, it is within a theistic perspective that we can claim that intuitions give us knowledge of moral truths that are objective, necessary, universal and normative. It is however to the alleged normativity of our intuitions that Cottingham draws the attention. Particularly, he wonders if it is possible to accommodate the claim that truths apprehended by moral intuitions have a normative force in a non-theistic and secularized framework where no God exists to grant them. To fulfil this requirement, according to Cottingham, two options are available to ethical intuitionism.

A first option could be to accept that the normative force of moral intuitions depends on the plans, desires and purposes that we have. To explain this point, Cottingham considers Alan Gibbard’s (2009) remark on the famous Brandt’s (1954) example of a tribe of Natives, the Hopi, for which it is morally permissible to hurt chickens as part of a game. It is something that most of us would find morally wrong. Nonetheless, both we and the Hopi claim that we have reasons for judging that it is, respectively, right or wrong to hurt chicken for fun. For Gibbard, both of us are right in respective moral judgments. There is nothing wrong with this: our moral judgements and our intuitions are nothing but “mere expressions of our plans, of our passions, preferences and projects” (13). However, as Cottingham rightly remarks, this answer cannot fully satisfy ethical intuitionists and their claim that the truths grasped by intuitions are objective, universal, necessary and normative. In addition, ethical intuition-

ists be satisfied with an alternative view on evolutionary bases. This line of response, shared with different nuances by authors such as Darwin, Mill and Nietzsche, claims that moral truths are not absolute but, rather, the contingent product of our biological, psychological or cultural evolution. Consequently, if morality is the product of a contingent chain of events there should be nothing wrong with considering it a matter of efficiency in the evolution of the species, as Darwin put it, or to decide to change it, for instance by inverting the table of values, as Nietzsche famously suggested.

A second option that explains morality as ‘a call on us that it is not of our own making’ (20) is non-naturalism, within which Cottingham distinguishes between *buck passing naturalism* and *bald non-naturalism*. *Buck passing naturalism* cannot account for the kind of normative realism that intuitionists want because, if non-natural properties, such as goodness, are our only reasons for choosing an action or an object in virtue of its natural properties, then we would have conditional normativity. Being a function of the reason-providing empirical properties, argues Cottingham, non-natural properties would be contingent, as in the evolutionary solution above. *Bald non-naturalism*, the view that values are *sui generis* evaluative properties grasped by intuition, has even less explanatory power than its theistic counterpart: it leaves the problem of normativity unmodified without providing an explanation of it (as the theistic view does).

Cottingham concludes that ethical intuitionism cannot be so easily disjoined from theism: they are natural partners, though Cottingham refuses to put forth a “coercive argument for theistic morality” (22). To sum up Cottingham’s argument: if we reject to ground the authority of intuitions on a theistic ground, either we should appeal to non-naturalist objectivism (in the “buck-passing” or in the “bald” version) or we should accept a deflationary account of morality, for which morality is a mere projection of our plans or desires, an illusion or the product of the evolution. Non-naturalist objectivism, however, is not a viable option, so we are left with the deflationary account. This account contrasts with the intuitionist thesis that there are principles and values that are objective, necessary, universal and normative. For the author, we feel a sort of “intellectual vertigo” that reveals us that principles and values are not a product of our minds: “love, compassion, mercy, truth, justice, courage, endurance, fidelity all belong to the core of key virtues that all the world’s great religions (and the modern secular cultures that are their offspring) recognize, and which command our allegiance whether we like it or not. We may try to go against them, but if we are honest we cannot gainsay their authority over us” (p. 23).

Cottingham seems to reproduce a famous thesis held by Elizabeth Anscombe (1958) (and before her by Arthur Schopenhauer) for which the notion of

duty makes sense only within a theological framework, and of which, in a secularized world, moral philosophy would do better to get rid of. Contrariwise, for Cottingham the solution is that of reframing, rather than of overcoming, the theological context. In fact, for Cottingham, theism is the only viable option in defending intuitionism.

Nonetheless, he probably draws this conclusion too quickly. In fact, if he clearly explains why the expressivist solution cannot be accepted by ethical intuitionists, his arguments against the alternative option – cognitive non-naturalism – are not developed enough to be satisfying. Moreover, Cottingham surprisingly fails to consider the possibility of conceiving intuitions as mental states that target self-evident propositions which is the favored solution of leading contemporary intuitionists. The argument would have further benefited from this conception of ethical intuitionism because, as Robert Audi (2004) has claimed, it sits neutrally between naturalism and non-naturalism.

In “Forgetting the difference between Right and Wrong” Sarah McGrath discusses Ryle’s famous thesis (1958) that it is not possible to forget the difference between the right and wrong and that claiming that someone has forgotten it is equivalent to say that someone has ceased to care about the right and wrong and not that the same person does not know the difference anymore (though, from the cognitive point of view, this person still knows what is right and what is wrong). Therefore, it is for Ryle absurd or ridiculous to assert simultaneously (1) “I used to know the difference between right and wrong, but I have forgotten it” and (2) “it is not possible for someone to forget the difference between right and wrong”. To explain the phenomena of moral forgetfulness he appeals to the notion of care and concern for what is right and wrong, something that, unlike the very notions of right and wrong, could be forgotten. Those who forget the difference are those who cease to feel care and concern for it.

On the contrary, McGrath agrees with (1) but rejects (2). To explain her point, McGrath compares two sentences “I used to know the difference between right and wrong, but I’ve forgotten it” and “My congressman used to know the difference between right and wrong, but he has forgotten it” and notices that the latter makes sense, while the former does not. The “forget-sentence” cannot be expressed from the first person point of view because it would be uttered from a morally ‘blind spot’: the person who has forgotten the difference cannot recognize it. However, an external point of view can determine whether someone has forgotten the difference, as happens when we claim that the congressman has forgotten the difference. However, Ryle’s thesis that forgetting the difference between right and wrong implies ceasing to have care and concern for it seems to remain valid even if we accept, as I do, McGrath’s solution to the puzzle. The tie between care and concern, on one hand, and knowledge, on the

other, is what distinguishes moral knowledge from other forms of knowledge that can be simply forgotten. A tie that deserves to be developed within ethical intuitionism, for instance in determining whether moral intuitions should involve concern and care as a condition for being moral.

In Sophie Grace Chappell's "Moral Certainties" the first move is that of finding a strategy to solve the contradiction between the beliefs "p" and "q" if both "p, and if p, not q" and "q, and "if q, then not p" hold. Chappell's proposal is that of putting "p" and "q" in a contest where the most credible of the two wins. Chappell calls contests between beliefs "credibility contest" and admits that if sometimes it is clear which belief is the winner in a contest, sometimes there might be also ties or, given that both beliefs have high credibility the outcome is uncertain till the end of the dispute. Chappell thesis is that there are some champion beliefs that win every credibility contest they take part in. For instance, moral certainties such as those concerning the badness of "murder, rape, terrorism, child abuse and human sacrifice" (189) or concerning the *pro tanto* goodness of generosity, will surely win in a credibility contest against countervailing arguments (notice that Chappell refers here to badness and goodness and not to rightness and wrongness, because many admit that murder can also be right in some circumstances). What is worth noticing here is that moral certainties are not detected by a *sui generis* epistemic faculty. Rather, they are those beliefs that our parents have transmitted to us during our childhood and that are part of the general view of common sense morality. This is for Chappell an argument against those for which moral certainties should be grasped by a weird faculty of intuition. On the contrary, for Chappell, as we do not need to postulate a *sui generis* faculty to defend the claim that "unsupported objects drop", so we do not need any such faculty to demonstrate that, say, "murder is bad".

Chappell rejects *epistemological intuitionism* on two grounds. Firstly, she does not want to provide a moral theory but only a correct view on moral phenomenology. Secondly, as we have seen, she rejects the use of intuition as a faculty. For Chappell, what matters is that "someone's moral certainties are knowledge or belief the justification for which is distributed right across his or her epistemic system" (197). This goes along with the claim of the usefulness of moral theory to explain our moral certainties that are basic: "in identifying something as a murder, we have, in one sense reached explanatory bedrock. If you want to know why it is wrong, then the best explanation is just this – it is a murder and other things are equal" (200). That murder is wrong is a platitude and explanations of the wrongness of an act of murder is not due to a theoretical appraisal of it: people are generally lost for words when asked to say why murder is wrong.

Chappell's argument is convincing, and she raises many other interesting points I have had to leave out here. Its greatest merit lies in assigning value to commonly held basic moral beliefs and that of defending their validity outside the borders of moral theory. Nonetheless, she does not fully explain what these moral certainties are. The appeal to commonsensical knowledge, that is the claim that these beliefs are rooted in our upbringing and education, only explains how these certainties arise. In other words, the argument would benefit from a clarification of what "obvious" and "basic" mean from an epistemological point of view. If it is obvious and basic that murder is wrong, it is useful to explain, at least in principle, why it is wrong. As for Cottingham, a reference to the relationship between intuitions and self-evident principles would surely have been helpful. In this direction, what grounds our certainties is not the education we have received but the fact that they are justified upon mere understanding (whether we are aware of it or not), though moral upbringing plays an unavoidable and essential role in transmitting these truths.

As should be now clear, the collection presents a range of perspectives, rather than a single definite thesis. In this way, the editor aims to account for the complex articulation of the current discussion. Nonetheless, as the authors themselves note, all the papers pave the way for further works. Both the beginners and the competent readers will benefit from this book.

Fabio Mancini  
 fabio.mancini@edu.unito.it  
 Consorzio FINO, Università di Torino

### *References*

- Audi, Robert, 2004, *The Good in the Right. A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Anscombe, Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret, "Modern Moral Philosophy", 1958, in Hudson, William Donald, *The is-ought question*, Macmillan, London: 176-195.
- Brandt, Richard Booker, 1954, *Hopi Ethics: a Theoretical Analysis*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.