

META-ETHICAL APPROACHES – INTUITIONISM

Objective moral laws exist independently of human beings; moral truths can be discovered by using our minds in an intuitive way; intuitive ability is innate and the same for all moral agents; intuition needs a mature mind so not infallible; allows for objective moral values. H.A. Prichard, 'ought to do' has no definition; recognise what we 'ought to do' by intuition; two ways of thinking (general and moral).

Challenges: no proof of moral intuition exists; intuitive 'truths' can differ widely; no obvious way to resolve conflicting intuitions.

Intuitionism

Intuitionists argue that when I say "stealing is wrong" I mean "I have a moral intuition that stealing is wrong". An intuition is a form of perception in reaction to an **a posteriori** observation, something I either know innately or because of moral training about the things that I observe - that some of those things are "good" and some "bad". Moral properties are, as Descartes observed, "clearly and distinctly true".

G. E. Moore

So, just as I can learn through direct observation that my brother is in the next room, so I can also learn that punching my brother is wrong through sensing my reaction to seeing him punched.

To do this I will need either:

1. Innate moral feelings (intuitions), as GE Moore (1873-1958) argues for, or
2. A type of perception of events that can pick out exactly what properties make them wrong.

G.E. Moore is a **non-naturalist** because he believes that science will not be able to establish the features of an action that make it good. We cannot establish them just by observation of facts. So Moore argues that the moral features are "irreducible" as we cannot reduce them to a scientific form. We can only know that things are wrong **a priori** (before experience).

Moore concludes that goodness is an **indefinable property** of an action like yellow is an indefinable property of a lemon. Good just is good, as yellow just is yellow.

Consider yellow, for example. We may try to define it, by describing the physical characteristics in terms of light-waves. But those light-waves are not themselves what we mean by yellow. They are not what we actually **perceive**. We would never have been able to discover their existence, unless we had first been struck by the difference of quality between the different colours. The most we can say is that light-waves represent in some way the yellow which we actually perceive.

Moore uses the idea of colour as an **analogy**. Just as the colour yellow cannot be reduced to its scientifically observable light-waves, so the idea of goodness cannot be reduced to a factually observable feature of the world, such as happiness, as utilitarian naturalists believe.

“If I am asked “what is good?” my answer is that good is good, and that’s an end of the matter....there is no intrinsic difficulty in the contention that “good” denotes a simple and indefinable quality. There are many other instances of such qualities....by far the most valuable things, which we can know or imagine, are certain states of consciousness which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects.” (1903:6-10)

H. A. Prichard

H A Prichard (1871-1947) argues that, like Moore’s ‘good’, moral obligation is something known directly by intuition (Moral Obligation, 1949). Not just goodness, but the idea of obligation itself is indefinable.

“The sense that we ought to do certain things arises in our unreflective consciousness, being an activity of moral thinking occasioned by the various situations in which we find ourselves”. (HA Prichard, 1912)

He believed that everyone has a different moral intuition – some more developed than others. Where there is conflict between our moral obligations, we simply examine the situation and choose the greater obligation.

So we recognise immediately from certain non-moral facts of the situation whether an action is right or wrong: the sense of obligation is ‘absolutely underivative and immediate’. This insight we possess is the equivalent, argues Prichard, to mathematical insight and it is obtained by a special unique faculty of human reason.

“Suppose we come genuinely to doubt whether we ought, for example, to pay our debts. The only remedy lies in actually getting into a situation which occasions the obligation, or – if our imagination be strong enough – in imagining ourselves in that situation, and then letting our capacities of moral thinking do their work”.

Using this special moral faculty of the human mind we can combine it with our imagination to create scenarios which then allows us to **intuit** how to act. But there is, according to Prichard, no other way of deriving fundamental moral principles. It is a process of intuition combining with imagination, rather than some other method of logic, or an appeal to natural facts which are themselves deemed to be moral facts. The key to moral thinking “lies not in any process of general thinking”, but in intuition.

References

HA Prichard 1912, “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” *Mind*, 21: 21–37.