

Article

Rossian Intuitionism without Self-Evidence?

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Abstract: The first phase of the recent intuitionist revival left untouched Ross's claim that fundamental moral truths are self-evident. In a recent article, Robert Cowan attempts to explain, in a plausible way, how we know moral truths. The result is that, while the broad framework of Ross's theory appears to remain in place, the self-evidence of moral truths is thrown into doubt. In this paper, I examine Cowan's Conceptual Intuitionism. I use his own proposal to show how he arrives at a skeptical position on self-evidence. First, he completely ignores the kind of epistemic appraisal intuitionism has always rested on; second, he is committed to the Reasons View of *prima facie* duty, rather than to Ross's Properties View; third, he holds that a commitment to self-evidence often comes with a commitment to metaphysically extravagant entities, which he calls Perceptualism; fourth, he scrutinizes only a part of the contemporary theory of self-evidence, overlooking the strengths of the theory when considered as a whole. Revealing these several points supports the conclusion that Cowan has not provided a viable variety of Rossian Intuitionism.

Keywords: Conceptual Intuitionism; W.D. Ross; Robert Cowan; self-evidence; concepts; *prima facie* duty



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1. Introduction

Rossian Intuitionism has recently experienced a revival. One of its main attractions is that it identifies the fundamental moral principles that we *really* think are true, even after subjecting them to severe testing. Although many might be surprised by this claim, Ross and other intuitionists approach both moral content and moral theory with great epistemic caution (David Kaspar 2022, 158–159) [1]. This applies both to matters normative and metaethical. Only propositions with high epistemic credibility are considered by intuitionists to be the content of morality. And while Ross used language that many take to indicate a commitment to an expansive and implausible metaphysics and epistemology, he consistently shied away from extravagant metaphysical and epistemological claims.

Ross's reticence in making substantive metaethical claims has upsides and downsides. Let us start with some downsides: first, it leaves us without detailed accounts of the objects of moral thought, and of how our minds might relate to them. So while intuitionists are quite confident in the content of certain fundamental moral principles, there remains an element of quietism about certain theoretical details supporting them. That is why Robert Cowan's article 'Rossian Conceptual Intuitionism' is a welcome contribution to the current intuitionism revival in ethics. He provides a partially new way of understanding the objects of moral thought within the intuitionist framework. The matter to explore, then, is whether Cowan's is offering a viable variety of Rossian Intuitionism. I will argue that he does not. As I proceed, I will highlight what I consider to be Cowan's missteps.

2. A Proposed Rossian Intuitionism

The framework of Rossian Intuitionism allows for several possible theories to be developed within it. One reason for this is that Ross left a number of things unsaid. Importantly, he left out details of how the mind relates to the objects of thought. He spoke of attributes such as *wrongness* and *being the fulfilment of a promise*. He spoke of propositions and principles with moral content. Although he claims we 'apprehend', 'think', 'see'—and more rarely 'intuit'—such objects of thought, he never explains how.

Contemporary intuitionists such as Audi, Huemer, Shafer-Landau, Stratton-Lake, myself and others have added some flesh to the bones that W.D. Ross and other early analytic intuitionists provided.

More recently a new variant of intuitionism has emerged. It may be called ‘Conceptual Intuitionism’. This approach puts its focus not on the ultimate objects of moral thought, moral properties, but on what is closer to our moral thinking, moral concepts. Ross and other intuitionists have thought it fitting to make moral properties central to the discussion, for the subject of moral theory must address whether some actions actually are right—having the property of being right—and other actions actually are wrong—having the property of being wrong. Call such a view ‘Property Intuitionism’. Conceptual Intuitionism and Property Intuitionism need not be at odds. Conceptual Intuitionists hold it is more theoretically promising at this time to secure claims about moral concepts before approaching matters involving moral properties (a prominent recent Conceptual Intuitionist article is Cuneo and Shafer-Landau’s 2014) [2].

Robert Cowan has his own distinctive approach to moral thought and its objects. I have previously argued that the best moral intuitionism would incorporate the theories of several different intuitionists, and other ethicists [3] (pp. 7–8). The ultimate question for intuitionists is, does Cowan’s Conceptualism best advance our understanding of the nature of veridical moral understanding? However, at this point in the discussion, Cowan’s theory need not demonstrate that much. All it need do is show it is a viable alternative to the traditional approach. Whether it passes that threshold is what will have our attention here.

One note before we proceed: advancing Rossian Intuitionism is not the same as advancing Ross’s Intuitionism. There should be no thought that the right view must simply be Ross’s. We should be open to replacing one of Ross’s doctrines if a superior one is found. However, in my view, the number of things that Ross got right should at least recommend carefully understanding his view. Cowan undoubtedly raises some issues that are long overdue for discussion. And he raises new points worthy of serious consideration. Rossian Intuitionists are fortunate, especially when considered alongside contemporary Kantians. Kant said too much. Ross said too little. One upside of Ross’s metaethical quietism is that it leaves it to us to fill in the blanks in Ross’s theory, of which there are many.

3. Replacing Self-Evidence

The central aim of Cowan’s paper is to advance what he calls ‘Rossian Conceptualist Intuitionism’, the key component of which is his Conceptualism. In his view, it is *prima facie* preferable to what he calls ‘Perceptualism’, which he describes as an ‘account of self-evidence’ [4] (p. 822) (All subsequent Cowan citations are of this article) [3].

What Conceptualism is, I will outline shortly. What is most remarkable about Cowan’s paper is that, as a self-described Rossian Intuitionist, he claims we are not justified in *thinking* that the Rossian *prima facie* principles are self-evident. Cowan recognizes the centrality of self-evidence to Rossian Intuitionism. The contemporary account of self-evidence, introduced by Robert Audi, is arguably the central theoretical innovation that made the current intuitionist revival possible. So any Rossian Intuitionist should carefully consider all of the strengths of the contemporary account, consider the implications of doing without it, and take care before rejecting it.

Intuitionists confront a serious challenge in explaining how moral thought relates to the world. We believe we know what is right and what is wrong, at least in the abstract. Such knowledge we hold to be *a priori*. How is it, then, that our minds have knowledge based on justification that is independent of experience in some way, and that such knowledge is about a real property, such as *wrongness*? We know that injuring another is wrong. And in some cases we can know that Jones’s assaulting Smith is wrong. Cowan’s Conceptualism poses a distinctive way of grappling with this challenge.

Conceptualism holds that the objects of *a priori* knowledge are ‘facts about the “world”’ (p. 828). The root of Cowan’s approach is concept possession and its abstract conditions. Cowan states, ‘For an agent, *S*, to possess a concept, *C*, involves *S* (at least) possessing

an *implicit conception* of *C*, the content of which specifies some set of conditions for something's falling under *C*' (p. 829) An individual agent who possesses the concept *C* thereby possesses 'informational content . . . that underlies the judgmental and inferential dispositions associated with *C* regarding particular cases' (Ibid.). So, for example, if Robinson possesses the concept WRONGNESS, then by her implicit conception of WRONGNESS, she can know that Jones's assaulting Smith is wrong.

The implicit dimension of Cowan's Conceptualism has a critical role. By our possessing a moral concept, one can possess several moral principles. This in part explains how such knowledge is a priori. But Cowan does not offer the kind of anchoring concept that we would expect from a Rossian Intuitionist, such as DUTY, WRONGNESS, or RIGHTNESS. Instead, MORAL REASON is the central concept around which moral principles implicitly orbit. He states, 'A Rossian Conceptualist thinks that the implicit conception which individuates the concept MORAL REASON encodes the Rossian Principles. Individuals who possess that concept are in possession of informational content such that their judgmental and inferential dispositions reflect a tacit commitment to the Principles' (p. 829). Cowan invests a lot in this claim, for many of his positions are derived from it. A crucial challenge for Cowan's theory is, can his Conceptualism explain a priori moral knowledge and also identify the moral propositions that are among the strongest candidates for being self-evidently true? I believe an examination of his paper will show us the answer is 'no'.

4. Rossian Intuitionism

Rossian Intuitionism can take different forms. An important value of this is that we can offer and compare different varieties of the view. I think that Rossian Intuitionism is best understood as the claim that: (1) we intuitively know (2) several fundamental moral principles, (3) having plural grounds, (4) which are capable of combinations that present apparent moral conflicts, and (5) by considering which our duty might be determined [1] (p. 557).

This framework has room for different competing theories to see which, overall, provides the best account. Testing can take place in a way that is internal to the framework. Our discussion focuses on elements (1) and (2). It is important that we understand Rossian Intuitionism as a *whole* foundational moral theory, and arguably a theory that covers the whole of ethics—the good and rights included. This theory quite naturally spans the normative/metaethical divide. Keep this in mind, for as we will see, intuitionism not only wishes to get its theory right, it also aims to get the fundamental *moral content* right. Arriving at the moral propositions with the highest epistemic credibility is job one. Rossian Intuitionism works off the assumption that if we really establish foundations that are knowledge, that we can stand by as life-engaged people, and not just as theorists, then any theoretical problem is in principle capable of resolution.

Ross's work has a quietist strand. He does not tell us what he means by calling *wrongness* or *being an injury* attributes. He does not tell us how 'apprehension' works. He does not explain what *self-evidence* is. The good news is it is left to us to figure these things out. My view is that intuitionism should proceed by epistemically based explanatory expansion. What we know are what I call the *intuitive principles*: *Keeping promises is right*, *Lying is wrong*, *Injuring another is wrong* (the intuitive principles are different from prima facie principles. I will explain how they are related in Section 11). Foundationally based explanatory expansion works thus: on the foundation of the moral propositions with very high epistemic credibility, we expand Rossian Intuitionism by offering explanations of everything else, from the epistemology to the metaphysics. Self-evidence, in my view, provides the best explanation of why *Keeping promises is right* is a moral proposition with very high epistemic credibility.

But on one point concerning self-evident propositions Cowan is right. There might be none. Suppose, as Cowan believes, the theory of self-evidence is problematic. The question is, how best to proceed? In my view, we should keep in mind all that is involved in *Lying is wrong* being self-evidently true before we dismiss this hypothesis. As I have argued previously, that the intuitive principles are self-evident is not supposed to merely explain

what we should believe, but what we also most firmly *do* believe, even after the most severe attempts at overturning them. It is supposed to explain why all known civilizations have believed many of these propositions over millennia [3] (pp. 10–11). It is supposed to explain why the average person can change their minds about deeply held beliefs such as whether gay marriage is permitted, but not change their minds about lying, promise keeping, or injuring others.

Rossian Intuitionists face roughly two choices when an intuitionist doctrine appears problematic:

1. When a fundamental intuitionist doctrine appears problematic, abandon it.
2. Recognize all the points that support the view, acknowledge a point that will take work to improve or correct, then offer solutions for the problematic point.

Since Cowan argues that ‘we lack sufficient reason to believe that the Rossian Principles are self-evident’ (p. 843), it appears he is leaning toward the first choice. I think the second choice theoretically preferable. To serve it, I offer several points that argue for self-evidence, providing the best explanation for the phenomena just mentioned. And I examine why Cowan might have come to a different conclusion.

5. Intuitionist Methodology

The methodology of Rossian intuitionism might be considered too basic to mention when reflecting on intuitionism. But, as I will show here, it is important to always bear intuitionist methodology in mind. There are several parts of Cowan’s article that show that he regards one traditionally prominent strand of intuitionist methodology as of little importance, or perhaps even as dispensable.

The intuitionist bases every assertion of the content of morality on *what we really think about morality*. Ross uses the phrase ‘what we really think’ repeatedly to justify his claims. In his use, it covers what we call first-order matters, such as whether we have an obligation to keep promises, as well as second-order matters, such as whether we only have one obligation or whether any obligation is absolute. Breaking it down, moral knowledge is based on what we *think*, not on what we perceive. It is not merely about what I think or what you think, it is about what *we* think. We are to check our intuitions against those of others, repeatedly. And it is not simply about what we think at a given time. It is about what we *really* think, after severe extensive reflection on moral propositions, and extensive introspection of how we respond to our moral thoughts. This includes repeated testing of even the most obvious moral propositions, such as *Keeping promises is right*. As Ross states,

‘We have to ask ourselves . . . whether we really *can* get rid of our view that promise-keeping has a bindingness independent of productiveness of maximum good. In my own experience I find that I cannot, in spite of a very genuine attempt to do so; and I venture to think that most people will find the same.’ [5].

Ross uses quite gentle language to describe his approach. But as he says elsewhere, inquiry should yield propositions that *survive* inquiry [6]. That means severe extensive reflection is required. Intuitionism asks moral inquirers to make their minds laboratories of moral inquiry. It asks them to be serious about their reflections. It requires hundreds if not thousands of instances of an inquirer reflecting and introspecting on their moral experiences.

Cowan apparently conducts his inquiry free of such testing. And that, I believe, is the first factor responsible for his skeptical conclusion concerning the self-evidence of the prima facie principles. Cowan argues that, ‘we lack sufficient reason for thinking that the Rossian Principles are self-evident, and that insisting that they are self-evident (perhaps in an attenuated sense) may commit Rossians to radically expanding the scope of self-evidence’ (p. 823). But could thinking the fundamental moral propositions are self-evident really lead to such a radical expansion? Not for one following intuitionist methodology. Cowan himself refers to a previous expansion, stating that Ross has seven prima facie princi-

ples, and that ‘Audi adds duties of liberty and respectfulness to the list’ (p. 825). Between Ross’s *The Right and the Good* (1930) and Audi’s *The Good in the Right* (2004), that is two new self-evident prima facie principles added in seventy four years. That is hardly a radical expansion.

By continuing the practice of extensive reflection, as Ross, Audi, and others have, we are not going to just say a given moral proposition is self-evident, and will always use extreme caution if we do. Saying that Intuitionism has high epistemic standards means that we only claim fundamental moral propositions are self-evident if they have very high epistemic credibility. That Cowan thinks that intuitionism is *no better off* epistemically than other theories such as Kantianism is another sign that extensive reflection is not being conducted (p. 851). If the degree of disagreement for a given proposition *p* is inversely proportionate to its epistemic credibility, clearly no supreme principle offered, including Kant’s Categorical Imperative, has anywhere near the epistemic credibility of the intuitive principles.

6. The Reasons View

The best moral theory will get content as well as theory right. Intuitionism aims to be right on both. Cowan adopts what may be called the ‘Reasons View’ of prima facie duty, most prominently held by Philip Stratton-Lake [7]. Cowan’s Reasons commitment leads him to claim that prima facie principles do not have content such as (P) *Keeping promises is prima facie right* but rather have content such as (R) *There is always an overridable but ineradicable moral reason to keep promises that one has made* (p. 831). His choice to consider whether the latter proposition, not the former, is self-evident is the second factor that leads to Cowan’s skeptical conclusion about self-evidence. (R), upon reflection, is not even close to being evident, while (P) clearly is. We will return to this point. For now, we must note that Cowan’s abandonment of self-evidence appears to come right out of his commitment to the Reasons View of prima facie duty.

The Reasons View is one contemporary doctrine to question as we examine varieties of Rossian Intuitionism. Although we can certainly take the Reasons First approach to ethics and fashion a moral theory along Rossian lines, there is little reason to believe this is Ross’s view. Shelly Kagan first introduced the hypothesis that Ross did not really believe what he actually says about prima facie duties. Instead, Kagan says, it ‘is actually pro tanto reasons that Ross has in mind in his discussion of what he calls prima facie duties’ [8]. Ross’s texts do not support this claim. Since there has been little examination of Ross’s texts to see if Kagan is right, it has become the received view of prima facie duties that they are moral reasons. Ross uses the term ‘reason’, and equivalents, at several different points [5,6]. Ross consistently employs ‘reasons’ language in such a way that reasons are distinct from prima facie duties. So a careful examination of Ross’s texts will, I believe, support the claim that that prima facie duties *give* reasons to act, but not support the claim that they are identical to such reasons (Hurka [9] pp. 31–33 addresses the contemporary Reasons View of prima facie duty and concludes that terminology of ‘ought’ and ‘duty’ have clear advantages to ‘reasons’. In this section and in Section 11, I add the content problem that arises out of holding the Reasons View) [8]. Ross’s theory, keep in mind, is a Property Intuitionism, regardless of what we determine moral concepts are. Despite the intuitionist revival, there has been little debate over what is a prima facie duty. While Cowan’s opening the floor to various Rossian Intuitionist proposals might accelerate such a debate, the flaw of the Reasons View I will focus on is the prima facie principles it generates.

7. Perceptualism

Cowan’s theory is within the Rossian Intuitionism framework. Cowan thinks his view, Conceptualism, is prima facie preferable to Perceptualism. Let us characterize, then evaluate, these two views. Cowan states that, ‘According to Perceptualism, an occurrent adequate understanding of a self-evident proposition, *p*, crucially involves standing in

a noncausal, nonsensory, but perceptual-like relation to the concepts (which on this view are abstract entities, e.g., Universals) figuring in p , for example, an “apprehension” or “acquaintance” (826). Conceptualism, in contrast, holds that, ‘adequately understanding p requires possessing the concepts in p and appreciating their mode of combination’ (p. 828) and that ‘concepts on this view are abstract’ (p. 828).

The first thing to state is that Perceptualism is not Ross’s view. Although he does use the language of ‘apprehension’, he avoids building any explanatory apparatus that resembles Cowan’s target. The second thing to state is that any characterization of intuition using the language of ‘perception’, as many do, is unfortunate and misleading. Yes, intuitions involve what may be described as a kind of *seeing*. Given the ordinary everyday usage of ‘perception’, we can perceive what is right. But in a philosophical context, this is one area where our language must be carefully regimented.

To best explain how the mind can understand and know what is right, we must move our thoughts away from sensory perception, and not allow the slightest opportunity for perception and intuition to be confused. As we see in Cowan’s article, it only takes two pages to go from describing a theory of concept apprehension that uses perception *as an analog* (p. 826), to flat out stating that Perceptualism requires ‘perception of a third realm’ (p. 828)!

Does any contemporary intuitionist hold Perceptualism as Cowan characterizes it? Cowan does not state that Audi holds Perceptualism. He does not provide a quote of him to show he that he holds Perceptualism. But Cowan claims Audi is ‘attracted to’ Perceptualism and claims that Audi ‘suggests this is his considered view’ (p. 826). Perceptualism, once again, holds that we stand in a noncausal, nonsensory, but perceptual-like relation to concepts. Does Audi state anything like this? In one article Cowan cites Audi states, ‘To understand abstract entities, if there is such understanding (as there certainly appears to be), *is* in part to be in some kind of contact with them; this is presumably a basic capacity of the mind whether the capacity is in some sense causal or not’ [10]. So far, no Perceptualism.

In the second Audi article that Cowan cites, Audi nowhere states anything to the effect that when one directly apprehends a concept one stands ‘in a noncausal, nonsensory, but perceptual-like relation to the concepts’. Here is what he does say. In speaking of ‘objectual intuitions’, Audi considers ‘direct apprehension’ of concepts or properties or relations [11] (p. 172). And he claims that ‘objectual intuitions constitute intellectual perceptions’. But immediately after that he states, ‘I prefer to reserve “cognitive intuition” for intuitions with propositional objects’ [10] (p. 173).

Cowan makes Audi’s consideration of objectual intuition central to Audi’s account, and fills in the rest of the thought he thinks must be involved. Intuitionists, including Cowan, are very careful and very subtle about what they state about foundational matters. It is not because we are blind to the problems at this level. It is because they stare us in the face. That explains the extra care. Audi’s use of ‘intellectual perception’ might appear, in retrospect, to be ill-chosen. But he does not claim Perceptualism. Granted, it is fair to demand an account of how we intuit concepts. But currently no one claims to know how we do.

8. Conceptualism

Perceptualism has no adherent that Cowan identifies. It is, however, a possible view. So let us see if Cowan’s Conceptualism is, indeed, *prima facie* preferable to it. A careful comparison of Perceptualism and Conceptualism does not put Conceptualism in an obviously better light. Let us compare them, using the proposition *Lying is wrong* as our subject, with ‘L’ standing for *lying* and ‘W’ standing for *wrongness*:

Conceptualism

C1. We possess concept L and concept W.

C2. L and W are abstract entities.

C3. We appreciate the mode of combination of L and W.

Perceptualism

P1. We stand in a noncausal, nonsensory, but perceptual-like relation to concepts L and W.

P2. L and W are abstract entities, e.g., Universals.

P3. We apprehend L is W.

The first thing to notice about these two views is that they are compatible. A Perceptualist can agree with C1, C2, and C3. And a Conceptualist can agree to P1, P2, and P3, even though Cowan does not. The question then is, does Conceptualism have a difference that makes it theoretically preferable to Perceptualism? Cowan thinks so. But let us see. He states that ‘a priori knowledge deploys only ordinary cognitive resources (those involved in concept possession and reflection)’ (p. 829) We do ordinarily think we possess concepts. For example, we think we possess the concept TRIANGLE. Is Cowan claiming that the Perceptualist will *deny* we *possess* the concept of WRONGNESS? The answer should be ‘no’, for no intuitionist denies possession of moral concepts. Next, Cowan nowhere states what the possession relation is like. Is the concept I possess *in* my mind? Or is it *external* to my mind in some way? These questions are pressing, especially since possession conditions, for Cowan, ‘are not tied to any particular agent’ (p. 829), and ‘are abstract’ (p. 831). P1 might arguably state too much. But we need a comparable Conceptualist claim to evaluate the two views. In order to compare a perceptual-like relation to a possession relation, we need to know what both are like.

This problem is compounded for Cowan when we consider what he thinks concepts are. They are abstract. He has a Fregean view, which is a platonist one. The main view of concepts in philosophy is that they are psychological entities. Most philosophers follow the lead of psychologists, and ‘virtually all discussions of concepts in psychology’ hold ‘that concepts are mental particulars’. [12]. Cowan asks us to give up a controversial claim in one discipline to take up a controversial claim in two disciplines. In philosophy, universals remain controversial. In philosophy and psychology, abstract concepts are controversial. So one wonders why Cowan thinks his view is any less controversial. By his own reasoning, he should abandon Conceptualism. Especially since Conceptualism, to use Cowan’s own language, ‘requires that we have a sort of direct access to non-natural objects’ (p. 828).

There are other ways in which it is not clear that there is a significant difference between the two views. Bear in mind that providing two distinct formulations of views does not imply necessarily two different views. In criticizing Perceptualism, Cowan claims that ‘apprehending’ concepts is problematic. Apparently in contrast, Conceptualism claims that we ‘appreciate the mode of combination’ of concepts of an intuitive moral proposition. The non-intuitionist would be justified in wondering what the significant difference between the two is. We would think that one would have to apprehend the concepts to appreciate the mode of them. Appreciating the mode of the combination of concepts seems to be something more than apprehending them. It seems to be recognizing something about them. But to recognize something about an item or items presupposes being related to them in some way. We possess thousands of concepts. But in order to appreciate something about them they must be occurrently before the mind in some way. So both views would seem to need to claim ‘appreciating the mode of combination’ of concepts on the basis of ‘apprehending’ them.

What is the correct theory of mind to object is fraught with difficulties. That the mind apprehends concepts and appreciates their combinations is merely descriptive. How the mind actually does either is speculative at this point. It is entirely possible that, given the nature of the objects of our thought, this domain might forever contain speculative elements. That Cowan’s formulation seems more promising now does not mean the explanation required to spell it out will ultimately be more successful. Cowan’s formulation of ‘appreciating the mode of combination of concepts possessed’ might appeal to some merely because it uses language of a discipline some philosophers respect more than ethics: cognitive science. That does not provide any more evidence that we are appreciating a mode of combination of concepts than that we are apprehending concepts.

9. Rossian Non-Naturalism

Cowan is concerned that Rossian Intuitionism inclines its adherents to accept a rationally unacceptable metaphysics in Perceptualism. This is the third reason he is skeptical of self-evidence. Again, he provides not a single quote from any contemporary Rossian Intuitionist that matches his description of Perceptualism. And if the worst he can say about fellow intuitionists concerning Perceptualism is that we are attracted to it, the theoretical importance of this is close to nil. For many philosophers, including myself, are attracted to theories that they cannot accept. So what is behind his concern about Perceptualism?

Cowan's fundamental mistake is that he does not consider the possibility that Ross might have a distinctive non-naturalist theory. He, like almost every other ethicist today, has bought the line that non-naturalism is necessarily a kind of platonism. This view is the view of the critics of intuitionism. Such critics, from A.J. Ayer to ethicists working today, have some common traits. They do not quote the intuitionist on the point in question. And they rarely demonstrate that they have thoroughly read and understood the target of their criticism. That explains why, since *The Right and the Good* was published, a popular belief has persisted that intuitionists are committed to a 'mysterious faculty of intuition'. That Ross is committed to platonic entities is another such popular belief.

The simple fact of the matter is that G.E. Moore provides two characterizations of non-natural properties. First, they are distinguished by not being the subject matter of the natural sciences [13]. Second, they are to be understood by their metaphysical feature that they are external to time [13] (p. 42). If *good* is claimed to exist in time, that is a naturalist view of *good*. If *good* is claimed not to exist in time, that is a non-naturalist view of *good*. What most everyone has missed is that Ross has a distinctive view of non-naturalism. And his is in line only with Moore's first, subject-matter characterization of non-naturalism. Ross claims that naturalism is committed to a view that the properties it studies are observable, and it attempts to define concepts such as 'good' and 'right' by such observables [6]. His non-naturalism holds that properties such as good and right are not observable, and 'good' and 'right' are indefinable. Unlike Moore, Ross gives no positive characterization of non-natural entities.

Here, as elsewhere, Ross exhibits great epistemic caution. He is confident that non-natural properties are not observable. But he makes no positive claim about what they are. Understanding 'non-naturalism' as capturing, as it does, the complement of the class of natural entities, he makes no attempt to narrow his inquiry to determine the subclass of entities that actually make up the metaphysics of morality.

Cowan and I agree on this: intuitionism must expand its explanatory net. We do need to come to understand what moral properties are. We must be unafraid to offer speculations of what non-natural entities are objects of moral thought, and what non-natural entities are instantiated in moral action. A theory must be offered that allows us to understand what 'apprehension' and 'intuition' really are. The whole theory must be laid out, all its parts working together. By making such an attempt, Cowan's theory is of value to intuitionists. However, assuming the misinformed critics of intuitionism have been right about Ross all along is a poor way to start the process of explanatory expansion. It is much better to recognize that Ross is not Moore, their theories of non-naturalism diverge in a crucial way, and that the best starting point for proceeding is with the broad negative claim that moral properties are not natural.

10. Self-Evidence

Cowan says we lack sufficient reason for thinking that Rossian moral principles are self-evident. Self-evidence is the crucial explanatory concept of Rossian Intuitionism's moral epistemology. Moreover, it was Audi's work on self-evidence that opened the door to the recent intuitionist revival. By attacking the contemporary intuitionist account of self-evidence, it is not one doctrine alone that is being undermined. It is a set of related doctrines that reinforce each other. The fourth factor supporting Cowan's skeptical position

on the self-evidence of prima facie principles is that he does not consider the strongest account of self-evidence to apply to them.

To have a clear understanding of self-evidence, to avoid various confusions, bear in mind that self-evidence has two aspects. These two aspects should be clearly separated, for they capture an internal complexity in the concept of self-evidence. To say a proposition is self-evident is, first, to say that it is a *source of justification*: it provides a kind of *evidence*. Also, it is to attribute to such a proposition a *degree of justification*: it is *being evident* to a given person at a given time. 'Being evident' is a term of epistemic appraisal. These two aspects give self-evidence more internal complexity than we might think the concept has before we investigate it.

Here are the central doctrines of the contemporary view of self-evidence. Suppose there is a self-evidently true proposition p and a person S who reflects on p :

1. All the *evidence* one needs to be justified in believing that p is contained in p .
2.
 - a. If S has adequate understanding of p , then S is justified in believing that p .
 - b. If S believes p on the basis of understanding p , then S knows that p .
 Suppose S satisfies both conditions in (2). That entails:
3. p is *evident* to S .
4. S sees the truth of p .
5. (4) does not imply that S sees the *self-evidence* of p .
6. Even though (1) is true of p , that does not exclude that S can come to believe p on the basis of propositions other than p .
7. Any given self-evident proposition p is either *immediately evident*, or *mediately evident* to a given person S who adequately understands it, or there are no conditions under which p is evident to S .

Almost everything in (1)–(7) has been previously published. (2) through (6) are originally found in Robert Audi, 2004 [14]. But I think that putting them together in this way, and making minor refinements, makes the whole account stronger and more precise. Taken as a whole, it would seem to lessen the strength of Cowan's critique of self-evident moral truths. Considering all the phenomena previously mentioned that self-evidence explains should lessen it further. The core of this account of self-evidence is (2). This is Audi's *two-condition* account of self-evidence. I call it an account of self-evident cognition. What is distinctive of it is that it enables us to explain how an intelligent person can adequately understand, for example, that *Keeping promises is right*, and not believe it. Prior accounts of self-evidence were one-condition accounts. They claimed that understanding a self-evident proposition was tantamount to knowing it, and often made the compellingness of self-evident propositions part of their definition.

However, we must note that the focus of Audi's account is person S , and S 's mental states. What we need to know is what it is *about* a self-evident proposition p that enables one to know it just on the basis of understanding p itself. That is why the account requires (1): All the *evidence* one needs to be justified in believing p is contained in p . That means that the nature of the constituents of a self-evident proposition, and the relation they bear to one another, provide evidence enough to be justified in believing it true. Such propositions are a source of justification. Furthermore, (3) states that if p meets the condition stated in (1) and S meets the conditions stated in (2) in relation to p , then p is evident to S . This is how *the evidence in p makes p evident* to one. And under such conditions, one has a very high degree of justification in believing p .

The remaining conditions enable us to avoid various confusions. Take (4). Clearly, if S knows p on the basis of adequately understanding p , S sees the truth of p . Crucially, (5), that does not imply that S sees the *self-evidence* of p . I call the recognition of the two distinct mental states given in (4) and (5) 'Audi's Insight'. It is so important, because the single biggest reason people give for dismissing the concept of self-evidence is they say, 'I do not see the *self-evidence* of p '. Once the level error that is presupposed in this objection is recognized, many can see the viability of the concept of self-evidence. In addition, (6) is

a claim about the context of discovery. Simply because all the evidence needed to believe p is in p does not imply that the mind cannot be brought to believe p by alternative routes.

One emendation to Audi's account is given in (7). Audi holds that self-evident propositions are *immediately self-evident* or *mediately self-evident*. The reason for this distinction is that some self-evident propositions we immediately see to be true, such as $\langle 2 + 2 = 4 \rangle$, and other self-evident propositions, such as $\langle 5 + 11 + 6 = 9 + 4 + 7 + 2 \rangle$ require reflection for most of us to see they are true. Since $\langle 2 + 2 = 4 \rangle$ and $\langle 5 + 11 + 6 = 9 + 4 + 7 + 2 \rangle$ are equally self-evident, the source of justification is the same for both. However, the degree of justification most people have for the two propositions differs. Indeed, $\langle 2 + 2 = 4 \rangle$ is *immediately evident* to most of us. And $\langle 5 + 11 + 6 = 9 + 4 + 7 + 2 \rangle$ is *mediately evident* to most of us. By distinguishing the source of the justification element of self-evidence from the degree of justification element, it is really the latter that Audi speaks about when he makes his distinction. So the terminology in (7) is preferable to his.

Cowan does not take (1)–(7) to be the contemporary account of self-evidence. Taking only a portion of it to be such gives less reason to believe that the *prima facie* principles are self-evident. By denying they are self-evident, Cowan sacrifices a number of epistemological advantages intuitionism has over other theories, not just one. His overlooking (1) is partly responsible for his skepticism about self-evidence. For (1) makes the self-evident *proposition's* evidence what fundamentally accounts for its being evident to us, given our capacity to adequately understand it. And the adequacy of our understanding is measured according to the evidence that the proposition provides. If there are self-evident propositions in the class of the *mediately evident* that are, for ordinary adults, strong candidates for coming to be evident to them, then if one fails to see the truth of one of them after careful reflection, *the onus is on him* for failing to do so. The prime burden of epistemic responsibility is on the agent reflecting on a self-evident proposition, not on what others think, and not on what any theory states.

11. The Self-Evidence of *Prima Facie* Duties

Cowan considers whether Rossian *prima facie* principles are self-evident. He finds it difficult to claim that they are. In search of an explanation, he considers alternatives to his Rossian Conceptual Intuitionism. It turns out that these alternatives would, to his mind, 'at least compare favorably' to his view (p. 547). His final assessment is: 'given the lack of adequate data, and given the clear potential for developing plausible alternative hypotheses, we currently lack sufficient reason to believe the Rossian Principles are self-evident' (p. 547).

The four factors that lead him to this conclusion are, once more, as follows. First, Cowan seems to conduct his inquiry independently of the kind of severe testing of moral content that is characteristic of intuitionism. Second, due to his commitment to the Reasons View of *prima facie* duty, he evaluates the self-evidence of formulations of *prima facie* principles that are not the intuitive candidates that have the highest epistemic credibility. Third, he holds that self-evidence is connected in some way to a theory he rejects, Perceptualism. Fourth, he does this without considering the strongest account of self-evidence.

In order to properly examine Cowan's skeptical assessment of self-evident *prima facie* principles, we should consider whether he offers strong candidates for being Rossian *prima facie* principles. As I will show, he does not. Instead, he offers idiosyncratically styled variants of them. His one characterization of the Rossian Promissory Principle is (R), *There is always an overridable but ineradicable moral reason to keep promises that one has made* (p. 831). I hold that (P) *Keeping promises is prima facie right* is a better candidate for a *prima facie* principle than Cowan's. Remember, fundamental moral principles must meet this test: they are what we really think. How do Cowan-style moral principles fare in the kind of comparative epistemic appraisal that intuitionist methodology requires? Clearly, when we carefully scrutinize these two propositions, we can see why Cowan has doubts about the self-evidence of (R). But one might object, *Keeping promises is prima facie right* is a proposition that invites a lot of disagreement, even among experts. That is true. But in order to know

whether *Keeping promises is prima facie right* is evident, we must make sure we understand its content. In order to do that we should ask ourselves, and others, these two questions:

1. Is keeping promises morally right?
2. Are there some possible circumstances in which breaking a promise is morally permitted?

To question 1, the vast majority of ordinary reflective agents will think and answer ‘yes’. Their confidence is based on the content of the intuitive principle *Keeping promises is right*. Nearly everyone will say ‘yes’ to question 2. They really think that *In some cases breaking a promise is permitted*. So the content of ‘Keeping promises is prima facie right’ is (K):

Keeping promises is right (but in some cases breaking a promise is permitted).

If we wish, we might understand (K) in Conceptualist terms: the implicit conception which individuates the concept DUTY encodes the principle *Keeping promises is right* and (what is even more implicit to DUTY) *In some cases breaking a promise is permitted*. Granted, this content is only part of the concept ‘prima facie duty’. There are epistemic and metaphysic elements of Ross’s theory it leaves out. But in terms of what might guide action, the content of ‘Keeping promises is prima facie right’ is most perspicuously laid out in (K).

Having laid out a stronger candidate prima facie principle for examination, once its actual content is clarified, we can do all the tests of clearness, agreement, disposition to believe, and so on, that Cowan would wish [4] (pp. 843–845). And doing so will give us much better results. The problem is that Cowan seems to—along with experts who object to prima facie principles—confuse *terminology* and *content*. Cowan raises problems with the terminology ‘prima facie’ [4] (p. 825). The term ‘prima facie’ covers the content in (K) that is missing from the component of it that has the content *Keeping promises is right*. Although many people will have doubts about the proposition *Keeping promises is prima facie right*, many fewer will doubt *Keeping promises is right (but in some cases breaking a promise is permitted)*. This mistaking of terminology for content is somewhat ironic, for a familiar point of Cowan’s kind of view of concepts is that two different terms can express the same content.

12. Conclusions

‘Rossian Intuitionists have much work to do to make their theory acceptable’, says Cowan [4] (p. 851). Suppose that is true. It does not apply to intuitionism any more than to any other contemporary moral theory. The first thing we ought to do to make Rossian Intuitionism acceptable is recognize advances that have been made, and then to build on them. The contemporary intuitionist account of self-evidence is such an advance—to my mind, the most important such advance for the view.

Cowan provides one of the most in-depth accounts of what might be involved in holding a moral proposition. But rather than merely claim that is what he is doing, he attempts to undermine intuitionist claims of self-evidence for some moral propositions, and to overthrow a view he thinks other intuitionists hold: Perceptualism. Conceptualism, as we have seen, does not offer clear advantages over this view. Lastly, if we are investigating whether Rossian prima facie principles are self-evident, we should acknowledge all that is involved in the contemporary account of self-evidence, identify the strongest candidate principles for examination, and distinguish terminology and content as we proceed.

As an intuitionist, Cowan should welcome the result that the reasons for being skeptical that the prima facie principles are self-evident are fewer than he thought. Combining that result with his account of concept possession is a more promising way to advance Rossian Intuitionism than the approach Cowan takes in his paper. At this point, the case is not strong for claiming that we have, in Cowan’s Conceptualism, a distinct, viable alternative variety of intuitionism to the one that Ross laid out. Rossian Intuitionism *with* self-evidence holds its ground.

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