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A CRITIQUE OF AUDI'S ETHICAL INTUITIONISM

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Philosophy 485: Research in Philosophy
October 15th, 2021

Abstract

Robert Audi's 2005 book *The Good in the Right* is a formidable representative of the recently resurgent theory ethical intuitionism (EI). Its renown is not unearned; Audi has developed a novel version of EI that preserves some of the most appealing features of Rossian EI while making a few key changes that help it to stand up better to some criticisms. This paper will explore Audi's position and articulate a variety of objections to it that, taken together, prevent it from being a serious contender on the metaethical stage. The first section will discuss some of the difficulties with Audi's attempt to establish a plausible and coherent account of the kind of self-evidence necessary to support EI. The next section will express two objections to Audi's views concerning the role that reflection (as opposed to inference) plays in coming to justified conclusions. The last section will argue that Audi's attempt to lend additional support to Rossian principles on the basis of a semi-utilitarian theory of value unambiguously fails.

Introduction: Audi's EI

Ethical intuitionism (EI) is the view that there exist some number of self-evidently true moral principles that sufficiently wise moral agents can apprehend and be justified in believing. The most well-known and canonically influential proponent of EI was W. D. Ross, whose articulation of the theory focused on a particular set of duties that he took to be *prima facie* binding: fidelity, reparation, justice, gratitude, beneficence, self-improvement, and non-injury.¹ The irreducible reality of each of these duties is, on Ross's account, "evident without any need of proof, or of evidence beyond itself."² It is through pure intuition, rather than some process of

¹ Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 25.

² Audi, 27.

inference or reasoning, that we come to know, say, that we should be grateful to others when they behave generously towards us. This is presented as being very similar to the way that we come to know that $A = A$ or that $2 + 2 = 4$; we find ourselves in a cognitive state of believing a proposition, without having inferred it from any premises, while being unable to imagine that we could be mistaken about it.

Robert Audi's treatise *The Good in the Right: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value* presents an update to Ross's ethical intuitionism that, in addition to many minor refinements and clarifications, makes two major improvements to the classic theory. The first is to moderate the claims of Rossian EI such that it stands up a bit better to criticism. Audi does this in a few ways: he backs off from Ross's analogy to the self-evidence of mathematical and logical truths, he makes room for the possibility that self-evident knowledge can be overdetermined (i.e. that intuiting the truth of something does not prevent us from also proving its truth), and he allows that something can be self-evident without its self-evidence also being self-evident. Audi's second improvement makes use of the epistemic territory that his first improvement opens up; he attempts to support Rossian principles using both Kant's second categorical imperative and semi-utilitarian theory of value that he calls "experientialism."

Section 1: Self-Evidence

Four Requirements

Audi, following Ross, bases his EI on the idea that some number of our moral intuitions are self-evident. He outlines four requirements that self-evident intuitions must meet if they are to be useful for the EI project.³

³ Audi, 32-34.

Firstly, self-evident intuitions must be *non-inferential*. This means that a person who comes to believe them through his intuition cannot be relying on one or more premises to do so. That is not to say that this person could not find premises that support his intuition, or even that he could come to find that the arguments available in support of his intuition are a stronger basis for believing it than his original apprehension of its truth was. This is a fairly concrete criterion; either an intuition relies on inference, or it does not, so the boundaries of this requirement are clearer than those of some of the others.

Secondly, intuitions must be “moderately firm cognitions” if they are to be considered self-evident. “A mere inclination to believe is not an intuition” in the sense required for self-evidence; a person needs to be totally convinced of its truth and unlikely to abandon it unless it comes into “conflict with a firmly held theory or with another intuition.” Audi acknowledges that “the concepts of intuition and of the intuitive are not sharp,” but he insists that his arguments do not “turn on their vagueness.”⁴ This may be true to a degree, but we should note that the fuzziness around this requirement makes it difficult to determine which cognitions are sufficiently “firm” to justify claims to self-evidence. This is true even of our own cognitions (how confidently can we evaluate our own level of confidence?) but is especially true of any attempts we might make to evaluate the claims of others. This is the first of many conceptual difficulties we will encounter in our exploration of Audi’s position.

Thirdly, intuitions must be based on a “minimally adequate understanding” of whatever is being considered.⁵ This is fairly straightforward and uncontroversial; most of us would posit this as a requirement for a claim to any kind of knowledge. It suffers from a similar fuzziness as

4 Audi, 34.

5 Audi, 34.

the previous requirement, but in this case the fuzziness seems necessary and therefore unobjectionable.

Finally, intuitions must neither be dependent on theories nor themselves be considered theories.⁶ If an intuition was a theory (if it was meant to explain a set of phenomena) then it would be dependent on the facts about those phenomena and could be proved wrong if new facts emerged. We could not possibly put much stock into self-evidence as a concept if self-evident propositions were subject to these sorts of pressures, so Audi's requirement here makes perfect sense. The idea that an intuition can be justified independently of any other theories is more difficult to accept, though. A person's understanding of the subject of a moral intuition will certainly include some theories if it is to be minimally adequate. If I have the intuition that it is wrong to kill a human but not necessarily wrong to kill a nonhuman animal, I am surely relying on a theoretical understanding of the morally relevant differences between human and nonhuman animals. This half of the fourth requirement, then, seems to directly contradict the third requirement.

Hard vs. Soft Self-Evidence

Most of the above is reminiscent of Ross and other mid-century intuitionists, but one of the moves Audi makes to differentiate his form of EI and strengthen it against criticisms is his idea that EI does not need Rossian "hard" self-evidence to work as a compelling and useful moral theory. Ross required intuitions to be as automatically and robustly obvious as the basic truths of math and logic to qualify as self-evident; they have to be axiomatic, indefeasibly justified, and compelling. Audi's soft self-evidence need have "none of these properties." Intuitions that are self-evident in the soft sense meet the four requirements outlined earlier, but

⁶ Audi, 34.

they need not have the same status as our most basic knowledge and we can even have a minimally adequate understanding of the relevant subject matter without apprehending their truth.⁷ “As long as basic moral principles can be known (or at least justifiably accepted) independently of relying on premises, morality can be understood and practiced as intuitionists understand it.”⁸

Audi considers the move from hard to soft self-evidence for ethical intuitions to strengthen EI against criticism by moderating its claim; if intuitions need not be as obvious as the basic truths of math and logic, less explanation is needed as to why some people are skeptical of them. This is an intentional divergence from Ross, who leaned heavily on the analogy between his intuitive principles and axioms that are more widely considered to be self-evident. Audi is right that this shift strengthens EI against certain types of objections. Take the “dissensus” objection (how can there be so much disagreement over self-evident truths?); if ethical intuitions are about as self-evident as basic mathematical and logical axioms, the blatant fact that there is far more disagreement about the former than the latter poses a clear problem for EI.

The Dissensus Objection

Audi’s EI, in relying only on the soft conception of self-evidence, does stand up considerably better to the dissensus objection. To clarify: this objection is not commonly posed as any sort of knock-down argument. Rather, the sheer volume and severity of moral disagreement seems to count against the plausibility of the EI claim that some moral truths are self-evident, even in the soft sense. Dissensus is a weight on the opposite side of the scale, a

7 Audi, 48

8 Audi, 49

reason against putting all of one's chips behind EI, not a refutation of any foundational EI claim. Let us now examine Audi's responses to this objection.

Part of Audi's response has already been examined; we should not expect similar levels of agreement from intuitions that are self-evident in the soft sense as we do from intuitions that are self-evident in the hard sense. If, as Audi contends, "some people have difficulty understanding Ross's principles in the first place," then our expectation of levels of agreement should be lower still.⁹ EI's lack of popularity among the philosophically inclined still needs addressing, though. Surely we would still expect the self-evident intuitions to win out in the long run for those with the time and ability to properly understand and engage with them. We might even expect the wisest thinkers from other cultures and time periods to have developed their own versions of EI independently of Ross and his contemporaries. Audi brings up an important point, though; EI's claim that some moral intuitions are self-evident "need not also be self-evident."¹⁰ This at least partially addresses the above concerns. If EI is not itself self-evident, we should not necessarily expect widespread agreement about it or for it to have independently originated in a variety of settings. We would still, though, expect the basic Rossian moral intuitions themselves to be widespread, at least among the philosophically inclined.

Here Audi simply maintains that they *are* widespread, at least in their most fundamental forms. "For instance, whether or not we accept Ross's principle concerning promising, we might, both in our reflection and in regulating our conduct, take our having promised to do something as a basic moral reason to do it—*basic* in the sense that its reason-giving force does not derive from

⁹ Audi, 52.

¹⁰ Audi, 52.

some other reason.”¹¹ Though informed opinions about the Rossian principle itself may not meet our expectations of consensus, Audi contends that the basic intuitions of sufficiently thoughtful individuals concerning the fundamental moral concern underlying the principle likely do.

There are a couple of responses I would like to raise here. Firstly, it seems important to acknowledge that utilitarianism, the foundations of which many people find to be quite intuitive, unequivocally denies the fundamental reason-giving force of a promise. Different versions of utilitarianism will have different accounts of why breaking promises is usually (or at least often) wrong (has a negative impact on net happiness), but virtually none grant significant credence to the idea that promises have some intrinsic moral force. This would seem to count strongly against Ross’s notion that real consensus exists on this topic. It does seem to be true, though, that the vast majority of those *not* drawn to utilitarianism do think of morality roughly in these terms; a plurality of types of actions and states of affairs have reason-giving force. Most utilitarians even hold that there is at least one consideration (some form of utility) that generates obligations for moral agents. There does seem to be a real intuitive consensus on that basic point, but the problem is that this point might be too basic for the consensus around it to support EI or Rossian principles in particular. The idea that reason-giving force exists at all may even be a necessary prerequisite for most conceptions of ethics as a field.

This brings me to my second response: it seems that much apparent consensus quickly dissolves if we get into specific applications of Rossian duties given the fundamental differences in ethical norms that seem to exist between people with different cultural backgrounds, as Danny Frederick argues. “The morally-loaded nature of the terms in which the obligations are expressed elicits agreement to them from people who disagree radically over the cases to which those

¹¹ Audi, 52-53.

morally-loaded terms apply.”¹² A conservative Christian, for example, might agree with someone of a more secular, liberal persuasion that we have a duty not to unnecessarily take the life of an innocent person. If conversation between them somehow was restricted solely to the abstract, we might see nothing but emphatic and enthusiastic consensus. But we started to get into specific moral cases, such as abortion regulations or the cost of healthcare, we would see constant and impassioned disagreement over how, and even if, this duty applies. The conservative Christian might think it is obvious that the duty not to kill innocents applies to a fetus just as much as it applies to any other person, while the secular liberal might see little daylight between killing thousands of innocent people every year and failing to provide thousands of people with life-saving healthcare. Agreement about this abstract, Rossian duty simply disguises mountains of disagreement over the various cases to which it may or may not apply. Audi’s contention that widespread consensus does exist, then, seems to be a distraction from the far more consequential ways in which widespread dissensus exists. Still, though, we can grant that the dissensus objection is certainly not a definitive rebuke of EI and move on to another issue: the incommensurability problem.

The Incommensurability Problem

“Any pluralistic ethical view” must provide an account of how there can be “irreducibly different kinds of moral grounds for action.”¹³ Now I would not consider this to be an objection or even a problem per se. It presents some difficulty for the practical implementation of EI, but if EI is the correct moral theory (in the sense that it reflects our most sophisticated available understanding of moral reality or whatever ethical landscape we create for ourselves) then the

¹² Frederick, “Ethical Intuitionism: A Structural Critique,” 638.

¹³ Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 55.

incommensurability problem is just a necessary implication of that theory and an issue that anyone operating within the theory can only work around, not solve. If it turns out our basic duties are incommensurable and we are left without clear-cut answers to a variety of ethical questions, then so be it; those answers are simply unavailable to us and we must make do with what we have. If moral facts exist, as Audi and many others think, then practical considerations have no bearing on the status of an ethical theory. Audi takes what is ultimately a similar stance: “intuitionism does not imply that we typically have non-inferential knowledge of *final* duty.”¹⁴ He also points out that “the difficulty of achieving knowledge or justification when there are conflicting grounds is not peculiar to ethics,”¹⁵ which is certainly true and helps to put this “problem” into proper context.

This view has an interesting implication for EI. If final duties are not necessarily self-evident while basic duties are, then these basic duties seem to be “ineradicable,” that is, those duties that are self-evident cannot nullify each other when it comes to specific applications where they cannot all be met. The higher priority duty may ultimately be found to override other duties with regard to our action, but those duties still exist and we are still responsible for the fact that we did not fulfill them.¹⁶ Let’s illustrate this with the classic, Kant-inspired example: say Jacques is harboring Jews in his basement in Nazi-occupied Paris. When a soldier comes to his door and asks if he knows the whereabouts of any Jews, what should he do? Assuming that Jacques simultaneously has a basic, self-evident obligation not to lie and a basic, self-evident obligation to protect the innocent, EI cannot tell him which obligation wins out and dictates his *final* duty.

14 Audi, 55.

15 Audi, 56.

16 Audi, 26.

What it does tell him, though, is that no matter what his final action should be, the duty that he neglects does not go away. If Jacques should lie to the Nazi to protect the Jews, he will still be accountable for the wrong of lying despite the fact that he was ultimately obligated to lie. If he should tell the truth to the Nazi and fail to protect the Jews, he will still be accountable for that failure despite the fact that he was ultimately obligated to tell the truth.

I bring this up mostly because it is an interesting aspect of Audi's position. I do think the idea that basic duties are ineradicable is extremely counterintuitive, but that does not necessarily make it incorrect. I also think that this position is probably directly implied by the broader position that final duties are not necessarily self-evident while basic duties are (how could a self-evident duty be negated by a non-self-evident duty?), but there may be other plausible ways to address that issue and it is not clear that coming to a definitive answer here would accomplish much in any case.

Conclusions of Reflection

Audi divides all conclusions into two categories based on the method through which they are arrived at: Conclusions of Reflection (CRs) and Conclusions of Inference (CIs). A CI is formed based on reasoned, granular analysis of the available evidence relating to the subject, while a CR is based on a holistic, intuitive assessment of it, without involving "one or more evidential premises."¹⁷ Additionally, he believes that these two types of conclusions are on similar epistemic footing. For him, the distinction between CIs and CRs allows intuitionism to "account both for our need to reflect in order to reach some moral judgments and for the way in which reflective equilibrium can enhance—or its unobtainability can undermine—our

¹⁷ Audi, 41.

justification for an ‘intuitive’ moral judgment and for at least some moral principles.”¹⁸ A CR in particular allows for “a sense in which intuitions can be *globally grounded*: based on an understanding of the proposition seen in the context of the overall grounds for it.”¹⁹ In this section, I will make two responses to Audi’s account: The “Implicit Premises Critique (drawing on Sinnott-Armstrong), and the “Emulation of Inference Objection.”

The Implicit Premises Critique

Can CRs really escape from a reliance on inference? Audi acknowledges that some amount of inference is involved in a CR but denies that a CR is a conclusion of said inference (if he did not deny this, CRs would be reducible to CIs).²⁰ In order to assess the plausibility of this denial, we must determine “whether there is an inference from the beliefs that occur during reflection to the conclusion of that reflection.”²¹ The answer seems to be yes. It is clear that some beliefs are necessarily generated during reflection; we will call these “beliefs of reflection” (BRs). Reflection culminates in the generation of a final belief: the CR. The CR “must be connected both causally and by virtue of its content to the beliefs of reflection in order to count as a conclusion of that reflection.”²² If this were not the case, then the CR of that reflection would not be justified by that reflection. Therefore, reflection involves the generation of BRs that

18 Audi, 42-43.

19 Audi, 42.

20 Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 46-47.

21 Sinnott-Armstrong, “Reflections of Reflection in Robert Audi’s Moral Intuitionism,” 22.

22 Sinnott-Armstrong, 22.

justify the reflector in believing the CR, which just so happens to fit “Audi’s own definition of inferential grounding.”²³

To say that a cognition, such as a judgment or a belief of a moral principle, is inferentially grounded in another cognition is roughly to say that the first is held on the basis of the second (or cannot be properly held by the person in question apart from such an inferential connection).²⁴

If CRs are inferentially grounded in BRs, what distinction is left to make between CRs and CIs? Sinnott-Armstrong offers the possibility that the distinction might instead “rest on the... [reflector’s] consciousness or articulation of the inferential structure or its elements.”²⁵ In other words, the reflector might think about his reflection as a CR despite the fact that it is, when considered apart from his opinion of it, a CI. This does not seem to be a sufficiently thick distinction, and Audi’s own conception of CR does not seem to make room for it. “What we really need from Audi is a definition of inference that brings out the crucial difference between conclusions of reflection and conclusions of inference.”²⁶

On top of this necessary first-order inference, having a justified CR seems to necessitate second-order inferences concerning the adequacy of one’s own reflection. Audi implies this necessity *twice* in his example wherein a reflector considers a poem in order to determine whether or not its language is artificial; the reflector engages in “two readings, one silent and one aloud”²⁷ and arrives at the CR through a “sense of the integration of vocabulary, movement, and

23 Sinnott-Armstrong, 22.

24 Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 113.

25 Sinnott-Armstrong, “Reflections of Reflection in Robert Audi’s Moral Intuitionism,” 23.

26 Sinnott-Armstrong, 25.

27 Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 41.

content.”²⁸ She “seems to believe that reflection is adequate on issues like this when it is based on two readings,” and “that reflection on... the integration of vocabulary, movement, and content, is enough.”²⁹ Even without Audi’s implications, it seems quite clear that a reflector “needs at least some implicit beliefs about when reflection is adequate in order to know when to stop reflecting and draw a conclusion.”³⁰ If so, these beliefs would again have to act as premises for second-order inferences, which, again, perfectly matches Audi’s own definition of inferential grounding.

Sinnot-Armstrong does not see a plausible route for Audi to take in denying the above. If the reflector does not have a belief that his reflection was adequate to justify his belief, then either he believes that the reflection is inadequate, has considered whether or not his reflection is adequate but come to no conclusion, or has not considered the adequacy of his reflection at all. It is hard to see how he would be justified in believing his CR in any of those cases.³¹

Audi has responded, albeit briefly, to some of the above concerns. Audi asserts that a reflector does not need to believe anything in particular about the object of his reflection; he “need only *understand* [the object of reflection] and appropriately *respond* to [it].”³² But surely one must believe things about the object of reflection if one is to understand it sufficiently to arrive at a justified CR concerning it. For example, say that, after some reflection, I have decided that I should donate to a particular charity. Either this charity exists, or it does not exist. If it does

28 Audi, 41.

29 Sinnot-Armstrong, “Reflections of Reflection in Robert Audi’s Moral Intuitionism,” 25.

30 Sinnot-Armstrong, 25-26.

31 Sinnot-Armstrong, 26.

32 Audi, “Intuition, Reflection, and Justification,” 202.

not exist but I believe that it exists (or vice versa), then I lack sufficient understanding to appropriately respond to my situation. My belief about the charity's existence has to be accurate for me to understand it enough to have said appropriate response. My belief, therefore, seems to be a necessary component of my sufficient understanding, making "sufficient understanding" virtually indistinguishable from "sufficient belief."

Similarly, Audi holds that "the perception of a property can ground a judgment without doing so by yielding beliefs that supply premises for that judgment."³³ In other words, it is possible to ground a CR with the perception of *A* without having any particular beliefs about *A* or my perception of it. But how can I come to a judgment that involves a perception without the belief, say, that the elements of the perception that were necessary to come to the judgment were accurately perceived? If I believed that my perceptions were inaccurate, I could not possibly be justified in coming to any conclusions based on them. Audi's example provides no help; he presents a situation in which I recognize an old friend from high school based on "thoughtfully contemplating [his] facial properties."³⁴ Again, is my belief that I perceived those facial properties accurately not a prerequisite for my justifiably believing that I had actually recognized my old friend?

Lastly, Audi questions whether one must have second-order beliefs about the adequacy of a reflection in order to know when to stop reflecting. He offers two scenarios in which this might not be the case: we "reach the judgment we sought to make" which doesn't seem to be a case where we are justified in believing said conclusion, or we reach a "judgment that brings a sense

33 Audi, 202.

34 Audi, 202.

of something like closure”³⁵ which, again, doesn’t seem to be a shining example of justified belief. These are both clear illustrations of a pervasive problem in CRs: our intuitions often mislead us due to a variety of well-understood cognitive biases. Audi offers no argument as to why those beliefs would be justified, so I have little choice but to take them as illustrations of my point rather than his.

The above foreshadows my own objection to Audi’s views about CRs. So let us take a step back and pretend that none of Sinnott-Armstrong’s critiques hit their marks. Sinnott-Armstrong does not even necessarily see his critiques as decisive rebukes of Audi, only demonstrations that Audi needs a better definition of inference for the CI/CR distinction to play the role that he wants it to. To my knowledge, Audi has yet to provide this definition, opting instead to (unsuccessfully, as I have argued) dispute some of the steps in Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument. In any case, we will now take a different but related approach to rejecting Audi’s conception of the role that reflection plays in the generation of justified moral beliefs.

The Emulation of Inference Objection

My view is that CIs are properly and inevitably the metric by which CRs are and should be judged. As stated, this view applies only if we meet Audi on his terms and accept that CRs do not rely on inference to be justified. If CRs do rely on inference (as Sinnott-Armstrong has persuasively argued), then they are merely sloppy, epistemically inadequate CIs. I will write this section as though I were unpersuaded by Sinnott-Armstrong’s arguments, however, so as to avoid unnecessary interdependence. In that light, let us consider Audi’s poem example more closely:

Consider reading a poem with a view to deciding whether its language is artificial.

After two readings, one silent and one aloud, we might judge that the language is

35 Audi, 203.

indeed artificial. This judgment could be a response to evidential propositions that occur to one, say that the author has manipulated words to make the lines scan. But the judgment need not so arise. If the artificiality is subtler, there may be a stilted quality to the poem. In this second case, one judges from a global, intuitive sense of the integration of vocabulary, movement, and content.³⁶

Note the implication here: if the artificiality is obvious then inference will suffice, but if it is subtler then this “global, intuitive” reflection (not based on any inference) is *necessary*. This seems to be a backwards understanding of this case. Imagine a reader (let’s call her Abby) who thoroughly analyzed every single characteristic of the poem, viewed each in light of all the others, and came to a CI based on a comprehensive set of all the evidential reasons that the poem is *probably* artificial (since, of course, it is not realistic for any reader to divine the intentions or mindset of the poem’s author). Abby has engaged in more or less an ideal process of rational inference, and the CI at which she ultimately arrives is probably the most accurate that will be available to any reader, assuming she is sufficiently competent. Audi’s reader (let’s call him Fred), who judged “from a global, intuitive sense of the integration of vocabulary, movement, and content,” has arrived at a conclusion with the same content as Abby’s (the poem seems to him, too, to be artificial), but an essential question remains: which of the two readers is more justified in believing their conclusion?

Let us consider the resources each reader brought to bear in their effort to assess the artificiality of the poem. Abby used all the evidence from the poem that she could think to assess. While she surely left a few things out, she was as thorough as anyone could reasonably expect her to be, perhaps more so. Additionally, she conducted her analysis of this evidence carefully, using paper to keep herself organized, and spelled out all her reasoning so that she

36 Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 41.

would have the best chance of catching any errors. Fred, on the other hand, was less careful. He had a strong feeling that the poem was artificial after reading a few lines, sensing its slightly stilted quality. Though he did not necessarily realize it, this initial assessment colored his experience of the remaining text (and of the poem spoken in full), as details that supported his initial assessment jumped out at him and he paid less attention to details that did not. Abby's thorough analysis, then, was ultimately more "global" and involved a better examination of "vocabulary, movement, and content," among many other factors, than Fred's did. There is no space left, it seems, to identify any epistemic advantage that Fred's process has that isn't hopelessly outweighed by the many advantages of Abby's. She has "obtained a view of the whole"³⁷ that is considerably more accurate than his.

The conclusion that Abby is more justified than Fred in believing that the poem is probably artificial now seems irresistible. If Fred wanted to improve his process such that he might become more justified in believing his conclusion, he could realistically do no better than to make his process more closely resemble Abby's. Audi allows for this possibility in the case of a particularly difficult judgment; "comparison and inference may be needed" if "two details in a poem... conflict in relation to" Fred's conclusion.³⁸ Yet it is also true for simple judgments; if Fred had the immediate and compelling intuition that the poem was artificial, he could move on with a comfortable degree of confidence. But if he wanted to *check* his intuitive conclusion, he would do so by conducting an analysis like Abby's. Abby's conclusion is the best proxy for truth we could realistically have access to in this case, barring perhaps the testimony of the poem's author (though that would open the door to issues of honesty and self-awareness).

³⁷ Audi, 42.

³⁸ Audi, 43.

There is at least one type of response open to Audi here. He could object that, while in the abstract a carefully-arrived-at CI can be more justifiably believed than a CR, CRs are far more common and useful in everyday life. On top of that, there is only so much information that we can consciously wrestle with at a time; perhaps Fred could not emulate Abby's process if he tried. While there is some merit to this objection, it must first be emphasized that it only works on a practical level. Just because Fred does not have the time or aptitude to conduct Abby's process does not mean that he should not hope that his conclusion matches Abby's, because Abby is still far more justified in believing it than Fred is. But yes: Abby's process just might not be worth Fred's time and, especially given the low stakes, he can be perfectly comfortable going with his gut, at least temporarily.

Additionally, it should be acknowledged that a non-inferential reflection can be more or less valuable (in a practical rather than epistemic sense) depending on its subject and the individual conducting it. An incredibly complex math problem, for example, can only be accurately derived through a careful rational process. The luckiest, most intuitive person alive will not have any chance of finding the right answer by merely getting a feel for the many lines of equations. In this case we at least theoretically know that a correct answer is out there to be found, making it totally unnecessary to rely on guesswork. A more pertinent example, of course, would be the evaluation of a value-laden statement, such as "it is wrong to use a human being merely as a means to any other end." Given the sheer volume of uncertainties at play in evaluating a statement like this, anyone might be perfectly justified in refusing to attempt a detailed approach, opting instead to go with their gut: "yeah, that seems about right to me." But if we wanted to find the correct evaluation (as we surely do), that person's gut is not the authority we would look to; we would instead seek out someone who has thought about the

problem carefully for decades. Sure, the latter individual may have spent those decades justifying her original gut feeling, but those decades should at least increase our confidence in the truth of her assessment over that of the first individual.

Intuitionism and Value

This final section diverges a bit from the first two; here I will be evaluating an account of value that Audi presents as compatible with, but not essential to, EI. If the conclusion I defend is correct, it is not at all clear that it has broader implications for the coherence of Audi's EI as an ethical theory, though it very well might. My goal for what follows, then, is not to refute EI but to argue that Audi's understanding of how an "experientialist" account of value can fit into EI is seriously flawed.

Audi's Account of Value

Audi sketches a model of value based firmly in experience. He considers *intrinsic* value to be a thing that is a characteristic of our subjective experience; "it's presence in our lives is what makes living them worthwhile."³⁹ On his account, it cannot be part of things that are external to our experience. He asks, "what is intrinsically good about art or truth or even virtue, apart from contemplation or some other kind of experience of them, in ourselves or others?"⁴⁰ He goes on to identify a few other ways that things can have value of various kinds, but it is important to note that all of those forms of value are dependent on intrinsic value, which can be found only in experience. This is the heart of experientialism.

39 Audi, 99.

40 Audi, 100.

Things that are external to our experience but could bring about intrinsic value upon our coming into contact with them have *inherent* value. They “are, in Aristotle’s terminology, less ‘final’ than the intrinsic goods they enable us to realize.”⁴¹ This is distinguished from *instrumental* value, which things have if they are used as tools to bring about intrinsically valuable states. Inherently valuable things, such as a beautiful piece of music, are not tools for producing intrinsic value, but things that are “partly *constitutive*” of intrinsically valuable experience.⁴² This distinction is a little thin (a kayak is a tool for enabling us to have the intrinsically valuable experience of kayaking, but it is also partly constitutive of that experience), but I will let it rest for the moment. Lastly, Audi identifies *contributory* value, which something may have (regardless of whether or not it has any other form of value) if it contributes to the value of something else in some way.

Each of these forms of value is, again, dependent on intrinsic value. They are essentially restatements of intrinsic value, with the difference in name reflecting the step or two that they are removed from that value. For Audi, though, these other types of value meaningfully expand the normative implications of experientialism such that it can “solve the empty world problem,” and show “that there are inappropriate objects even of experiences that embody an intrinsic good,”⁴³ thereby demonstrating that, “despite initial appearances, experientialism is not a narrow theory of value.”⁴⁴ This is similar to the project of the rule utilitarian who wants to show that utilitarianism, properly understood, does not in fact contradict our intuitions with the frequency

41 Audi, 101.

42 Audi, 101.

43 Audi, 102.

44 Audi, 105.

and severity that many of its critics assert. If a utilitarian theory of value can support Rossian principles (making them overdetermined in the way that Audi has argued is possible), it would perhaps be in a position to resolve some of the divisions that have plagued ethics throughout modern history.

The Narrowness of Experientialism

Readers familiar with the basic landscape of ethical theory, though, may be surprised that Audi thinks that experientialism, an apparently consequentialist conception of value, is really able to support a broadly Kantian formulation of EI. Such readers' gut feelings, I will argue, happen to be right in this case; experientialism is too narrow to justify the Rossian principles of Audi's EI. This can be demonstrated by examining Audi's attempts at reconciling the two perspectives. Audi, following Kant, asserts that "people can ill-deserve the good their lives contain."⁴⁵ This is certainly an intuitive claim for most people, but can it be justified from an experientialist perspective? He provides an example to illustrate this possibility:

Suppose a malicious and unrepentant murderer is living in hiding. His going unpunished is (morally) bad. But imagine that he begins to enjoy life (through pleasures of food and drink with no redeeming value). The overall state of affairs, his going unpunished and enjoying his life, is inherently worse than his simply going unpunished, and our contemplating it should be morally distressing and in that respect intrinsically bad.⁴⁶

For Audi, the above "facts" are best explained by the further fact that an experientialist value calculation cannot be mere addition. "If it were, then the addition of pleasure to the murderer's

45 Audi, 103.

46 Audi, 110.

life would produce a better, not a worse, state of affairs.”⁴⁷ This relies on some concept of deservingness, fairness, or fittingness, each of which are invoked by Audi in this section but none of which are supported by experientialism. Nowhere in the idea that conscious states have value does desert enter the picture. Desert is an utterly separate concept, unimplied by the existence of this type of value; if it existed in any sense, it would need its own independent explanation (which Audi does not provide).

Let us look at two different versions of Audi’s case that contain different morally relevant details and may demand different responses:

- A. The murderer is utterly anonymous. No one who knows the murderer in his current location has any idea of his past crimes, and no one who knows of the murders he committed knows his identity or current situation. The family(ies) of his victim(s), then, are completely unaffected by his enjoyment of life or his lack of remorse.
- B. The murderer was caught and tried for his crimes, but he escaped justice on a technicality and now frequently posts both his enjoyment of life and his lack of remorse to social media, where many people, including the family(ies) of the victim(s), often see it.

From an experientialist perspective, the murderer’s happiness in case *A* is pure upside. An individual is experiencing pleasure, and no one who might be negatively affected by being aware of that pleasure is aware of it. The murderer’s situation is totally unknown to them, so the murderer’s situation has no bearing on their happiness. In case *B*, however, the reverse is true. While the murderer’s happiness is still an intrinsic good, it comes with many downsides, including tormenting those who knew the victim(s) and serving as a bad influence on those who might consider carrying out murders themselves. These downsides are not attributes of the

⁴⁷ Audi, 110.

murderer's pleasure itself, but consequences of the broader context in which that pleasure takes place.

Audi also attempts to justify the Kantian notion that the reasons for action can be identified with the action itself rather than the state of affairs that the action brings about. "Reasons for action are directed to bringing something about and may often be conceived as aimed at realizing some value, but they need not always be directed toward bringing about something further than what, in the circumstances, is entailed in the action itself. This is one way to express the contrast between deontological and consequentialist ethical theories."⁴⁸ Audi clarifies that actions cannot have intrinsic value, only inherent value; an action is not itself a conscious experience, but the experience of engaging in or considering the action may bring about intrinsically valuable conscious experiences. Yet it should be quite clear that, if the action brings about intrinsically valuable experiences, those are consequences of the action. If I help a stranger collect belongings he has dropped, the positive experiences we both have are a result of that action, not "entailed in the action itself." Inherent value, then, seems to simply be a conceptual repackaging of consequences.

This brings us to the fundamental problem with Audi's attempts here; the types of value that he posits as distinct from (but dependent on) intrinsic value are not up to the task he puts them to. The inherent value of a thing comes from the consequences of that thing's interaction with conscious experience. This is also true of the instrumental value of a thing: the intrinsically valuable experiences that a family's dining room table enables are the consequence of the effectiveness of the carpenter's tools. The tools themselves have no value outside of that consequence and other, similar consequences. And finally, the same is true of contributory value;

48 Audi, 106.

the condiments on the aforementioned family's dining room table have the consequence of improving the taste of their food, which in turn improves the quality of their dinner experience. The lack of a particularly strong distinction between each of these non-intrinsic types of value is telling; they all refer to states of affairs that have consequences for conscious states, or consequences for other states of affairs that have consequences for conscious states, and so on. None of Audi's notions of value that is dependent on intrinsic value makes any more room for non-consequentialist morality than intrinsic value itself does.

The point of the above is not to demonstrate that experientialism is implausible; experientialism is quite close to my own view of how value is best assigned. The point is instead that experientialism has many extremely counterintuitive implications. If your ethical system is ultimately at the mercy of your moral intuitions, it will inevitably come into stark conflict with an ethical system that is built entirely on the idea that the quality of experience is the only source of value, and hence the only thing with any reason-giving force. Alone, the only implication this has for Audi's EI is that self-evident Rossian duties are not necessarily overdetermined. If that self-evidence were to fail, though, as previous sections have attempted to show, then we would be left with little theoretical basis on which to take Rossian duties seriously, even if they are still of some practical use.

Conclusion: Moral Skepticism?

If my attacks on self-evidence, intuitive reflection, and experientialism as a basis for Rossian duties have succeeded, what are we left with? Thus far, I have left what for many may be the elephant in the room unaddressed; EI may be the only justificatory framework that is

capable of supporting any ethical theory at all. Its supposed lack of reliance on any inference lets it escape the skeptical regress, expressed by Sinnott-Armstrong as follows:

It seems that, if a person is justified in holding a certain moral belief, that person must have some reason to believe it. That reason must be expressible in some argument. That argument must have some premises. If the person is not justified in believing its premises, that argument cannot make the person justified in believing its conclusion. But, if the person is to be justified in believing those new premises, then the believer needs another argument for those premises. That argument must itself have further premises. And so on.⁴⁹

EI stops this regress by asserting that some premises need no argument to justify them, and hence that there is no need for further premises (which would need their own justification) to support that argument. Most of us accept this move in other areas; the idea that “two instances of two entities are, when taken together, four entities” is self-evident is far less controversial than the idea that “we always have a duty to not lie” is self-evident. Why should we accept the veracity of our human intuition in the first case but reject it in the second?

This issue is, of course, far beyond the scope of this paper. It also seems to be beyond the scope of Audi’s EI. He acknowledges that even if objections to self-evidence such as mine succeed, we can still “be amply justified in believing” our self-evident moral judgments, “and in stopping the regress” by doing so, “even if we cannot justify claiming... [them] to be self-evident.”⁵⁰ This seems to essentially be a concession to pragmatism, and one that I ultimately agree with. We cannot put all our human projects on hold while epistemologists attempt to solve the riddle of human knowledge; we have to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps at some point. This necessity is some form of justification, just not the one that epistemologists are after or that

⁴⁹ Sinnott-Armstrong, “Moral Relativity and Intuitionism,” 1.

⁵⁰ Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 41.

I have been referencing in my various arguments against Audi's EI. Even if all of Audi's attempts to achieve one of those other forms of justification has failed, he can still fall back on the justification of necessity. While I might argue that Audi's approach to navigating this lesser landscape of justification leaves far too much room for the acceptance of an arbitrarily large number of assumptions, the very notion of argumentation becomes difficult to make sense of when one is operating within said justificatory landscape. That, too, is well beyond the scope of this paper.

I can only leave you with a few reasons to look for alternatives to the ethical theory Audi has presented in *The Good in the Right*. I have presented several problems that his conception of self-evidence encounters, though I also acknowledged ways that his version of EI mitigates some of them and that none of them are necessarily fatal. I put forward two objections to Audi's views about the proper role of reflection in arriving at justified beliefs. Following Sinnott-Armstrong, I argued first that conclusions of reflection require the reflector to have at least some ideas about the context of the object and the proper parameters of judgment about the object for reflection to begin, causing Audi's distinction between conclusions of reflection and conclusions of inference to at least partially break down. I also argued that conclusions of reflection are epistemically inferior to conclusions of inference. Lastly, I argued that experientialism is too narrow a theory of value to support Rossian duties due to its lack of support for concepts like fittingness and desert and the way in which all kinds of value reduce to intrinsic, experience-based value.

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