

# Intuitionism and Emotivism

## Compare and contrast Intuitionism and Emotivism.

Intuitionism and emotivism are both meta-ethical attempts to *explain* the terms “good” and “bad” without being caught in the naturalistic fallacy described by GE Moore in his work *Principia Ethica*. Moore’s theory states that good cannot be defined in terms of natural qualities like pleasure, nature and rationality – as theories such as utilitarianism and natural moral law would have us believe – but instead “good” can not be defined in terms of anything but itself, and following this through to a moral theory we can conclude “*that neither science nor religion can establish the basic principles of morality.*”<sup>1</sup>

Intuitionism holds that there are objective moral truths, but rather than reasoning or deducing these truths, they are self evident to the “mature” mind. Moore contends that just as we *know* there is a world out there, we *know* objective moral truths – they are just common sense or intuition.

These truths are universal and beyond human experience and reasoning, and from them we gain our sense of what is “good” and what is “bad”. Moore would say we can see these self evident truths when, in an argument, we are reduced to “*it’s just wrong,*” they require no further explanation, proof or justification.

Moore sets out his argument for intuitionism in this format:

- Some moral truths are known.
  - To prove a moral belief you appeal to more basic beliefs.
  - You cannot infinitely break down to more basic beliefs.
- ∴ Some moral truths – basic moral truths – are known but not provable.

This seems a fairly logical conclusion, in order to justify what we do we look at it in basic terms, but such a process could not take place indefinitely without coming to a base truth which could not be broken down further. It’s the classic “*it just is*” situation in an argument, where the statement cannot be further simplified nor justified.

The problem however is agreeing on what these basic moral truths are. Moore and WD Ross a fellow intuitionist agreed that pleasure, knowledge and virtue are all intrinsically good, and pain, ignorance and vice are intrinsically bad. However, they disagreed about our basic moral duties. Moore’s pseudo-utilitarian view was maximising good consequences for everyone – by evaluating the possible consequences of an action in

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<sup>1</sup> Moore, *Principia Ethica*

terms of the basic principles. Ross however took a non consequentialist view and said there are self evident duties as well, such as “always keep your promises”.

Unlike Intuitionism, Emotivism does not purport the existence of objective moral facts, truths or duties. Instead it takes a very different look at ethics, suggesting that the terms “good” and “bad” are merely emotional responses to an action or situation. Emotivism was born out of the logical positivist movement, which supports the claim that if something cannot be empirically or analytically verified, then it is meaningless.

Ethical facts cannot be empirically shown to be true, we don’t detect a “wrong-ness” when we perform an action which is wrong, or similarly observe intrinsic “goodness” in an action. Nor can we analytically prove ethical facts, Hume’s Is-Ought gap has shown how we are unable to substitute other terms for “good” meaningfully. As such, for the logical positivists there was no such thing as an ethical fact, it is a meaningless concept for such a fact could never be verified. Intuitionism asks us to take for granted the existence of these facts, but for the logical positivists there is no *actual* proof, and therefore it is not correct to *assume* their existence.

The key idea behind emotivism is that morality is not anything objective; it is just a concept for our emotions. As AJ Ayer outlines in his work *Language, Truth and Logic*, “*The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content*”. What Ayer is trying to get across is that that an ethical symbol (a term such as “good”, “wrong”, “bad) does not have any real factual value in a statement. To say someone acted wrongly, “*I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it.*”, there is no extra “content” to the statement, it’s the same as saying it in a disapproving tone of voice.

Unlike intuitionism there will be no moral facts to disagree over, emotion is a personal thing – and moral terms are just a way of expressing that. It seems silly to say, but “the killing of Jews is good” is the same as to say “hurrah! for killing Jews”. It’s most probably the case that we do not agree with that emotion, but it is in no way forced upon us like a universal truth from intuitionism. Continuing our example, Hitler was lending his support to an action when he declared that the killing of Jews was good, he was not expressing a moral fact.

A benefit to the emotivist belief over many other theories, intuitionism included, is the ability to be in disagreement with someone’s belief, and have the potential to validly change their belief. For a subjectivist, when Hitler says “the killing of Jews is good”, this statement becomes necessarily true – which seems horrendous, and there’s nothing anyone can do to change that. With emotivism however, we are well within our rights to challenge someone’s belief, and try to persuade them to a more tolerant stance.

A problem with this is that people can be persuaded wrongly, but still *know* that it is wrong. Expanding further upon our example, in Nazi Germany propaganda was used to persuade people that the holocaust was justified, yet many of the people involved have since claimed that in their hearts they knew it was wrong all along. As if there *was* some objective truth they were intuiting telling them so.

Both these theories are descriptive, they are seeking to understand how our morality operates, and as such both seem a very close match to what we *actually* do in everyday life. Emotivism explains why we cannot accurately define good and bad, it explains why we have moral disagreements, intuitionism explains how we can get into a situation from which we know we are *just right*, without any means to justify it. However, matching what we do now does not necessitate a *good* moral theory, or a correct one.

As descriptive theories, neither emotivism nor intuitionism is actually able to counsel us on what to do in a given situation. When we turn to moral theories, it is often to advise on the best course of action for a given situation. Utilitarianism calls upon us to evaluate the most pleasurable consequences, situation ethics asks us to perform the most loving actions, and so on. Emotivism especially gives no advice on what to do at all, merely describing what people *do* do.

Both theories also have severe logical faults. Intuitionism falls apart in the technicalities with a circular argument, as it assumes the existence of these objective truths, as well as assuming their content. Emotivism has a severe logical flaw which caused the logical positivists to give up their beliefs – since, why should we accept the statement “*a genuine truth claim is either empirically or rationally justifiable*”, when this statement itself is neither empirically nor rationally justifiable?

With their logical inconsistencies it would be generous to say either theory succeeded in explaining morality, however both theories have aspects which seem positive and realistic. But, with no proof for either theory, and the logical positivists themselves surrendering their views when presenting with the criticisms there is little else left in their favour.

In conclusion, the theories each try to challenge our previously naturalistic understanding of ethics by taking stances which do not depend upon our sensory experience of the world nor objective facts. But aside from their aim, and their failure to attain it there is little other likeness between the two theories. Intuitionism asks us to accept universal truths which we intuit, whilst emotivism holds no ethical truths and views ethical language as the expression of emotion.