Review of Intuitionism by David Kaspar

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Intuitionism is the theory that our moral intuitions are mostly correct; this is to say that the majority of our moral beliefs that are founded on our moral intuitions accurately capture genuine moral truths about the world. In *Intuitionism*, David Kaspar advocates a stronger theory of intuitionism, according to which our intuitions are always correct; he argues that each of knows what the right thing to do even if we don't believe that we do.

Kaspar assumes that strong intuitionism is true and asks what a completed intuitionist theory would look like. He believes that science can serve as a model for philosophers. One popular criticism of philosophy in general, and moral philosophy in particular, is that it contemporary philosophers are no closer to discovering truth than those who came centuries before. In contrast, Kaspar contends, science builds upon scientific discoveries and thinkers of the past. There is a general consensus that contemporary scientific theories are closer to getting it right about the world than those that came before it. To support this claim, Kaspar cites how in physics Newton's laws are said to cover macroscopic objects, Einstein’s laws gravity, Bohr’s laws quantum events, so forth and so on. A completed intuitionist theory, he contends, will follow science’s lead, and incorporate the strengths of various intuitionist and ethicist theories; he then provides a laundry list of disparate normative theories that he believes would be part of a completed intuitionist theory of ethics.

Roughly, Kaspar is suggesting that the complete intuitionist theory is one that is comprised of the most appealing aspects of normative theories from the past. This approach is not necessarily as *ad hoc* as it may appear, though, as most
moral philosophers treat moral intuitions as playing a privileged role in their theory, counting consistency with moral intuitions as evidence of their theory’s worth. Because intuitionism asserts that our moral intuitions give us moral knowledge, any elements of a normative theory that are said to be consistent with our moral intuitions are candidates for a complete intuitionist theory of ethics. However, there are two substantive aspects of Kasper’s approach that undermine his efforts.

First, it appears as if Kasper’s appeal to great thinkers in ethics is inconsistent. For example, he rejects the idea of an overarching supreme moral principle that is capable of determining what the right thing to do in any given situation. However, many prominent normative ethicists have the intuition that, there are a finite number of moral laws - often times a single supreme moral principle that would be capable of telling us how to act in any given situation. Furthermore, ethicists have good reasons to believe this intuition is correct; two reasons stand out: (1) a supreme moral principle is more ontologically parsimonious than multiple principles, and far more parsimonious (and practical) than an infinite number of moral principles, and (2) ethics is understood as the branch of philosophy concerned with answering the question “What is the right thing to do?” for any given situation. A supreme moral principle would be one that could answer this question for any situation we might face ourselves in. To know the supreme principle, then, is to know what the right thing to do is no matter what situation you find yourself in. By dismissing our intuitions about a supreme moral principle, Kasper rejects the fundamental tenant of his strong intuitionism - that our intuitions capture moral truth.

Second Kasper seems confused about the relationship between the laws of physics; Newton’s laws of motion are theories about the world as a whole, not merely the macroscopic objects. The problem is that these laws are demonstrably false when we apply them to the subatomic level. Given that humans primarily interact with macroscopic objects, Newton’s laws are instrumentally valuable tools, but they fail to capture genuine laws of nature. We don’t know the laws of nature. Indeed, Scientists have long looked for a unifying scientific theory that explained all physical phenomena at all levels with the accuracy that Newton’s, Bohr’s, and Einstein’s describe crude subsections of nature; such a theory would be a complete theory about the laws of nature.

Kasper’s goal is to construct a complete intuitionist theory, which if true would capture the actual moral law or laws that govern our world; but he treats contemporary science as a model for constructing such a theory despite the fact that contemporary scientific theories, like Newton’s laws, are generally accepted to do just about everything but capture the actual natural laws that govern our world.

Kasper’s discussion of intuitionism is, at times, compelling, but unfortunately there is a substantial oversight that undermines his effort: This book is missing a thorough discussion of knowledge. The central thesis of strong intuitionism is that each of us knows what the right thing to do is - even if we don’t know that we know. Unfortunately the author devotes less than a page (52) to the topic, asserting that knowledge is merely justified true belief. However it is generally accepted by epistemologists, or knowledge theorists, that Gettier-cases, named for a case presented by Edmund Gettier, constitute counter-examples to this otherwise commonsense theory of knowledge. In the traditional Gettier case, an agent comes to have a true belief that they are justified in having, but their justification is a red herring that has no relationship to the truth-making aspect of the belief. It is generally accepted that in these cases, agents lack knowledge despite having justified, true beliefs. In the same way that there is substantive disagreement between moral philosophers, there is substantive disagreement between epistemologists on what constitutes knowledge.

Many epistemologists agree that although the definition of knowledge as justified true belief is false, it is probably close enough to describe most of the scenarios we deal with in our everyday lives; of course the same can be said for Newton’s laws, although they don’t capture true natural laws, most of us will get along just swell by applying Newton’s laws as if they were true. But just as the
amalgam of Newton's laws, Bohr's laws, and Einstein's laws don't capture the
natural laws, we have no reason to think the amalgam of moral theories Kaspar
strings together captures the moral laws that govern the actual world.

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