

THE SEEMING ACCOUNT OF SELF-EVIDENCE: AN ALTERNATIVE TO AUDIAN ACCOUNT

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I argue against the epistemology of some contemporary moral intuitionists who believe that the notion of self-evidence is more important than that of intuition. Quite the contrary, I think the notion of intuition is more basic if intuitions are construed as intellectual seemings. First, I will start with elaborating Robert Audi's account of self-evidence. Next, I criticise his account on the basis of the idea of "adequate understanding." I shall then present my alternative account of self-evidence which is based on the seeming account of intuition. Finally, I show how the seeming account of self-evidence can make the moral intuitionist epistemology more tenable.

KEYWORDS: intuition, seemings, self-evidence, Robert Audi, intuitionist epistemology, George Bealer

1. The Concept of Self-evidence

Robert Audi refines and categorises the idea of self-evidence, as he wants to shape his own view of moral intuitionism, which he has dubbed "ethical reflectionism."¹ Moral intuitionists like Audi believe that some propositions are self-evident if, and only if, an understanding of them is sufficient justification for believing them, and is sufficient to know the proposition, provided one believes them on the basis of one's understanding of them. He characterises self-evident propositions such that

- (1) if one can sufficiently understand them, then in the light of that understanding one is justified in believing them, and
- (2) if one believes them on the basis of that understanding, then one can know them.²

¹ Robert Audi, "Self-Evidence," *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999): 205-228.

² Robert Audi, "Ethical Reflectionism," *The Monist* 76 (1993): 303; Robert Audi, "Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundation of Ethics," in *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology*, eds. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University

Of course, one might know that *p* even if one does not know that *p* is self-evident. In other words, “[w]e do not need to know that *p* is self-evident to know that *p* on the basis of an understanding of it.”³ Thus, for the sake of clarity, we can distinguish between

(a) knowing a self-evident proposition

and

(b) knowing that this proposition is self-evident.

Apprehending the *truth* of a self-evident proposition is one thing, but apprehending its *self-evidence* is another thing. It is the understanding of the truth of a self-evident proposition that is all a moral intuitionist needs to claim.⁴ Because one might know some self-evident propositions but might not know that they are self-evident. However, it is not true that (a) and (b) are not connected at all, for to know that a proposition is self-evident one needs at least to know the self-evident proposition in question based on adequate understanding.

To illustrate, consider young children who know certain simple self-evident mathematical propositions, but do not even have the concept of self-evidence at all. Similarly, we can have rational and reasonable beliefs even if we do not have any beliefs about reasons. Parfit, for example, observes that

Young children respond rationally to certain reasons or apparent reasons, though they do not yet have the concept of a reason.⁵

When we refer to an adequate understanding of a self-evident proposition, provided one believes that proposition, this does not entail that one *necessarily must* believe it. Self-evident propositions are knowable on the basis of a sufficient understanding of them. But understanding does not necessarily cause one to

Press, 1996), 114; Robert Audi, “Moderate Intuitionism and the Epistemology of Moral Judgment,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 1 (1998): 20-22; Robert Audi, “Moral Knowledge and Ethical Pluralism,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, eds. John Greco and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999), 283; Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1998), 95.

³ Philip Stratton-Lake, “Introduction,” in *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations*, ed. Philip Stratton-Lake (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 20. See also Audi, “Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundation of Ethics,” 106-107.

⁴ Audi, “Ethical Reflectionism,” 286; Audi, “Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundation of Ethics,” 107-108.

⁵ Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 118.

believe them. To understand a proposition entails “being able to apply it to (and withhold its application from) an apparently wide range of cases, and being able to see some of its logical implications.”⁶ If one does not have an ability to draw at least one inference *from* the proposition in question, one probably does not really understand the proposition.

In Audi’s view, since self-evident propositions are those propositions one can justifiably believe on the basis of adequately understanding them alone, Audi’s view makes it sound like self-evident propositions must be all *a priori* truths.⁷ This is because on the one hand, for justifiably believing in self-evident propositions we merely need adequate understanding. On the other hand, this condition is what we need for justifiably believing *a priori* truths. Audi, for example, notes that this proposition is self-evident: “The mother-in-law of my father’s son-in-law is my mother.” If one has an adequate grasp of this proposition, one can know it to be *true*, provided that one believes it on the basis of this understanding. For self-evident propositions are such that we can know them to be *true* on the basis of understanding them adequately, and need not to be known on the basis of any other things beyond a grasp of the proposition itself. Audi claims that such knowledge is *non-inferential*.

According to Audi, we can distinguish the notion of self-evidence into two types, from two aspects in terms of understanding. First, we have “hard” self-evident and “soft” self-evident propositions. Second, we have “immediately” self-evident and “mediately” self-evident ones.⁸ A hard self-evident proposition is

- (1) strongly axiomatic, in the sense that there is no other proposition which is better justified than it,
- (2) immediately understandable, in the sense that it does not need reflection to be understood,
- (3) indefeasibly justified and
- (4) cognitively compelling, in the sense that if one understands it one cannot resist believing it.⁹

⁶ Audi, “Moderate Intuitionism and the Epistemology of Moral Judgment,” 22.

⁷ There is a further question whether all *a priori* propositions are self-evident. I will discuss this issue later.

⁸ Audi, “Moderate Intuitionism and the Epistemology of Moral Judgment,” 22, 24; Audi, “Ethical Reflectionism,” 303; Audi, “Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundation of Ethics,” 284; Robert Audi, *The Good in the Right: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 48-54.

⁹ Audi, “Moderate Intuitionism and the Epistemology of Moral Judgment,” 24; Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 53.

However, Audi believes that a soft self-evident proposition has none of these features. Soft self-evidence, Audi thinks, can hold for all Rossian *pro tanto* duties.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that Audi is committed to an exhaustive dichotomy between hard and soft self-evidence. Perhaps there is a continuum from completely soft (none of (1)-(4)) to completely hard (all of (1)-(4)). If so, then a proposition that has some but not all of (1)-(4) can still be a hardish proposition.

Audi believes that hard self-evident propositions are often found in logic and mathematics. So, comparing self-evident moral propositions such as *pro tanto* principles to mathematical propositions is an epistemological mistake, which some classic moral intuitionists, e.g. Ross, committed. Audi thinks that “moderate intuitionism” does not commit this mistake. He writes, for example, “I believe that the kind of self-evidence to which a moderate intuitionism is committed lies quite far at the soft end.”¹¹

Although most “hard” self-evident propositions such as many mathematical and logical propositions are justified non-inferentially, there are at least some hard self-evident propositions, e.g. “every integer greater than one, either is prime itself or is the product of prime numbers”, that *can* be justified inferentially. Likewise, “soft” self-evident propositions *can* be justified inferentially. “Hard” self-evident propositions are often accepted at first sight, but “soft” self-evident propositions need reflection in order to be persuasive.¹² Of course, reflection and mental maturity are matters of degree, but this does not entail that the justification that emerges after further reflection *must* be inferential.¹³

Being a self-evident proposition does not entail that it is obvious to everyone. Some self-evident propositions may need lots of reflection to believe. However, there are some self-evident propositions that can be accepted easily without any effort. Of course, people might not believe a self-evident proposition if

¹⁰ Audi, “Moderate Intuitionism and the Epistemology of Moral Judgment,” 24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Audi, “Ethical Reflectionism,” 303; Audi, “Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundation of Ethics,” 115.

¹³ For further details on self-evidence, see Laurence Bonjour, *In Defense of Pure Reason: A Rationalistic Account of A Priori Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Also, for the issue of self-evidence and rational disagreement, see Robert Audi, “Intuition, Inference, and Rational Disagreement in Ethics,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11, 5 (2008): 488-491. As a criticism of Audi’s epistemological intuitionism particularly on self-evidence, see Klemens Kappel, “Challenges to Audi’s Ethical Intuitionism,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 5, 4 (2002): 391-413.

they do not understand it. And some people cannot know a self-evident proposition because they believe it on the basis of inadequate understanding.¹⁴

Furthermore, an immediately self-evident proposition is, Audi says, “readily understood by normal adults,” in the sense that its truth is immediately obvious or clear upon the understanding. Mediatly self-evident propositions, however, are endorsed or accepted “only through reflection on them.”¹⁵ For example, a proposition like “the bachelor is an unmarried man” is an immediately self-evident proposition. Audi himself uses the phrase “luminously self-evident” when he wants to talk about very clear propositions which do not need reflection to accept them.¹⁶ However, consider for instance the self-evident proposition introduced by Audi as a self-evident proposition which is not obvious and needs further reflection to find its truth or falsity: “if there have never been any siblings, there have never been any first cousins.”¹⁷ Whenever propositions are self-evidently true (no matter whether the self-evidence is immediate and hard, or soft and mediate), they are knowable non-inferentially, or, as Audi says, “[i]f they are even mediatly self-evident, they may be taken to be knowable non-inferentially.”¹⁸

Nevertheless, one might be sceptical of how Audi’s discussion of reflection generally is supposed to work. Although there are some moral self-evident propositions mediated through reflection, we need to be clear about what the consequence of this claim is. How is it possible that one reflects on a self-evident proposition but still remains non-inferentially justified?

In order to explain how moral self-evident propositions mediated through reflections work, we should discuss what it means when we say that moral self-evident propositions might have both inferential and non-inferential justification. Although Audi does not use this terminology, in the next section, I introduce a distinction between two concepts, i.e. “self-evident truth” and “self-evident justification,” to give a plausible explanation of how reflection might work in Audi’s framework. This distinction, I believe, helps us to have a better understanding of the contemporary moral intuitionist epistemology.

¹⁴ Audi, “Ethical Reflectionism,” 303.

¹⁵ Audi, “Moderate Intuitionism and the Epistemology of Moral Judgment,” 22.

¹⁶ Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 31.

¹⁷ Audi, “Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundation of Ethics,” 114.

¹⁸ Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 23.

1.1. Self-Evidently Justified vs. Self-Evidently True

Immediately self-evident propositions like “all vixens are female” do not need a high level of understanding for justification, according to Audi’s version of self-evidence. We easily and immediately accept and believe the proposition “all vixens are female” (if we know the meaning of vixen). Immediately self-evident propositions, of which we can realise the truth instantly, are “self-evidently true” to us. These self-evident propositions are presented to us as true and we do not need any further reflection to believe them.

On the other hand, although there are some immediately self-evident propositions which are self-evidently true, and everybody can understand and accept their truth at first sight, there are also some mediately self-evident propositions which might not be known easily and need further reflection to be understood adequately. Such further reflection might involve drawing inferences from the proposition so as to better understand it. But this does not entail that they *cannot* be non-inferentially justified. Because one might know some self-evident propositions non-inferentially but might know that they are self-evident inferentially.

Mediately self-evident propositions do need further reflection. Reflection is needed to have an adequate understanding of the proposition. The truth or falsity of this sort of proposition is not known before reflection and at first sight. It is possible that a proposition that one considers to be self-evidently true may turn out not to be true, as we see after more and more reflection.¹⁹

Nevertheless, to reject a proposition based on reflection does not imply that the proposition was not initially intuitive or non-inferential. As an example, in Copernican physics, there are some axioms or postulates that were thought to be self-evident. The scientific community then saw the emergence of Newtonian or Einsteinian physics, which has some parallel self-evident axioms.²⁰ This illustrates the possibility that an *apparently* self-evident proposition may be shown to be incorrect after further reflection by other scholars in one scientific society.

¹⁹ Philip Stratton-Lake, “Pleasure and Reflection in Ross,” in *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations* ed. Stratton-Lake, 113-136.

²⁰ As another example, the Ptolemaic model of the solar system as being geocentric was “self-evident” but was later overturned by the Copernican model of the solar system, a heliocentric model. Neither classical mechanics nor relativity disprove Copernican heliocentric model. Rather heliocentricity disproves the Ptolemaic model.

Similarly, this could happen in the area of morality when we discover that some *apparently* self-evident moral propositions are not true.²¹

Since it is hard to accept mediately self-evident propositions at first sight, one can think that these propositions are not self-evident. We might need further reflection to understand them adequately as self-evident. The more we reflect on a proposition, the better we find out whether it is self-evident or not. However, to know (justify) that some mediately self-evident propositions are actually self-evident, some further inferences might be needed. Thus, since some inferences might be needed to know that some mediately self-evident propositions are actually self-evident, it is better to call mediately self-evident propositions “self-evidently justified.”

2. Evaluating and Developing Audian Self-Evidence

Sidgwick tried to establish a systematic account of self-evidence, i.e. to elaborate what it is for a proposition to be self-evident. He mentioned at least three conditions for self-evident propositions: (1) the proposition must be a clear and precise proposition; (2) reflection needs to ascertain the proposition’s self-evidence; (3) self-evident propositions must be consistent. Sidgwick believes that these conditions are for “a significant proposition, apparently self-evident, in the highest degree of certainty attainable.”²² Parfit clarifies Sidgwick’s view about self-evidence in this way:

When Sidgwick calls our knowledge of some normative truths *intuitive*, he is not referring to any special faculty. Sidgwick means that we can recognize the truth of some normative beliefs by considering only the content of these beliefs, or *what* we are believing. These beliefs do not need to be inferred from other beliefs. Sidgwick also calls some of these beliefs *self-evident*. In using this word, Sidgwick

²¹ I said “apparently self-evident moral propositions” here because in Audi’s view a proposition cannot really be self-evident without being true. If Audi’s account of self-evidence is correct, a self-evident proposition cannot turn out to be false. An *apparently* self-evident one can, however. Compare this with the claim made by Hooker, who wrote that a proposition can seem to be self-evidently true and yet turn out to be false. See Brad Hooker, “Intuitions and Moral Theorizing,” in *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations*, ed. Stratton-Lake, 161-183. Audi’s account of self-evidence has some shortcomings, I believe. I will explain my criticisms later.

²² Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edition (London: Macmillan, 1967 [1874]), 211-212, 342-388. Sidgwick also says that self-evident propositions must be agreed upon or at least agreed upon by experts, but he does not explain why experts should have any special weight here.

does not mean that such beliefs are infallible. These beliefs, he claims, may need careful reflection, and they may be false. Such beliefs may merely seem to be self-evident. These beliefs may also be *indubitable*, or *intrinsically credible*. Such credibility is a matter of degree.²³

Now recall Audi's account of self-evident propositions. In almost the same way, he believes that self-evident propositions are propositions, the *sufficient understanding* of which provides *sufficient justification* for believing and knowing them; or a proposition is self-evident when it is a *truth*, such that a sufficient understanding of it satisfies the two conditions below.²⁴ Audi's description of self-evidence, then, becomes

Audian Self-evidence: A self-evident proposition is a truth such that

- (a) In virtue of having an adequate understanding of the proposition, one is justified in believing it.
- (b) If one believes the proposition on the basis of an adequate understanding of it, then one knows it.

Some critics such as Tropman believe that Audi's account of self-evidence does not explicitly make room for particular self-evident propositions.²⁵ This is because Audi himself admits that his view rules out the self-evident particular moral truths.²⁶ Audi grants that moral intuitionists need only claim for the *general* self-evident moral principles or "generic intuitionism."²⁷ In Tropman's view, while Audi's notion of self-evidence helps us to see how *general* moral truths such as Rossian principles of *pro tanto* duty are evident to us in themselves, his account does not care about the self-evidence of *particular* moral truths, such as those moral truths in *concrete* cases. Yet, in what sense are particular propositions self-evident if not in Audi's sense?

Tropman would argue that we could still have particular self-evident propositions in Audi's sense like general ones, although his account does not

²³ Parfit, *On What Matters*, Vol. 2, 490.

²⁴ Robert Audi, "Conclusion," in *The New Intuitionism*, ed. Jill Graper Hernandez (London: Continuum, 2011), 174; Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 247.

²⁵ Elizabeth Tropman, "Renewing Moral Intuitionism," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 6, 4 (2009): 450.

²⁶ Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 69; Audi, "Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundation of Ethics," 109.

²⁷ Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 55, 49; Audi, "Conclusion," 172.

explicitly entail that. In her view, we can develop Audi's account to cover a non-inferential real-world-particular knowledge of moral facts. For example, consider a particular propositional belief such as "the lie my brother told yesterday was *pro tanto* wrong." Tropman believes that we can learn substantive moral facts about the action in question solely by reflecting on the conceptual meaning of "my brother's action." A particular act of lying is self-evidently wrong because knowledge of self-evident truths depends totally on the conceptual meaning of the constituents. So, the proposition can be qualified as self-evidently true.

Furthermore, we can argue that if the general principle, say, lying is wrong, is self-evident, then it will be self-evident that any particular act of lying would be wrong. If the general proposition is self-evident, why cannot the particular instance be? For example, if it is self-evident that the fact that an act counts as a lie is a *pro tanto* reason not to do the act, then how could it not also be self-evident that the fact that this particular act counts as a lie is a *pro tanto* reason not to do the act? Hence, once again Tropman would maintain, Audian self-evidence should take into consideration a non-inferential real-world-particular knowledge of moral facts.

However, one might object that this kind of arguing can be problematic in some cases. It is true that in some moral cases if there can be self-evident general propositions, then there can be self-evident particular ones too. For instance, if it is *pro tanto* wrong to rape someone for pleasure, it is also self-evidently wrong that Jack rapes Jill. However, this cannot be true in any case of, say, mathematics or geometry. For example, if it is self-evident that any triangle's angles sum up to 180 degrees, then it is not self-evident that this triangle's angles sum up to 180 degrees. The reason for this is that it is not self-evident that "this is a triangle," rather it is something we establish by looking at the object, not by *a priori* reflection. Nonetheless, one can respond to this objection that, as far as conditional propositions can be self-evident, a proposition such as "if this is a triangle, its angles sum to 180," looks like an intuition about a particular self-evident in geometry. In fact, by having established that this is a triangle we can know straight off that this triangle has 180 degrees.

Whether or not my argument or Tropman's argument for particular self-evident moral knowledge can work, we certainly can think of different moral particular self-evident propositions in our daily life. It seems obvious that a particular truth may be adequately understood, so it may be known on the basis of that sufficient understanding. For example, in the case of my brother's lie or a

proposition such as “my friend killed her husband for fun,” we can have a morally relevant particular self-evident proposition by reflecting on the nature of a lie or killing. Following some classic intuitionists who take into account particular self-evidence, we can take a broad view about particular self-evident propositions in terms of adequate understanding.

For example, Clarke and Prichard, as two classic intuitionists, tended to seek self-evident propositions more often in concrete and particular cases.²⁸ They thought that individuals just see some specific (obligatory) actions. In fact, although these philosophers discussed the idea of self-evidence, they suggested that we can think of something like *intuitive perception* of moral facts when we are faced with particular concrete moral cases.

Ross also seemed to believe that *pro tanto* duties in concrete situations could be self-evident. He thought that the first thing that came to mind was the particular *pro tanto* self-evident duties in concrete cases.²⁹ Consider for example this passage from Ross:

[W]e see the *prima facie* rightness of an act which would be the fulfillment of a *particular* promise, and of another which would be the fulfillment of another promise... What comes first in time is the apprehension of the self-evident *prima facie* rightness of an *individual* act of a *particular* type. From this we come by reflection to apprehend the self-evident *general* principle of *prima facie* duty (emphasis added).³⁰

Ross thought that the self-evidence of *pro tanto* rightness or wrongness of a *particular* action comes to our apprehension, even if we do not recognise the relevant *general* moral principle.³¹ However, by reflecting on different similar and dissimilar particular actions we can form self-evident general principles. For Ross,

²⁸ Samuel Clarke, “Discourse on Natural Religion,” in *The British Moralists 1650-1800*, I. ed. D. D. Raphael (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1706 [1969]), 226; Harold A. Prichard, *Moral Writings*, ed. J. MacAdam (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 28. This claim might be complex in Prichard. For more on this, see Jonathan Dancy, “Has Anyone Ever Been a Non-Intuitionist?” in *Underivative Duty: British Moral Philosophers from Sidgwick to Ewing*, ed. Thomas Hurka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁹ W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, ed. Philip Stratton-Lake (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930 [2002]), 33. See also, W. D. Ross, *The Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), Ch. 8.

³⁰ Ross, *The Foundations of Ethics*, 170.

³¹ For an alternative view, see Brad Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

these particular moral facts come to our cognition non-inferentially in the sense that some particular moral beliefs are credible independently of their inferential relations to general moral principles.

Although Audi calls his intuitionism “Rossian style intuitionism,” his version of intuitionism does not say explicitly much about particular moral facts as he defines self-evidence in terms of generality. However, I want to highlight one element in Audi’s epistemological framework which one might think of as something similar to particular self-evidence, albeit he does not say this directly. It seems that Audi has something similar to particular intuitions about self-evident propositions in mind when he talks about “conclusion of reflection.”³² Since intuition can be yielded by reflection, Audi thinks, we are able to distinguish between two categories of conclusion, i.e. “conclusion of inference” and “conclusion of reflection.” An intuitive self-evident proposition can be the conclusion of an inference. Likewise, it can be the conclusion of reflection.

Audi gives two examples to make clear what exactly this distinction is. Suppose someone reads a letter of recommendation that refers to itself as “strong.” It is possible to infer that the recommender means “strong” in another way, i.e. actually means weak, as the recommender never directly praises the applicant. The reader forms the judgement that the recommendation letter is not really a strong one by picking some points that show the recommender does not directly praise the applicant. Since this judgement is based on an inference from evidence, Audi calls this a “conclusion of inference.”

On the other hand, as an example for “conclusion of reflection,” one might see in the letter a subtle commitment and indirect praise. It is possible that one simply *feels* elements of “strength.” In this case, Audi believes, since the judgement is made by global intuitive sense and reflection, unlike the conclusion of inference, conclusion of reflection is supposed to be non-inferential. In fact, conclusion of reflection is a result of reflecting upon the *overall nature of some phenomenon*, as a *whole*.

However, it might be objected that although Audi did not directly connect the idea of conclusion of reflection to the particular intuition, it seems that “conclusion of reflection” cannot be a good example of non-inferential (self-

³² It seems that Audi is also somehow talking about self-evident particular moral propositions when he talks about the moral properties of fittingness and unfittingness. See Audi, “Intuition, Inference, and Rational Disagreement in Ethics,” 482; Robert Audi, “Introduction” and “Conclusion,” in *The New Intuitionism*, ed. Graper Hernandez, 5-7, 181-184.

evident) propositions about *particular* facts or *pro tanto* duties. This is because a conclusion of reflection is drawn by considering *all aspects* of its phenomenon and necessitates considering the phenomenon as a *whole*. Yet a belief about a *pro tanto* duty necessitates considering just one of an act's aspects. We need not consider all of the action's features in order to gain knowledge of *particular* instances of *pro tanto* duties. So, Audi's conclusion of reflection cannot explain our non-inferential beliefs about particular concrete *pro tanto* duties.³³

This objection is not persuasive though. One can reflect on all aspects of a particular situation as a whole, including different self-evident facts about the situation. Also, although one could reflect on all aspects of something, there is nothing about the notion of reflection that means one must reflect on all elements. So, reflection on some part of the situation could be sufficient.

Nonetheless, it is not clear how Audi can match the distinction between conclusion of reflection and conclusion of inference to his Rossian-style intuitionism. On the one hand, it seems that the idea of conclusion of reflection is closer to Ross's *pro tanto* duties than all-things-considered duties. We come to beliefs about our *pro tanto* duties by reflection, not by inference. However, Audi thinks that our beliefs about *pro tanto* duties *can* be inferential. For example, he distinguishes between "justification from below" and "justification from above." The justification from below, in his view, aims to derive intuitively-justified moral principles, such as Rossian *pro tanto* duties, from a more fundamental principle, such as the Categorical Imperative.³⁴

What sounds puzzling in Audi when he introduces the conclusion of reflection is that Audi does not give us a clear explanation of what reflection amounts to when he says that we can remain non-inferentially justified in reflecting on a self-evident proposition. Suppose someone reflects on a particular self-evident proposition. It seems that one needs to take account of various properties in that particular situation to believe in the proposition. However, in Audi's framework, it is supposed that taking different properties does not require

³³ Tropman raises this objection in her "Renewing Moral Intuitionism."

³⁴ Audi, "Ethical Reflectionism," *The Monist* 76 (1993): 305-306; Audi, "Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundation of Ethics," 119; Robert Audi, *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 285; Robert Audi, "A Kantian Intuitionism," *Mind* 110, 439 (2001): 601-635; Robert Audi, "Intuition, Reflection and Justification," in *Rationality and the Good: Critical Essays on the Ethics and Epistemology of Robert Audi*, eds. Mark Timmons, John Greco, and Alfred Mele (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 204.

someone to form a belief inferentially. How is it possible that, in reflection on something such as a situation, we are supposed to take in various properties of the thing and then, without drawing any inferences, reach a self-evident truth about the thing?

The objection, in fact, is that it just does not seem plausible that reflection does not involve drawing inferences. To understand Rossian principles adequately or to reflect on self-evident propositions, we sometimes need to consider and form judgements that involve drawing inferences from hypothetical scenarios. This leads us to think that inferences drawn play a role as premises for the overall conclusion. For example, consider the self-evident proposition such as “when an equal amount is taken from equals, an equal amount results.” When one reflects on this proposition, one might need to draw some inferences to adequately understand it.

Audi tries to provide an answer to sceptics such as Sinnott-Armstrong who raise this issue.³⁵ Audi believes that forming a belief by attaining an adequate understanding (or reflection) does not necessarily involve inferences. In his view,

the perception of a property can ground a judgment without doing so by yielding beliefs that supply premises for that judgment. Consider, for instance, facial recognition regarding someone you have not seen for many years. If the judgment that the person is, say, an old friend from high school, arises from thoughtfully contemplating facial properties, but is not based on beliefs of supporting propositions, we may call it a conclusion of reflection even if the person could formulate ‘corresponding premises.’ The judgment may, then, be both non-inferential and intuitive.³⁶

However, Audi’s example of facial recognition is not illuminating, in large part because facial recognition is very unlike recognizing the truth of a self-evident proposition. Even in contemplating facial properties, it is not clear whether there is dependency on a proposition in a way that *is in fact not* inferential. So, it is not obvious that Audi’s move can avoid the objection about inference.

Nonetheless, it is not true that reflections (or adequate understanding), at all times, necessarily involve inferential justification.³⁷ Although there are some

³⁵ Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Reflections on Reflection in Audi’s Moral Intuitionism,” in *Rationality and the Good*, eds. Timmons, Greco, and Mele, 19-30. For Sinnott-Armstrong’s criticism, see: Hossein Dabbagh, “Sinnott-Armstrong Meets Modest Epistemological Intuitionism,” *Philosophical Forum* 48, 2 (2017):175-199.

³⁶ Audi, “Intuition, Reflection and Justification,” 204.

³⁷ I occasionally use “reflection” and “adequate understanding” interchangeably here. Although it

difficult cases in which reflections explicitly work as an inference, I believe, there are still some cases where reflection does not work as an inference. In my view, to attain in reflection (or have an adequate understanding) about a proposition, one needs: 1) to have at least the capacity to tease out the meaning of the constituents; 2) to be able to use the terms correctly and apply them reliably; 3) to draw some inferences *from* the proposition in question. In fact, these three conditions together make our understanding adequate or reflection sufficient. But none of these conditions makes us form an explicit argument or inferential reasoning. Hence, although for having a sufficient reflection, one needs to be *able* to draw some inferences, this does not entail that one *must* actually go through drawing inferences when one considers a proposition. Furthermore, even if one draws some inferences in order to reflect on a proposition's meaning, this need not involve forming an explicit argument or inferential reasoning. This account of reflection makes our beliefs non-inferential. Drawing inferences to form an explicit argument or reasoning makes us inferentially justified. But merely having the capacity to draw inferences does not cross the line into inferential justification.

There are clear cases where we have non-inferential belief based on a reflection about a proposition. For example, by reflection on the meanings of the constituent words in the proposition "all squares are rectangles," we are non-inferentially justified in believing the proposition. Reflection on the meanings of the words in the proposition is not an argument. On the other hand, for the proposition "helium is twice as heavy as hydrogen" we need some proofs, inferential reasoning or argument to show that it is true. There are some clear cases of reflection *without* explicit argument. There are some clear cases of reflection *with* explicit argument. I do not deny that, in some cases, it is unclear whether we need explicit argument. For example, in the proposition "God probably necessarily exists," it is not clear whether we need an explicit argument or just the ability to understand the meanings of the constituent words in order to be justified based on reflection.

This account of reflection and adequate understanding allows us to have a direct content when we consider a self-evident proposition. So, it seems more likely that we are non-inferentially justified when we form our beliefs on the basis of adequate understanding or reflecting on self-evident propositions. Thus, if one

is possible that one reflects on something without having adequate understanding, I assume here that to reflect on something is to understand it adequately and vice versa.

believes a self-evident proposition on the basis of reflection or adequate understanding, one can non-inferentially know it.

2.1. An Alternative Account to Audian Self-evidence

Intuition and self-evidence are two important aspects of intuitionist moral epistemology, though most moral intuitionists talked about each of them separately. For example, as we have seen, Audi treated intuitions as something like belief and defines a self-evident proposition in terms of understanding and non-inferential justification. Although intuition is a type of mental state and self-evidence is a property of propositions, we need to discover how they are related. Let us start with self-evidence.

Almost all epistemological intuitionists maintain that there are some moral propositions that are self-evident. For example, Locke says that a self-evident proposition is one that “carries its own light and evidence with it, and needs no other proof: he that understands the terms, assents to it for its own sake.”³⁸ Or Richard Price believes that a self-evident proposition is immediate, and needs no further proof.³⁹

However, contemporary moral intuitionists such as Audi and Shafer-Landau never include the element of obviousness in their account, and yet they define a self-evident proposition in terms of understanding. This definition of self-evidence is currently the standard understanding of self-evidence among moral intuitionists. For example, Shafer-Landau writes,

Beliefs are self-evident if they have as their content self-evident propositions. A proposition *p* is self-evident=df. *p* is such that adequately understanding and attentively considering just *p* is sufficient to justify believing that *p*. It is possible that agents who adequately understand and attentively consider just *p* may yet fail to believe it; for instance, other beliefs of theirs may stand in the way. If I have a standing practice of believing whatever my guru tells me, then his say-so in a given case may be sufficient to prevent me from believing a self-evident proposition that I understand and have attentively considered. Still, if I do get all the way to believing a self-evident proposition, my belief is justified.⁴⁰

³⁸ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 139.

³⁹ Richard Price, *A Review of the Principle Questions in Morals*, in *The British Moralists 1650-1800, II*, ed. D. D. Raphael (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969 [1758]), 187.

⁴⁰ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence*, 247. See also Audi, *Moral Knowledge and Ethical*

In Shafer-Landau's view, one's adequate understanding of self-evident propositions is sufficient to justify believing them. On that view, if one adequately understands a moral self-evident proposition, such as "it is *pro tanto* wrong to rape anyone," one's mere understanding can justify one to believe the proposition. However, I believe, it is not plausible that merely an adequate understanding can be evidence to justify our belief. Let me explain.

We can doubt whether adequate understanding of a self-evident moral proposition is evidence and can justify our belief in the proposition.⁴¹ This is because evidence for *p* must be something that can give us reason to believe that *p* and provide justification for us. For example, the introspective experience of *p* or to remember that *p* is the sort of evidence that can provide such reasons to believe *p*. But our understanding of a moral proposition is not evidence and cannot provide justification for us. Although an adequate understanding of a self-evident moral proposition is needed for us to believe in something, it does not look as though that adequate understanding is evidence to provide the justification for that belief.

But this argument depends on what we mean by evidence. One might object that understanding a self-evident proposition counts as evidence for its truth, in which case my argument is wrong. Or one might object that understanding a self-evident proposition does not count as evidence for its truth, since self-evident propositions can be known true without evidence, in which case, once more, my argument is wrong.

However, such objections are not convincing if we consider my account of evidence: Evidence (*e*) for (*p*), in my view, is a mental state or proposition that raises the (epistemic) probability of *p* being true. It is true that evidence is indeed the existence of a mental state—e.g. that I am in pain, or that such-and-such seemed to me to be true. But of course, not all evidence consists in mental states. So, I am not denying that evidence can be a fact—e.g. that there is blood on the carpet. Nevertheless, I am not using "evidence" to mean merely "whatever justifies belief" because then it follows trivially that if understanding justifies then it is

Character, 216. Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 48–49.

⁴¹ Philip Stratton-Lake, "Intuition, Self-Evidence, and Understanding," in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics: Vol. 11*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Kirchin also maintains that intuitionists need to develop a positive account of what understanding of self-evident propositions amount to. See Simon Kirchin, "Self-evidence, Theory, and Anti-theory," in *Intuition, Theory, and Anti-theory in Ethics*, ed. Sophie-Grace Chappell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

evidence.⁴² On my account of evidence, mere understanding of a self-evident proposition is not evidence, because mere understanding of a proposition cannot raise the probability of that proposition's being true. So, on my account of evidence, mere understanding of a proposition cannot be evidence of its truth and thus cannot justify our belief in the proposition.⁴³

If evidence is whatever raises the (epistemic) probability of *p*, self-evident propositions are facts (true propositions) that are inherently evidence. For example, the propositions "all cows are female" and "a finite whole is greater than, or equal to, any of its parts" are facts that do not need any other propositions to justify their truth. They are evidence in themselves. In other words, self-evident propositions are credible on their own independently of any other propositions. Indeed, self-evident propositions are self-justified in the sense that they are justified on the basis of their conceptual meaning.

But if self-evident propositions are facts, can we say that they are all analytic propositions? All analytic propositions such as "all triangles have three sides" are self-evident. Analytic propositions are propositions whose truth is knowable by knowing the meanings of the constituent words and their relation. In fact, in an analytic proposition, the predicate concept is contained in its subject concept.⁴⁴

But not all self-evident propositions are analytic. Suppose that it is self-evident that there is a *pro tanto* duty not to harm others, or at least innocent others. In other words, the fact that an act would harm an innocent person imposes on any agent a defeasible requirement not to do the act. Is the very meaning of "*pro tanto* duty" such that there *must* be a *pro tanto* duty not to harm the innocent? No. Is the very meaning of "harm the innocent" such that there *must* be a *pro tanto* duty not to harm the innocent? No. Is the very meaning of, for example, "justice" such that every agent *must* have a *pro tanto* duty to promote it? No. Is the very meaning of "*pro tanto* duty" such that there *must* be a *pro tanto* duty to promote justice? No, and the same applies for each of Ross's other *pro tanto* duties. Although self-evident moral propositions must be *a priori* truths, and must be necessary truths, they manifestly are not analytic truths. However, depending

⁴² Loosely speaking, by justification I mean the reason or argument that someone (properly) holds a belief. To (properly) hold beliefs is having good reasons to think that they are true. A justified belief is one that we are epistemologically or intellectually right in holding.

⁴³ For more on evidence, see: Simon Schaffer, "Self-Evidence," *Critical Inquiry* 18, 2 (1992): 327-362.

⁴⁴ This also can be true of analytic conditionals, e.g. "If Holmes killed Sikes, then Sikes is dead."

on how we understand “moral,” there are some moral self-evident propositions that can be analytic as well. For example, insofar as the concept of murder is the concept of wrongful killing, the proposition “murder is wrong” is analytic.⁴⁵

In addition to that, all self-evident propositions such as “all bachelors are unmarried” are *a priori*. *A priori* propositions are propositions that one can reasonably believe without empirical evidence. *A priori* propositions are justified independently of sensory experience. We can believe an *a priori* proposition on the basis of pure thought and by simple reflection on its content.

But are all *a priori* propositions self-evident? Self-evident propositions are the foundation for the *a priori*. That is, although most *a priori* propositions are self-evident, there are some *a priori* propositions that are not self-evident. For example, consider a proposition like “all bachelors are unmarried, or Obama’s eyes are blue.” The proposition is *a priori* but it is not self-evident in itself. The proposition “all bachelors are unmarried” is self-evident and this can be put in a disjunction with any other proposition. The result, however, will be true *a priori* because a disjunction is true as long as one of the disjuncts is true. The disjunctive propositions with one true disjunct need not be self-evident, since one needs to know logic in order to know that they are true, and indeed needs to do the inference: this is a disjunction with at least one true disjunct, and disjunctions with at least one true disjunct must be true. As another example, although it is *a priori* that “0.9 recurring equals to 1,” it might be debated whether it is self-evident.⁴⁶ Also, for some moral philosophers it is *a priori* that “happiness is an intrinsic good,” but it is controversial whether it is self-evident. So, it is not true that all *a priori* truths, no matter how complex, would come out as self-evident.⁴⁷

Thus far, I have elaborated on whether self-evident propositions are analytic and *a priori*. I have also criticised the standard Audian understanding of self-evident propositions in terms of my account of evidence. It is not plausible, I believe, that an adequate understanding of a moral self-evident proposition is evidence to justify belief in the proposition. If the adequate understanding of a

⁴⁵ David Copp, *Morality in a Natural World: Selected Essays in Metaethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 40; Elizabeth Tropman, “Self-Evidence and A Priori Moral Knowledge,” *Disputatio* 4, 33 (2012): 459-467.

⁴⁶ Elijah Chudnoff, *Intuition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 68-69. He thinks it can become intuitive after reflection.

⁴⁷ For the relationship between intuition and *a priori*, see Carrie S. I. Jenkins, “Intuition, ‘Intuition,’ Concepts and the A Priori,” in *Intuitions*, eds. Anthony Robert Booth and Darrell P Rowbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

moral self-evident proposition does not provide justification for believing it, the Audian self-evidence account is not the whole story about self-evident moral propositions. Although having adequate understanding is a necessary condition for the self-evidence account, mere adequate understanding is not a sufficient condition for that.

I believe that *intuition* is the part that can provide justification. However, this idea depends on how intuition is understood. My theory of intuition, explained below, can help us to distinguish intuition from certain similar mental states, such as guesses, gut reactions, hunches and common-sense beliefs. I will argue that intuitions are not belief-like states and we should not understand intuitions in terms of doxastic accounts. Rather, the seeming account of intuition is better. So, I propose a self-evidence theory based upon an account of intuitions as seeming states rather than mere beliefs. This theory is an alternative to the Audian self-evidence account.

3. The Seeming Account of Self-evidence

George Bealer, as a prominent intuition theorist, thinks that intuition is a *sui generis* mental state that cannot be reduced to other mental states.⁴⁸ He states two claims: one negative and one positive. On the negative side, he argues that one can have an intuition with certain content while one does not believe that content. Also, one can believe that p whereas one does not have the intuition that p. Bealer also differentiates between intuition and guess, hunch, judgement, and inclination-to-believe.⁴⁹ On the positive side, however, he introduces a new terminology instead of intuition, i.e. “intellectual seeming.”

Following Bealer’s non-doxastic account of intuition, I also understand intuitions, either philosophical or moral, as *seemings*, against the doxastic account, which understands intuitions as *beliefs*.⁵⁰ According to the non-doxastic account,

⁴⁸ George Bealer, “Intuition and the Autonomy of Philosophy,” in *Rethinking Intuition: The Psychology of Intuition and Its Role in Philosophical Inquiry*, eds. Michael DePaul and William Ramsey (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).

⁴⁹ Bealer, “Intuition and the Autonomy of Philosophy,” 208-210.

⁵⁰ I elsewhere defended the seeming account of *moral* intuition, although Bealer defended only the seeming account of *philosophical* intuition. See Hossein Dabbagh, “Intuiting Intuition: The Seeming Account of Moral Intuition,” *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 18, 1 (2018):117-132. See also Philip Stratton-Lake, “Intuitionism in Ethics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2016). URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/intuitionism-ethics/>.

to have an intuition that *p* is to have the intellectual seeming that *p*. The reason that I advocate the seeming account is that it looks more fundamental than the doxastic account, e.g. disposition or inclination-to-believe account, in explaining different phenomena. Although we can remain open-minded about whether there are some cases that the inclination or disposition account explains best, the seeming account can do a better job. The reason is that we can explain why we are inclined (disposed) to believe various things by saying that they *seem* true to us. In other words, even in cases where we are inclined (or have disposition) to believe something, we are actually inclined (or have the disposition) to believe it because it *seems* true to us. In other words, that *p* seems true to me is a decent reason for my believing *p*. In contrast, that I am disposed or inclined to believe *p* is not a decent reason for me to believe *p*.

The doxastic account of intuition does not allow for cases where an intuition that *p* (non-inferentially) justifies a belief that *p*. On the doxastic account, the intuition that *p* is either the belief that *p* or an inclination or disposition-to-believe that *p*. Neither of these justifies the belief that *p*. The belief that *p* cannot justify the belief that *p*. The inclination or disposition-to-believe that *p* does not by itself justify the belief that *p*. It might be the case that I know that it is not true that “I am inclined to believe that *p*” but this does not prevent its seeming to me to be true. Furthermore, the inclination or disposition-to-believe account is not informative about why we should believe that *p*. Even if one argues that “I am inclined to think that *p* and things that I am inclined to think are very often true. So, in the absence of reason to think not-*p*, I am justified in thinking *p*,” we are entitled to ask why one is inclined to think that *p*.

However, the non-doxastic or seeming account of intuition can do this. For example, a belief can be based on an intellectual seeming with the same content. So, if we regard intuition as defeasible evidence for its content, having an intuition that *p* can justify us in believing that *p*. Even if the disposition or inclination accounts of intuition can work in some cases, seemings can do this job better.

Having said that, then, we can have a new account of self-evident propositions consistent with the seeming account of intuition. I now revise the Audian account of self-evidence. In this new account, since intuitions (construed as seemings) have the upper hand, the self-evidence account is based on intuition but not vice versa. I call this account

The Seeming Account of Self-evidence. A self-evident proposition (*P*) is a truth such that

The Seeming Account of Self-Evidence: An Alternative to Audian Account

- (a) Attaining an adequate understanding of P gives one an intuition (construed as seeming) about P.
- (b) The intuition (construed as seeming) about P, on the basis of an adequate understanding of P, is what provides a justification for believing P.
- (c) If one forms a belief about P, on the basis of an intuition (construed as seeming) about P, then one knows P.

But how is it possible that forming a belief on the basis of both an adequate understanding and intuition can be remained non-inferential? This certainly depends on how we formulate our accounts of adequate understanding and intuition. As I explained before, my preferred account of intuition is a non-doxastic one and the non-doxastic account of intuition does not make our beliefs inferential. I also explained how adequate understanding can lead us to be non-inferentially justified if we construe them in terms of extracting the meaning of the constituents, be able to use the terms correctly and ability to draw inferences. For example, if I am considering a self-evident proposition, e.g. "All Xs are Ys," I need to adequately understand it, of course. However, understanding it requires at least knowing the meaning of "all," "Xs," "are" and "Ys." To know the meaning of a concept involves knowing how to use it to make inferences. So, to test whether I adequately understand the elements of the self-evident proposition, I might need to see if I can use each of the terms to draw inferences. The propositions in which I try to use the terms will probably be other than the self-evident proposition whose meaning I am trying to adequately understand. This exercise of testing my adequate understanding of the concepts in the self-evident proposition I am trying to adequately understand is a kind of thinking. But such thinking is not a matter of inferring "All Xs are Ys" from other propositions. So, while it is true that I might have to test my ability to draw inferences using the concepts in the target self-evident proposition, it is not true that these inferences are being offered in support of, or as arguments to, the target self-evident proposition.

So, even if we form a belief based on an intuition that is presented (given) by attaining an adequate understanding (or reflection), there is no need to involve inferences in order to be inferentially justified. Therefore, we can believe a self-evident proposition on the basis of intuition and adequate understanding while being non-inferentially justified. If we have adequate understanding of conceptual meaning, i.e. mere semantic understanding, this gives us an intuition (construed as seeming) and we take this to be grounds for believing the self-evident propositions.

Thus, we have the justification of self-evident propositions on the basis of the seeming, which comes from the proposition's conceptual semantic meaning.

However, we should bear in mind that the seeming account of self-evidence does not entail that all intuitive propositions are self-evident as this is obviously wrong. For example, when I say, "I hate this weather" or "it is my duty to help my mother when she is in need" or "abortion is wrong," they are intuitive for me but for sure not self-evident. Without this qualification we cannot have a tenable account of self-evidence. Not all intuitive propositions are self-evident; only the propositions whose seeming true is based on adequate understanding or reflection *can be* self-evident. Nevertheless, there are some basic explanatory intuitive moral propositions that normative ethicists consider as self-evident, but which vary from one normative moral theory to another. Hence, determining which intuitive propositions are self-evident depends on our moral normative theory. But how?

Many moral intuitionists assumed that belief about *pro tanto* duties were both epistemologically and metaphysically/explanatorily foundational. However, there are some moral philosophers such as Tim Scanlon, Robert Audi, Brad Hooker and Derek Parfit who think that moral intuitionists do not have a knockdown argument that all *pro tanto* duties have these statuses. They think that *pro tanto* duties might or might not be epistemologically or metaphysically/explanatorily foundational. These philosophers think that *pro tanto* duties are not metaphysically/explanatorily foundational because they derive their moral justification from the Categorical Imperative, or a Contractualist first principle, or a Rule-Consequentialist first principle. For such philosophers, the first principles are all the most basic propositions.⁵¹

The seeming account of self-evidence, unlike Audi's, is not truth-entailing. Rather, it is justification-entailing. This is because the seeming account of self-evident propositions is based on seemings and intuitions in terms of the seeming

⁵¹ Note, I am not claiming that what is most *basic* in terms of normative justification must also be *self-evident*, which is an epistemological matter. Must the first principle be self-evident? Well, it must be attractive in its own right, but various alternative candidate first principles are attractive in their own right and yet are not consistent with one another. If self-evident propositions have to be consistent with one another, then not all these attractive alternative candidate first principles are self-evident; indeed, it remains an open question whether any of these are. We should bear in mind that being basic or foundational can be an epistemic matter or a matter of normative metaphysics. Contractualism and Rule-Consequentialism, for example, cannot be plausibly claimed to be epistemologically basic but they are claimed to be foundational in terms of the normative justification of rules and actions.

account cannot be justified but instead can be explained. Having an intuition justifies our belief in the proposition's content but having an intuition cannot be justified. However, one can explain why a certain proposition seems to be true but cannot justify its seeming so.

According to the seeming account of self-evidence, beliefs in self-evident propositions that are based on intuition can be justified. We do not need anything other than intuitions of such propositions, presented by sufficient understanding, to justify our belief in them. However, when we say that self-evident propositions can be justified by moral intuition, this does not entail that some other ways of justification, e.g. argument, are ruled out.

The seeming account of self-evident propositions thus provides salvation for my favoured intuition theory. The seeming account of self-evident propositions is grounded in intuitions as seemings, which I think is the right account of intuitions, in contrast to Audi's account. Nevertheless, we can adopt some elements of Audi's account to explain why sufficient understanding is necessary for having self-evident propositions. Although it is the intellectual seeming that justifies belief in self-evident propositions, the seeming must be based upon sufficient understanding. Having sufficient understanding means that we should at least be able to extract the conceptual constituents and have an ability to make inferences *from* the proposition in question.

Seeming must be based upon sufficient understanding because some things may seem true to us just because we do not have an adequate understanding of them. For example, suppose someone tells a kid: "if all As are Bs, and no Cs are Bs, then no Cs are A." Anyone who adequately understands the proposition can be presented by a seeming that the proposition is true. But how can a kid be presented by a seeming when the kid does not understand it adequately?

As another example, suppose that I tell someone, in Persian, that "rape is absolutely wrong." If one does not understand any Persian words, how can one be presented by a seeming that the proposition is true? Seemings are presented to us based upon our adequate understanding, although this does not make our beliefs based on seeming inferential. If by adequate understanding we mean something that is not engaged with argument, then seemings and beliefs based on them can be non-inferential.

The seeming account of self-evident propositions can provide us a new explanation of what Ross might have in mind about intuition and self-evident proposition by putting words into his mouth. Ross did not use the word

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“intuition.” He often used the word “conviction” instead of intuition. When Ross writes that self-evident propositions are “propositions that cannot be proved, but that just as certainly need no proof,” he might want to say that the intuitions about self-evident *pro tanto* principles are basic and non-inferentially justified. While having intuitions can justify belief in self-evident propositions, the having of the intuitions—having the seemings—cannot be justified. Saying that self-evident propositions can, but need not, be justified by means of argument is one thing. But to say that intuition about those self-evident propositions cannot be justified is another thing. Intuitions only give us the explanation of justifiably believing in self-evident propositions. We can have intuitions about self-evident *pro tanto* principles when we gain enough mental maturity. Ross, in the same vein, believes it is not the task of moral philosophy to *justify* beliefs about *pro tanto* duties. Rather, the task of moral philosophy is to *explain* how knowledge and justification are possible in ethics.⁵²

4. Conclusion

What I have discussed here is some concerns about the account of self-evident propositions endorsed by contemporary moral intuitionists (e.g. Audi and Shafer-Landau). However, I have provided an alternative account of self-evident propositions, which I call the seeming account of self-evident propositions. Although classic and some contemporary moral intuitionists believe that the notion of self-evidence is more important than that of intuition, I think the notion of intuition is more basic if intuitions are construed as intellectual seemings.⁵³

⁵² Ross, *The Right and the Good*, 29-30. As a possible similarity, Chappell, for example, seems to read W. D. Ross’s view as quasi-perceptual, although Chappell does not mention the seeming account. See Sophie-Grace Chappell, “Introduction,” in *Intuition, Theory, and Anti-Theory in Ethics*, ed. Chappell.

⁵³ I would like to thank Philip Stratton-Lake, Brad Hooker, Sophie-Grace Chappell, and David Oderberg, for their helpful and critical comments.