

**McCLOSKEY ON RATIONAL ENDS:
The Dilemma of Intuitionism**

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In his book, *Meta-Ethics and Normative Ethics*,¹ Professor H. J. McCloskey sets forth an argument which he thinks shows that we know, by intuition, that certain moral propositions are true *a priori*. Thus, McCloskey's argument is an attempt to resolve what he regards as "the central problem" for intuitionists in ethics – the problem, namely, of whether we do in fact have intuitive knowledge of synthetic *a priori* moral truths. Now, the moral propositions McCloskey has in mind are those that declare that certain ends are or are not intrinsically worthwhile, or that certain ends ought or ought not to be maximized. The proposition, "Pleasure is good and ought to be maximized," is an example of the class of propositions McCloskey considers. Additional examples will be provided as we proceed. I propose to use the expression "rational end" to refer to propositions of this class. That is, by the expression "rational end" I shall mean "an end of human conduct such that the proposition that affirms its intrinsic worth or the obligatoriness of maximizing it, or the proposition that declares that such an end has intrinsic disvalue and ought to be minimized, is known to be true, *a priori*, by an intuitive exercise of reason." Then what we can say concerning McCloskey's argument is this: He thinks that his argument shows that there *are* rational ends.

What I shall argue in this paper is that McCloskey's argument does not show this. It is my belief that his argument is vitiated by elementary logical mistakes, and this I shall try to show in Section I (below). Moreover, I believe that his argument rests on an assumption which is far from obviously true and which he fails altogether to justify; and this I shall endeavor to show in Section II. Finally, in Section III, I shall argue that the consequences of McCloskey's argument, if it were sound, would be inconsistent with his own, intuitionist view of how we acquire moral knowledge and that this inconsistency in his own case points to a dilemma which no intuitionist in ethics can avoid.

I

One of the problems McCloskey considers is how to determine which ends are rational, in the sense of "rational end" explained above. The test he proposes for determining this is as follows: given any proposition affirming the value or disvalue of a particular end, we are to ask whether it can be rationally

¹ H. J. McCloskey, *Meta-Ethics and Normative Ethics*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1969. The argument I discuss is presented on pp. 140-142. All quotations from McCloskey are from these pages unless otherwise noted.

questioned; that is, in McCloskey's words, we are to ask whether "to question" it "gives evidence of irrationality." If it does, then the end in question qualifies as a rational end. If not, then it does not qualify. Thus, the condition McCloskey proposes for determining which ends are, and which are not, rational, or, as he sometimes puts this, "the most important," is supposed by him to be both necessary and sufficient.

This procedure of McCloskey's is unsatisfactory; that is, it does not constitute a logically satisfactory basis in terms of which to determine which ends are and which are not rational, (even assuming that there are some of each). To show this, let us begin by noting that McCloskey's thought here rests on the ambiguous idea that there are certain moral propositions, p , q , r , which "cannot be rationally questioned." This claim admits of at least the two following interpretations.

- 1) To doubt or be uncertain of the truth of p , q , or r , gives evidence of irrationality.
- 2) To deny the truth of p , q , or r , gives evidence of irrationality.

This second alternative, moreover, is itself ambiguous, and can be understood to involve at least the two following possibilities.

- 3) To affirm the contradictory of p , q , or r , gives evidence of irrationality. and
- 4) To affirm the contrary of p , q , or r gives evidence of irrationality.

Different judgments clearly can be reached about the irrationality of questioning, say, p , depending on how the expression "cannot rationally be questioned" is understood. For example, if the meaning of this expression is what is set forth in (1), then it would not be necessary for a person to *deny* the truth of p to give evidence of irrationality; it would be sufficient for him simply to *doubt* it. But it would not be sufficient for a person simply to doubt p , if the meaning of "cannot rationally be questioned" is what is set forth in (2), (3), or (4). Thus, it is very much to the point to ask of McCloskey just what sense he does attach to this expression, and to expect a clear, unequivocal answer. Unfortunately, no such answer is to be found. Instead, we find that McCloskey vacillates back and forth between various meanings of "cannot rationally be questioned." On some occasions, for example, we find him alleging that the propositions that affirm the worth of certain ends are "indubitable," a characterization which quite naturally suggests the view that ((1) above) the truth of such propositions cannot be rationally *doubted*. On other occasions, however, we find him contending that it would be irrational if "a person accepted and acted on the contradictory" of these propositions. And on still other occasions, finally, we find him declaring that these same propositions "are so plainly indubitable that the adopting of their contraries *or* contradictories as principles of action or as ends is evidence of irrationality" (my emphasis). It is not unfair to McCloskey, I think, to point out this vacillation on his part on so crucial an idea. However, I think it would be unfair to make too much of this. Clearly, even though McCloskey sometimes uses the term "indubitable," what he actually endeavors to prove is that there are certain ends such that it is irrational to deny them and to affirm and act on their contraries or contra-

dictionaries. Only senses (3) and (4), therefore, on balance, seem to capture the meaning McCloskey here associates with the expression “cannot rationally be questioned,” and, since (3) and (4) provide logically distinct analyses of the meaning of this expression, a complete examination of McCloskey’s argument must explore both of these alternatives. I shall now proceed to examine each possibility in its turn.

First, then, let us suppose that McCloskey’s position is that there are certain ends such that to accept and act on their *contradictories* gives evidence of irrationality. Relevant ends or principles here, according to McCloskey, are “‘Promotion of good and prevention of evil are obligatory’ (and its particular applications such as ‘Promotion of pleasure and elimination of pain are obligatory’), and ‘Respect for persons is obligatory’ (and its particular applications, for instance, ‘Innocent persons ought not to be killed’).” What argument does McCloskey offer to show that to affirm and act on the *contradictory* of any one or all of these principles provides “evidence of irrationality”? McCloskey’s argument here is as follows:

Suppose someone adopted as an ultimate, irreducible principle, the principle “Promotion of the maximum suffering for mankind is obligatory”, or “It is obligatory to kill as many human beings as possible”, we should judge him to be insane no matter from what culture group he came.

Now, this last mention of a “culture group” is intended by McCloskey to put off those who would hold that ultimate moral principles are culturally relative, and though some questions might be raised concerning the adequacy of his response to this problem, a more fundamental question can be raised concerning the logic of his reasoning. To see this, let us grant to McCloskey the claim that an end is irrational if the adoption of it gives evidence of the insanity of those who adopt and affirm it, and let us concede, further, his contention that to affirm and act on the principles “Promotion of the maximum suffering for mankind is obligatory” and “It is obligatory to kill as many human beings as possible” are paradigm examples of irrational ends, for the reason McCloskey gives. Then, having granted this much, let us ask what logical support these claims could possibly give to McCloskey’s view that an end is rational if to affirm and act on its *contradictory* gives evidence of the irrationality of the person who does so? The answer here, clearly, must be that these claims cannot possibly provide support for the view in question. For the contradictory of (E₁) “Elimination of pain is obligatory,” to use one of the relevant examples provided by McCloskey, is not (E₂) “Promotion of maximum pain for mankind is obligatory,” an example of an end whose irrationality has been conceded for the sake of argument; rather, the contradictory of (E₁) is (E₃) “*It is not the case that the elimination of pain is obligatory.*” And (E₂) clearly is not equivalent to, nor does it entail, (E₃), or vice versa. Thus, even if, as can be conceded, a person and the end he adopts would be irrational if he adopted (E₂), it would not follow that either or both would be irrational, if he adopted (E₃). And since it is (E₃) and *not* (E₂) that is the logical contradictory of (E₁), to show that no rational person could affirm and act on

(E₂) could go no way toward showing that no rational person could affirm and act on the *contradictory* of (E₁). Moreover, since (E₂) is not the contradictory of (E₁), the irrationality of the end posited in (E₂) cannot by itself entail the rationality of the end posited in (E₁). Nor, for the same reason, could McCloskey argue, as he does in this context, that he has shown that it is part of what we mean by “a rational man” that he is “one who recognizes the truth of the propositions affirming the worth of the more important ends,” including (E₁). To show this, McCloskey would be obliged to show that no rational man could affirm (E₃), and this, as I have just pointed out, his argument cannot even begin to demonstrate.

Even granting this, however, it is worthwhile asking whether denying (E₁) and affirming (E₃) gives any evidence of irrationality. Certainly McCloskey thinks it does, and he could be correct in thinking this even if he is confused when he treats (E₃) as the contradictory of (E₁). Now, McCloskey, himself, presents no argument to show this, and I do not see how anyone could do so without begging the question. For let us suppose that a given individual does not accept and act on the principle “Pleasure ought to be maximized.” Now, as has been argued, not to accept and act on this principle is not equivalent to accepting and acting on the principle “Pain ought to be maximized.” All that such a person commits himself to is not regarding the maximization of pleasure as morally obligatory. And how can it be inferred from this that the person is, to this extent, something less than a rational man? For my own part, I cannot see how it can, unless one begs the question and assumes that it already is known that the maximization of pleasure *is* a rational end *and* that persons who do not seek to maximize pleasure are, to this extent, irrational. Short of this, however, it remains clear that affirming the contradictory of the end in question is not a paradigmatic case of affirming some ignoble or depraved end, the likes of which only an insane person could find worthy of dedication. It is, instead, a simple case of excluding a particular end as morally binding on all rational, free beings, and it is an exclusion which, by itself, fails to provide evidence of irrationality of a kind even remotely resembling the pathological conditions of those agents McCloskey cites as examples of irrational men – (e.g., men like the one who accepts and acts on the principle “Pain and suffering ought to be maximized for their own sakes.”)

It is important to emphasize at this point that this same line of argument, developed with respect to the principle “Elimination of pain is obligatory,” can be developed in response to any end which McCloskey might care to denominate as rational. To take another example of an end thought by him to be rational, to affirm the contradictory of (I₁) “We have an obligation not to kill innocent human beings” is not to affirm (I₂) “We do have an obligation to kill innocent human beings,” but is to affirm, instead, (I₃) “*It is not the case that* we have a moral obligation not to kill innocent human beings.” Now, anyone who affirms (I₂), let us agree, is not a rational man. But the rationality of (I₁) does not *follow* from this, anymore than does the irrationality of (I₃). Nor is it clear how the affirmation of (I₃) is supposed to provide “evidence of irrationality,” even if we agree that the affirmation of (I₂) does so. For exam-

ple, some scrupulously careful, reflective persons have held the view that the idea of moral obligation is vacuous; they have held, that is, that there is no such thing as a "moral obligation," and, as a consequence of this, they could consistently affirm (I_3). And while it is true that these thinkers might be mistaken, both with respect to their general view and with respect to their affirmation of (I_3), to allege that they, like those who affirm (I_2), thereby "give evidence of their irrationality" would be as indecisive as a refutation of their views as it would be unfair. When, therefore, McCloskey is understood to be contending that we can determine which ends are rational by determining which ends are such that to affirm and act on their contradictories gives evidence of irrationality, his argument can be seen to be inadequate.

As indicated earlier, however, a possible interpretation of the claim, "There are certain moral insights which cannot rationally be questioned," is ((4) above) "To affirm and act on the *contraries* of these moral propositions gives evidence of irrationality." Moreover, since this is not only a possible interpretation of McCloskey's claim, but one which also fits his explicit mention of the "contraries" of certain principles and ends of action, it is possible to interpret him as arguing throughout, albeit in a loose and confused way, for the truth of ((4) above), and not, as we have been considering up to now, for the truth of (3). However, while a possible interpretation of McCloskey's argument, this one, like the earlier one, would not, even if correct as an interpretation, render the argument sound. For consider what McCloskey's argument could show, if interpreted in this way. It could show that there are certain ends, E_1 , E_2 , *etc.*, that only an irrational man could affirm or pursue, ends such as, *e.g.*, "Is it obligatory to kill as many human beings as possible" or "It is obligatory to maximize lying and stealing." And let us concede that this is true and that McCloskey shows that it is. What follows from this? Certainly not, as McCloskey might have us believe, that the contraries of these irrational ends are rational. Certainly not, as McCloskey might have us believe, that it is part of what we mean by "a rational man" that he must recognize the worth of the contraries of E_1 , E_2 , *etc.* Of course, it *may* be the case that the contraries of these ends are rational, and it *may* be the case that it is part of what we mean by "a rational man" that he recognize them to be such. But the rationality of the contraries of E_1 , E_2 , *etc.* does not *follow* from the irrationality of E_1 , E_2 , *etc.*, anymore than the irrationality of E_1 , E_2 , *etc.* would *follow* from the rationality of *their* contraries. Once again, of course, if one assumes that the contrary of an irrational end already is known to be rational, then it would follow from "E is an irrational end" that "The contrary of E is a rational end." But to assume this is clearly to beg the question at issue. What one needs and wants, and what McCloskey fails altogether to provide, is some argument to support this assumption, since it is not, itself, a logical truth. The rationality of any given end, E, simply does not follow from the irrationality of its contrary.

In sum, therefore: Whether McCloskey is interpreted as maintaining (3) or (4) above, his argument fails to establish that there are rational ends, let alone which among the variety of conceivable ends these might be. And since his

argument is incapable of informing us as to which of these ends are rational, it also fails to show, as McCloskey thinks it does, that there are some ends which all rational men must recognize to be worthwhile because, he thinks, it is "part of the meaning of 'a rational man'" that such a man do so. And this is to say that, McCloskey's argument to the contrary, the possibility remains that two men could be completely rational and yet disagree on the question of what ends ought to be pursued.

II

It is important to be clear about the force of my objections in Section I. I have not denied that there are rational ends. What I have denied is that McCloskey has presented us with a sound procedure for determining which ends these might be. I have argued that the rationality of any given end, E, does not follow from the fact, assuming that it is a fact, that to accept the contrary of E gives evidence of irrationality. And I have argued that, though the rationality of E could be conceded to follow from the irrationality of affirming the contradictory of E, McCloskey fails to show that it ever is irrational to affirm the contradictory of any given end. What I have disputed thus far, in short, is the logic and some of the details of McCloskey's argument. What I have yet to dispute is the assumption underlying it. This is the assumption that from the fact, assuming that it is a fact, that rational men must accept the worth of certain ends, it follows that the propositions affirming the value of these ends are known *a priori* by an intuitive exercise of reason. That McCloskey does make this assumption is implied by some of the quotations from his work presented to this point, and it is explicitly averred by him in the opening sentences of the argument under consideration. "That we do have knowledge," he writes,

of truths which are synthetic *a priori* propositions, in particular, that intuitive moral knowledge is possible, is evident if we consider two intuitive insights which cannot rationally be questioned . . . (the intuitive insights being) "Promotion of good and prevention of evil are obligatory" (and its particular applications such as "Promotion of pleasure and elimination of pain are obligatory"), and "Respect for persons is obligatory" (and its particular applications, for instance, "Innocent persons ought not to be killed").

The question I now want to raise is why anyone should concede this assumption to McCloskey. I want to ask, that is, why anyone should assume that (1) the fact that all rational men must agree on the worth of certain ends, assuming that this is a fact, can and does support the contention that (2) the propositions affirming the worth of these ends are synthetic *a priori* and known to be true by an intuitive use of reason?

My answer here can be anticipated. I believe there is no good reason to concede this assumption to McCloskey. Even if it is true, as may be granted, that there are certain ends which all rational men must agree should be promoted, it does not follow that all rational men must intuit the truth of the

propositions affirming these ends. In other words, even if we agree that it is a necessary condition of being a rational man that one affirm and seek to realize certain ends, such as, say, the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain, it does not follow, as McCloskey evidently thinks it does, that *another* necessary condition of being rational is that one intuit as true the allegedly synthetic *a priori* propositions "Promotion of pleasure is obligatory" and "Elimination of pain is obligatory." For we can concede (a) that there are ends which every rational man must agree are worthwhile (because, say, it is part of the meaning of "a rational man" that he do so); and we can concede (b) that we know which ends these are (– *e.g.*, by asking what ends are such that to question them gives evidence of irrationality); and still deny (c) that we *know* (intuitively or otherwise) that the propositions affirming the worth of these ends are true. This we are able consistently to do because the truth of (a) and (b) is consistent with the truth of a proposition that is not consistent with the truth of (c) – namely, the proposition (d) "We believe or trust (but do *not* know) that the propositions affirming the worth of the ends in question are true." In other words, it very well may be the case that no man can be rational unless he believes certain things; and it very well may be the case that included among those things which a rational man must believe are certain propositions affirming the desirability of certain ends – *e.g.*, "Pleasure is good and ought to be maximized." This much, as I have said, can be conceded, and to concede it would be to concede quite a lot. But what does not follow from these concessions is the thesis that we *know* that the propositions affirming the worth of these ends are true, either by intuition or in any other way. Accordingly, even if we were to concede the formal validity of those of McCloskey's arguments examined in Section I, we could still consistently deny that he provides us with a satisfactory answer to (in his words) "the central problem" – "namely, that of showing that reason does in fact supply us with genuine moral knowledge."²

III

In the two preceding Sections I have tried to show that a particular argument of McCloskey's is unsound. What I now wish to point out is that this same argument of McCloskey's, if it were sound, actually would lead to consequences that are inconsistent with what I take to be his own theory about how we acquire moral knowledge. Getting clear on this point is, I think, vital to a proper understanding of McCloskey's theory in particular and to any intuitionist account of moral knowledge in general. This is because such understanding as is required here is sufficient to enable us to become cognizant of a dilemma which all intuitionists must encounter and in the face of which they must choose the lesser of the two horns.

The dilemma is this: Intuitionists in ethics must choose either to beg the question about whether, in McCloskey's words, "reason does *in fact* supply

² *Ibid.*, p. 138.

us with genuine moral knowledge” or, by attempting to answer this question in a non-question begging way, they must face the consequence of rendering their position inconsistent. If they choose to beg this question, then, though they may claim that we have intuitive moral knowledge, they will be unable to set forth any basis for confirming that we do “in fact” possess it, and it will necessarily remain an open question as to whether there is anything – (namely, any genuine intuitive moral knowledge) – which their theories about “non-natural properties,” “fittingness,” “intuitive apprehension,” *etc.*, explain. For clearly, if we do not have genuine intuitive moral knowledge, then intuitionist accounts of how we get it and of in what it consists must be empty. If, on the other hand, intuitionists attempt to set forth some basis for confirming the existence of genuine intuitive moral knowledge, then, though it could be the case that they might not then be justly accused of begging the question about the existence of such knowledge, they could be justly accused of rendering their position inconsistent. For any test by which we could confirm that a particular moral proposition, *p*, is known intuitively would necessarily open up the possibility that *p* could be known *non*-intuitively, and this will necessarily be inconsistent with the view, which I take to be definitive of intuitionism in general and of McCloskey’s view in particular, that the *only* way we can know that certain propositions – (namely, those we are supposed to know by intuition) – are true is by intuition.

To make this clearer, we should note that intuitionists, themselves, must concede, as McCloskey does, that there is a genuine problem about the existence of intuitive moral knowledge, and they must concede, as McCloskey does, that, even if it is correct to claim that the concept of moral knowledge is such that, if we have any moral knowledge it must be *a priori*, it does not follow that we actually do have any such knowledge by intuition. Thus, intuitionists, if they are unable to confirm the existence of intuitive moral knowledge in some non-question begging way, must also concede that their theories about how we get moral knowledge and in what moral knowledge consists must remain exclusively hypothetical; that is, their theories must all be prefaced by the words, “*If* we have moral knowledge . . .” It is clear, however, that if the intuitionist merely *assumes* that there is something that his theory explains – that is, if he merely *assumes* that reason does “in fact” provide us with genuine intuitive moral knowledge – he begs the question, “*Is there* intuitive moral knowledge?” And once it becomes clear that the intuitionist must face this fact, it also becomes clear that the only way he could avoid begging this question is by presenting us with some test for distinguishing between cases of genuine intuitive moral knowledge, on the one hand, and cases of ersatz knowledge, on the other.

It is, I think, against this backdrop, that the argument of McCloskey’s, examined in the two previous Sections, can be understood. For what McCloskey can be understood as attempting to do, by means of his argument, is to avoid the charge of begging the question. We can interpret McCloskey as endeavoring to show, in other words, that reason does “*in fact*” supply us with intuitive moral knowledge, at least in those cases where particular moral

propositions “cannot rationally be questioned.” And, clearly, if we were to concede to McCloskey the argument he uses to support this claim, then we might also be obliged to concede that he has avoided the first horn of the dilemma facing intuitionists.

But there is a price McCloskey must pay for this. And this is that he hereby exposes his position to the other horn of the intuitionist’s dilemma – namely, the charge of inconsistency. And that this charge can be fairly raised in the case of McCloskey’s position can be seen by reflecting on what his argument must establish, if it is to show that we do have genuine moral knowledge. To show this, his argument must show, not only that to question certain moral propositions gives evidence of the questioner’s irrationality; it must also show that those moral propositions of which this is true are themselves true and known to be so. But if McCloskey’s argument really were sufficient to show this, then it would be open to us to use his argument as a means for securing moral knowledge – knowledge, in fact, of those very propositions he says we can know only via intuition. In other words, *if* his argument were sound, we could use it as a basis for acquiring moral knowledge, and not, as he seems to think, only as a test for whether we have already got it (by intuition).

This can be shown in at least two ways. First, let us suppose that McCloskey claims that he knows, by intuition, that a certain moral proposition, *p*, is true. And suppose, further, that, in order to avoid the charge of begging the question, he argues that *p* is a proposition such that, to question it gives evidence of irrationality, a fact which “shows,” he thinks, that he *does* know *p* by intuition. Let us suppose all this. For what we want to notice is that, if McCloskey’s argument really did “show” this, then we would be entitled to say that he (McCloskey) knows that *p*; if his argument really did do what he says it does, that is, it would follow that *we* would know that McCloskey knows that *p*. And something else would follow from this – namely, that we, too, would know that *p*. For, in general, if X knows that Y knows that *p*, then X knows that *p* also. But, now, if we ask how *we* have come to know that *p*, it is manifestly not by means of intuition. Rather, we have come to know that *p* because, *ex hypothesi*, McCloskey’s argument is supposed to “show” that *he* knows that *p*. Thus, *we* have come to know that *p*, not by intuition, but by inferring *p*’s truth from the fact that McCloskey’s argument “shows” that he (McCloskey) knows that *p*. Consequently, if McCloskey’s argument were adequate “to show” that he knows various moral propositions, *p*, *q*, and *r*, by intuition, this same argument could be used to show that it could not be true to maintain, as intuitionists in ethics do, that the *only* way we can gain knowledge of the truth of *p*, *q*, and *r* is by intuition. In short, the price McCloskey must pay for “showing” that he really does have intuitive moral knowledge is that he renders his position inconsistent.

Moreover, this same result can be seen to follow in yet another way, and one which does not assume, as the argument just given does, that non-intuitive moral knowledge must be parasitic on intuitive moral knowledge. For if McCloskey were correct in supposing, as he does, that there are certain moral propositions such that, to question them gives evidence of irrationality, *and*

that any moral proposition of which this is true is itself true, then, given the soundness of McCloskey's reasoning, we could *infer* the truth of some such proposition, *p*, from the fact, (assuming that it is a fact), that to question *p* gives evidence of irrationality. And one could acquire this non-intuitive knowledge of *p*'s truth, once again, without assuming that someone else first came to know *p* by intuition. In this case, then, as in the previous argument, it can be shown that McCloskey's argument, if it were sound, would lead to a consequence that is inconsistent with his own (intuitionist) view that the *only* way we can acquire knowledge of certain moral propositions is by intuition. Indeed, not only would this not be the only way we could acquire such knowledge, as the first of the two arguments just given is intended to show; more than this, it would not even have to be *a* way in which we could acquire it, a position which follows from the second of these arguments.

For the reasons given, then, I believe McCloskey's position would be inconsistent, if the argument examined in Sections I and II were sound. Moreover, I believe precisely this same fate would await any other intuitionist who, following McCloskey's lead, set forth an argument that was supposed "to show" that he (the intuitionist) really does have intuitive moral knowledge. For if we were to assume that his argument really did "show" that he knows some moral proposition, *p*, by intuition, then (1) we, who understand his argument, could come to know that he knows that *p*, from which it would follow that we, too, could know that *p*, *without* our having to intuit it; and (2) if the intuitionist's argument really did show that he knows that *p* because of some reason, *R*, then we, too, could come to know that *p* by learning that *R* applies in *p*'s case – that is, we could infer *p*'s truth from the propositions (a) "Whenever *R* applies to a moral proposition, the proposition is true" and (b) "*R* applies to *p*." At least for these two reasons, therefore, it would be inconsistent for the intuitionist to maintain *both* that the only way we can know *p* is by intuition *and* that he has an argument that shows this.

Now, there are two points I would like to make here. First, none of what I have said is intended to show that we do not have intuitive moral knowledge. Perhaps we do. Then again, perhaps we do not. All that I have endeavored to show in the present Section is that no intuitionist can consistently attempt "to show" that we do and, at the same time, maintain that the only way we can acquire such knowledge is by intuition. Of course, the intuitionist could consistently endeavor to show that we have such knowledge if he was prepared to grant that we can acquire it in other, non-intuitive ways, or, in other words, if he were to grant that intuition is just one way (among others) in which we can acquire it. But I doubt that any intuitionist would be prepared to grant this. Certainly what is distinctive of intuitionism would be lost if he did.

Second, it is worth noting that the argument I have presented does not pose a dilemma for those who hold the view that there are certain moral propositions we can know *a priori* and that we can show that we do. The dilemma arises only for those who, like McCloskey, maintain further that the only way these *a priori* truths can be known is *via* intuition. To make this clearer, let us suppose that we can infer that a given moral proposition, to the effect that

something is intrinsically good and ought to be maximized, is true on the grounds that to question it would give evidence of the questioner's irrationality. Then I think we could maintain that how we know that this proposition is true is *a priori*. For, clearly, our inference does not rest on observation. Thus, a variant of McCloskey's argument might be consistently set forth by someone who held the view that our knowledge of moral propositions is *a priori*. However, any argument that might provide support for *this* view would not automatically provide support for the *different* view that the only way we know these propositions is by intuition. Indeed, it could not provide such support. For if, as intuitionists, including McCloskey, maintain, the *only* way we can know that certain general moral propositions are true is by intuition, then it cannot be true that we *also* can know that these propositions are true, *a priori*, on the basis of evidence gained *a priori*. In fact, it may be the case that McCloskey is guilty of assimilating these two very different views, and that he thinks that his argument, since it might provide support for the view that moral knowledge is *a priori*, might also provide support for the view that we know these *a priori* moral truths by intuition. If my argument is sound, however, not only is it the case that McCloskey's argument fails to do this; it also is the case that it could not possibly do so.

Paradoxically, therefore, it is in the interests of McCloskey's theory in particular, and of intuitionism in ethics in general, that my arguments in Sections I and II be sound. For if they are sound, then I have succeeded in showing that we never can verify or infer the truth of propositions that assert the value or disvalue of certain ends from the fact that these propositions "cannot be rationally questioned," in the senses of this expression discussed there. And if I have shown this, then I have succeeded in removing at least one *non-intuitionist* account of how we can know that certain moral propositions are true. It is a fine irony, to be sure, that the non-intuitionist account in question should have been set forth by a philosopher intent upon defending intuitionism. But stranger things have happened in philosophy. And will. And perhaps the final word I should add here is that my argument might help prevent similar occurrences in the future. Once it is recognized to be true that intuitionism in ethics can be consistent only so long as it begs the question about the existence of intuitive moral knowledge, intuitionists might, in future, resist the temptation "to show" that we really do have intuitive moral knowledge. The "central problem" McCloskey speaks of – "namely, that of showing that reason does in fact provide us with genuine moral knowledge" – this central problem must remain just that – the central problem. For it is at once the desire "to show" this, on the one hand, and, on the other, the inconsistency that necessarily results when an intuitionist attempts to do so, that underlies the dilemma I have sketched.³

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³ I want to thank my colleagues Paul Bredenberg and Donald VanDeVeer for their helpful criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper.