

MORAL INTUITIONISM AND THE LAW INSCRIBED ON OUR HEARTS

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Ignorance of the law is no excuse. Or so I am told. But what about God's law? What about those who lived prior to God's written law or who presently live in locations where they have no access to God's written law? Is ignorance of this law no excuse?

Actually, this last question, according to the apostle Paul, is illegitimate. No one can claim ignorance of God's law because, as Paul writes,

For when the Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus (Rom 2:14–16 NASB).

Part of Paul's argument for the guilt of all humanity is that each one knows enough about God's nature and moral demands to be held accountable whether or not they have God's written law (Rom 1:20, 32; 2:14–15).

But how is this knowledge gained? Without explication, Paul claims that the work of the law is written in human hearts. Paul's intent here is not to treat the epistemological question (he simply assumes individuals possess such knowledge), but to argue that those without God's special revelation of moral demands are without excuse. However, inquisitive readers may wish to ask the relevant questions as to how humans acquire this knowledge. What does it mean for the work of the law to be inscribed in us? And how do we then come to apprehend and then know it?

One account of moral epistemology, moral intuitionism, provides a plausible explication. On my view, Rom 2:14–15 can be construed in terms of a moderate moral intuitionism. My goal then is to do what Paul does not—provide an epistemology of the internal law. In what follows, I will examine the internal law of which Paul speaks in Romans 2, put forth what I take to be a successful account of moral intuitionism, then explicate the internal law in light of this moral intuitionist account. The result will be, I hope, a plausible formulation of just how each human can and does know God's moral demands apart from special revelation.

I. THE INTERNAL LAW OF ROMANS 2:14–15

Paul asserts that unregenerate people who do not have access to God's written law are able to obey God's law (or at least parts of it) presumably

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because they know and understand God's law.¹ Their accomplishing of the law (or, again, parts of it)² is not by accident or coincidence. From Rom 2:14–15 and 1:32 one is under the impression that the very reason these Gentiles do the law is that they possess a knowledge of it and purposefully keep it.

But how does this knowledge originate? Though an initial reading of Rom 2:14–15 may lead to the view that the law itself or a knowledge of it is innate, I am not so convinced. I argue, rather, that what is part of the human's constitutional makeup is the cognitive ability to grasp or apprehend the law.³

The internal law spoken of in Rom 2:14–15 is not to be equated with any essential property we possess nor is reducible to any one of them. The internal law is not our instinct, impulse or even intuition though it may be known by one or more of them.⁴ Moreover, the internal law is neither our conscience nor discovered by it. The conscience in 2:15 plays an evaluatory role with respect to one's acceptance and performance of the internal law. It is not the source of it.⁵ One must be careful not to read "do by nature the things of the law" in 2:14 as "have innately as part of their nature the things of the law." One cannot automatically infer the latter from the former.

But does not 2:15 say that the law is written or inscribed in our hearts? Some words of caution are needed before we too hastily take Paul's assertion here as a description of some innate property we have. The text provides us with no hint as to who (or what) has done the writing and how that writing was accomplished. Most would assume God as the inscriber, but one need not take him as such. Nothing in the text alludes to any divine action at this point.⁶ More to the point, the author does not appear to have as his purpose

¹ I am well aware of the opposing view that Paul has Gentile Christians in mind, e.g. C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975, 1979), and Karl Barth, *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (Richmond: John Knox, 1959). I remain unconvinced of that view and believe these verses are best understood as referring to unregenerate people. Of course, this does not imply that regenerate people (even those who have the written law) do not also have the law inscribed on their hearts. The law in our hearts is due to our humanity, not our state of regeneracy. For support of the view that Paul has in mind unregenerate people, see F. F. Bruce, *Romans* (rev. ed.; TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1988), and Douglas J. Moo, *Romans 1–8*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1991).

² From here on when I refer to either obeying or apprehending the internal law I leave it open as to whether it is a reference to the whole law (whatever that turns out to be) or simply parts of it, though I hold the latter view.

³ I am purposefully avoiding "innate idea" talk because of an ambiguity in how the term is used. "Innate idea" is often taken as broadly including both disposition (or tendency) and knowledge itself. I think a sharp distinction needs to be drawn between disposition and knowledge. Dispositions need have no specific content whereas knowledge does. Dispositions, then, do not confer content to belief or knowledge; thus dispositions need not entail knowledge. I have therefore chosen to speak of "innate capacities" or "innate abilities" rather than "dispositions," "tendencies" or "innate ideas" so as to clarify my position.

⁴ In the following sections I will point out why our innate intuitive abilities provide us with knowledge of basic moral principles while capacities such as instinct and impulse do not (cannot).

⁵ Moo, *Romans 1–8* 148 and Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 232–233.

⁶ TDNT 9:274. Parallels between Rom 2:15 and Jer 31:31–34 should be guarded due to the dissimilarity between the covenantal nature of Jeremiah's account and the condemnatory nature of the Romans account. See Moo, *Romans 1–8* 147–150 as well as Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 197.

an attempt to inform us of exactly how the law became present in us and who (or what) is responsible for its presence in us. Paul's terminology may in fact be a metaphoric or stylistic way of simply saying that the law exists or is found in human hearts or minds in a more than ephemeral way.⁷ I see no conclusive support in 2:15 requiring the interpreter to take the law itself as being innate in humans.⁸

One may want to object at this point that even if 2:15 does not force a reading of the law being innate, 1:32 does. Here Paul claims that the moral degenerates of which he speaks in the preceding verses know the just or righteous decree of God (τό δικαίωμα τοῦ θεοῦ) and that violation of it requires death. Paul appears to have a specific law in mind with a specific punishment, suggesting support for the notion that the law discussed in 2:14 is innate. However, as with 2:15, nothing in 1:32 insists that the law is an innate part of the human makeup. Paul simply asserts that humans generally have some degree of knowledge that the actions and behaviors of which he speaks in 1:21–31 violate God's moral standard and deserve punishment.⁹ He is not concerned with, and does not allude to, how that knowledge obtains. Moreover, knowledge of specific moral requirements, that they are punishable, and even the extent of the punishment does not entail an innate set of moral laws. Knowledge of such facts may be gained apart from an innate law. C. S. Lewis's argument for a moral Lawgiver proves insightful here.¹⁰ Lewis shows that from the moral order of the universe itself humans know that we ought to behave in a certain way (there is a specific moral law) and that it originates in an intelligence beyond the universe. Additionally, Lewis contends humans know that none of us are keeping this law; have thus made ourselves enemies of this intelligent Lawgiver, and we want to hide (for fear of punishment?) from it.

A more plausible view is that while the moral law itself is not innate, an understanding or knowledge of it is. We are born with the knowledge of God's moral demands.¹¹ We presumably become introspectively aware of them at a later stage of cognitive maturity.¹² Though this view is an improvement over

⁷ Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1973) 41.

⁸ One must also wonder exactly what it would mean for the moral law to be an innate part of humans. Granting moral law the status of a transcendent reality, in what sense can we talk of it as being an innate part of us? This seems very problematic.

⁹ See Moo, *Romans 1–8* 116.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 17–39.

¹¹ This appears to be the position taken by Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation* 22, 228–233. Though I heartily agree with Demarest that we come to know God's moral demands in an *a priori* manner via intuition, I cannot agree with his apparent understanding of our knowledge of the law as being innate.

¹² I believe Demarest is mistaken in construing our apprehension of what is innate as intuition (*ibid.*). Introspection is better seen as that capacity that allows us to "see" or focus in on what is innate (e.g. a substantial self, states of consciousness). Intuition, on the other hand, is the cognitive capacity we possess that allows us to apprehend truths in an *a priori* manner that are not innate (e.g. first principles). I do not take intuition and introspection as synonymous. It is also technically mistaken, on this view, to understand introspection as the means by which one comes to know the moral law. If a knowledge of that law is already innate, introspection merely allows us to be aware of what we supposedly already know. In fact, introspective knowledge of the moral law does not appear possible if the law is ontologically an external reality. By introspection I can have knowledge

the moral law itself being part of our constitutional makeup, several questions suggest that it may not be the best explication.

On this view questions arise as to the content of the law innately known. If knowledge of the law is innate, one must wonder of what this knowledge actually consists. Is the reference in Rom 2:14–15 to the whole Mosaic law, just the Decalogue, or simply general moral principles of which the Mosaic law and the Decalogue are specific expressions? The latter two options appear the most sane. On either of these options which commandments or principles are innately known? There appears to be no other basis than arbitrary decision on which to decide how many commandments (all, eight, five, etc.) are innately known or just what and how many principles are innately known.

Other questions arise as to the uniformity of this innate knowledge in humans. Do some people have innate knowledge of the law that others do not or is this innate knowledge uniform in every human? If the innate knowledge is not uniform (i.e. some innately know some of God's moral demands that others do not), why not? If this innate knowledge is uniform, what explains the fact that some do appear to know basic moral demands while others do not? For example, in some cultures individuals regard some forms of adultery (e.g. polygamy) as virtuous while others immediately perceive (just "see") it as a moral evil.

Now none of these queries concerning the content and uniformity of the innately known law is anywhere near fatal to that position (for instance, the effects of sin may be postulated as blinding our introspective abilities so that some "see" their knowledge of a moral principle that others do not). They merely call to attention an apparent lack of explanatory power that may prompt us to search for a position that yields more explanation.

A more difficult problem for the view of innate knowledge of the moral law is the very idea of innate knowledge itself. Whatever else may be said of innate knowledge, it does not appear that knowledge is something that can be innate. On most accounts of knowledge belief is a necessary condition. But, with knowledge conceived as innate, when did belief obtain? Beliefs do not appear to obtain prior to adequate cognitive development. At this point the proponent of innate knowledge may push the problem back a step and claim certain beliefs are also innately deposited in us by our Creator. As with knowledge, however, beliefs do not appear to be the kind of things that are innate. Beliefs are the result of conscious cognitive functions that cannot obtain prior to some stage of cognitive maturity. Furthermore, God does not do our believing for us—that is left to us. But, if beliefs then do obtain at a later stage of cognitive development, knowledge cannot be innate.¹³

about my beliefs, feelings, states of consciousness, etc. (e.g. that "I hold 'x is wrong'"), but I cannot by introspection have knowledge of external realities (e.g. that "x is wrong") because having this latter kind of knowledge entails something about the external world to which I do not have introspective access. Unless, of course, we are ready to grant that the moral law itself is an innate part of us. Consider Robert Audi, *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 27–29.

¹³ Does this rule out dispositional beliefs? Not at all. At some point dispositional beliefs were *occurrent beliefs of ours* now stored in our memory. It would be difficult to place innate beliefs in

In light of the explanatory and epistemological difficulties of this view, I would like to consider another option. The view I find the most plausible is that what is innate in humans is the cognitive capacity to apprehend and know the moral law. Neither the moral law nor a knowledge of it is innate. Humans are born with a natural ability of the mind to grasp immediately God's moral demands in an a priori manner. This capacity is actualized at some stage of cognitive maturity.

What recommends this view over the others? First, this view better fits into the context of Paul's argument in Romans 1 and 2. The view that our cognitive abilities to grasp moral reality are innate nicely parallels the innate abilities we have to grasp physical reality in Romans 1. Neither God's creation nor a knowledge of it are innate aspects of the human. Instead, we are born with the capacities to apprehend immediately and directly and non-inferentially know the created order around us ("the external world" in philosophical parlance). Just as we have the innate capacity to perceive immediately and directly the external physical world and non-inferentially come to know it, so too we are inborn with the capacity to perceive moral reality (God's moral demands) immediately and directly and come to non-inferentially know it. In neither case is the reality nor the knowledge of that reality innate to us. Additionally, one wonders if the direct apprehension of the created order in Romans 1 should be limited to the physical creation. Perhaps God's existence and attributes are not only inferred from the physical world, but the nonphysical world (which includes moral reality) as well—"what has been made" (verse 20) refers to both realities. This would make sense in light of Paul's discussion and condemnation of the unbelievers' rejection of God, their immoral behavior in the remainder of chapter 1, and his clear denunciation of those who know the ordinance of God—"those who practice such things are worthy of death" (verse 32).

Second, the view that capacities to apprehend and know the moral law are what is innate better squares with the human as *imago Dei*. On the most accurate understandings of the image of God, the image is seen as multifaceted including both intellectual and moral aspects.¹⁴ If humans reflect their Creator in these (and many other) capacities, it would appear that we best image him in apprehending and knowing moral reality ourselves rather than him simply depositing that reality or knowledge of it in us from conception. God does not do our knowing for us—moral or otherwise. As image-bearers, we best reflect God when we do that ourselves and even more so when we do it correctly.

Third, this view avoids many explanatory difficulties by remaining neutral about the exact content of the internal law that is known. On this view one is not obligated to postulate and then define a certain set of moral laws and/or principles that every person knows—though one may wish to do so. Since

our memory due to the fact that remembering seems to presuppose some prior conscious state. But innate beliefs do not present us that option unless one adopts a reincarnationist approach.

¹⁴ For example, Hoekema, *God's Image* 66–82 and Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, Vol. II (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 142–160.

no body of moral knowledge is innate, this view may better explain some differences (or potential differences) in the content of knowledge of the moral law from person to person and why some may non-inferentially know more of this law than another. In section three I will take up the question of whether the lack of some innate law or knowledge of that law leaves open the possibility that an individual may never gain knowledge of God's moral demands at all. I think it does not.

I have now, I hope, established that it is not necessary to hold that Rom 2:14–15 describes an innate law or innately known law. Rather, innate capacities to gain knowledge of the moral law may be a better explication. But how are we to understand this? What capacity (or capacities) allows us to apprehend and know God's moral demands? We turn to moral epistemology to provide us with a more detailed account of how we can know *a priori* the internal law spoken of in Rom 2:14–15. This will involve the presentation of a moderate moral intuitionism.

II. MORAL INTUITIONISM

Perhaps Robert Audi articulates the best recent account of moral intuitionism in his *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character*.¹⁵ I find Audi's account of moral intuitionism largely correct. My explication here will follow and, in many ways, depend upon that account.

Before defining moral intuitionism, let us be clear on what it is not. By moral intuition, moral epistemologists do not mean hunch, instinct, impulse or mere inclination. What we mean by "a mother's intuition" is very different from what we mean by "moral intuition." The former suggests "hunch," "instinct," etc., while the latter is to be seen in terms of a conviction held through serious rational consideration and understanding.¹⁶ Knowledge, immediate or mediate, is the result of rational deliverances. Intuition, I would argue, gives us this rational deliverance. Though often confused with intuition, the "brute deliverances" of hunch, instinct, impulse and mere inclination do not (cannot).¹⁷

Audi defines moral intuitionism as "the thesis that basic moral judgments and basic moral principles are justified by non-inferential deliverances of a rational, intuitive faculty . . ." ¹⁸ I (presumably Audi as well) would go a step further and say that we also *know* at least some moral judgments and principles in this manner. Two comments are in order regarding this intuitive faculty. First, moral intuition does not require an added or special faculty. Intuition of moral principles is rooted in the same faculty whereby we intuit other non-moral truths such as first principles of logic and other self-evident propositions. Stated another way, our intuitive faculty allows us to gain immediate knowledge of external realities, some of which is moral knowledge.

¹⁵ Audi, *Moral Knowledge*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 40–41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 53–54.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 33. Elsewhere (p. 54) Audi describes moral intuitionism as "the view that we can have, in the light of appropriate reflection on the content of moral judgments and moral principles, intuitive (hence non-inferential) justification for holding them."

Second, this rational, intuitive faculty is innate. We do not acquire this faculty. It is part of our constitutional makeup.

I must emphasize here that intuitive knowledge, moral or otherwise, is non-inferential. Knowledge concerning moral principles gained by intuition is not based on or inferred from perception, memory, prior conclusions, etc. Moral intuition is an immediate grasp of or insight into moral reality.¹⁹ Though Audi correctly cautions us on some problems in drawing analogies between intuition and perception, it is useful to do so as long as we keep those cautions in mind.²⁰ Just as we have direct access to the external physical world through innate perceptual faculties (sight, hearing, touch, etc.), so too we have direct access to the external nonphysical world of moral reality through our innate intuitive faculty.²¹ No inferences need be made in either case. The fact that a hummingbird is hovering outside my study window is non-inferentially known through my innate faculty of sight, and the moral fact that “sexually molesting small children is morally wrong” is non-inferentially known through my innate faculty of intuition. Moral intuition may be qualifiedly seen as moral perception.

But what characterizes the moral intuitionism I am suggesting that allows it to withstand recent attacks that have appeared to make moral intuitionism epistemologically incredible?²² Again, following Audi, I believe a plausible account of moral intuitionism may be construed as moderately foundationalist, moderately rationalist, and internalist—thus a *moderate moral intuitionism*.

First, this moral intuitionism is *foundationalist*, but only moderately so. Foundationalism—the view that knowledge may be rooted in first principles whose justification does not depend on inference from other cases of knowledge—in its classical form has been the locus of much criticism due to the problems associated with such knowledge being infallible, indefeasible and incorrigible.²³ Unfortunately, the apparent failure of classical foundationalism leads many to conclude the failure of foundationalism generally. Recent

¹⁹ “Immediate,” as used here, is not to be thought of in temporal terms. The idea here is directness. Intuition gives us unblocked or unmediated epistemological access to reality.

²⁰ Audi, *Moral Knowledge* 41–42. For instance, “an intuition is more like a belief based on careful observation than like an impression formed from a glimpse . . .” Also, the analogy may mislead us into thinking all intuitions are about observables. But rights, moral principles and the like are not observable even though they are still intuitable.

²¹ In describing moral reality as “non-physical” I am not denying a connection between moral reality and the physical world. Though moral principles, judgments, truths, etc. are non-physical, they are manifested in and can be discernable in physical acts and beings. Human morality is not wholly independent from the physical world. Audi may be correct that moral properties supervene on natural properties even though they cannot be reduced to them and need not be caused by them (pp. 93–128). More work on this issue needs to be done from a theological perspective that takes seriously the fact that morality flows primarily from God’s character but also from what he has created (including the physical world). For example, environmental ethics and ethical principles depend not only on God’s character but the very existence of a physical planet, the kind of planet it is, and what can be done to that planet.

²² See, for example, criticism leveled against moral intuitionism in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Moral Skepticism and Justification,” in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons, *Moral Knowledge?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 3–48.

²³ Keith Lehrer, *Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), *et al.*

epistemologists have, I believe, demonstrated that moderate forms of foundationalism are not susceptible to the same criticisms leveled against classical varieties.²⁴

Moderate foundationalism applied to moral intuitionism gives us non-inferential knowledge of moral principles or judgments that need not be infallible, indefeasible or incorrigible. Audi astutely observes that,

Once it is seen that the primary role of intuition is to give us direct, that is, non-inferential, knowledge or justified belief of the *truth*, rather than of the self-evidence, of moral propositions (especially certain moral principles), there is less reason to think that moral beliefs resting on an intuitive grasp of principles must be considered indefeasibly justified.²⁵

Surprisingly, to many, a moral intuitionism that is moderately foundationalist may (perhaps even should) include time and reflection.²⁶ Intuitive knowledge can be (though need not be) a conclusion formed through rational inquiry and yet not be inferential.²⁷ Thus, a distinction exists between kinds of self-evident propositions. Some are *immediately self-evident* (grasped apart from any reflection) and others are *mediately self-evident* (grasped through the mediation of reflection).²⁸ Reflection, in such instances, plays a clarifying role that is not itself the basis for the intuition.²⁹ Armed with this distinction, Audi states that,

Once we distinguish between the immediately and the mediately self-evident, and appreciate that a self-evident proposition need not be obvious or even compelling, we can see clearly that an intuitionist—indeed, even a rationalist one like Ross—may be a fallibilist about the sense of self-evidence. He can thus make room for error even in thoughtful judgments to the effect that a proposition is, or is not, self-evident. He might grant, then, that a non-self-evident (or even false) proposition may seem to someone to be self-evident. Moreover, not every self-evident proposition need be “intuitive,” just as not every proposition believed on the basis of intuition need be self-evident. If there are self-evident moral truths, the sense that one has grasped such a truth can be illusory, and at least the majority can be expected to be in the mediate category.³⁰

²⁴ See Audi, *The Structure of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and “Contemporary Foundationalism” in Louis P. Pojman, *The Theory of Knowledge* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1993) 206–213; Richard A. Fumerton, *Metaphysical and Epistemological Problems of Perception* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985) and *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995).

²⁵ Audi, *Moral Knowledge* 38.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 41, 43–44, 49–54.

²⁷ *Ibid.* Audi comments that “it is essential to see that particularly when a case, real or hypothetical, is complicated, an intuition may not emerge until reflection proceeds for some time. Such an intuition can be a conclusion of reflection temporally as well as epistemically; and it may be either empirical or a priori” (p. 44).

²⁸ *Ibid.* 45–46.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 46.

³⁰ *Ibid.* It is also worth considering Audi’s claim on page 47: A self-evident proposition can function as an epistemic *unmoved mover*: it can be known, and can provide support for other propositions without itself being seen to have (and perhaps without there even existing) a basis in something constituting evidence for it. But, unlike a strongly axiomatic proposition, it need not be an *unmoveable*

Furthermore, moral knowledge gained by intuition may be revised and refined on the basis of evidence.³¹ Moral knowledge gained through intuition, then, need not be infallible, indefeasible and incorrigible.

Beyond the possibility of moral knowledge being fallible, defeasible and corrigible, what other practical results might be found? A moderately foundationalist moral intuitionism does not entail that a person will “see” a particular self-evident truth. For various reasons (some to be discussed later) one may intuit a moral principle that another just does not “see.” Likewise, one may intuit a moral principle that another comes to know inferentially. Moreover, the possibility exists that intuitions may misfire and we may be wrong about what we have intuited. In other words, just because some moral principles or judgments are intuitable does not entail they (1) will be intuited, (2) will be intuited by each person, (3) can only be known by intuition, or (4) are successfully intuited. Analogously, the same may be said for our perceptual faculties. Just because some facts about the physical world are perceivable does not entail they (1) will be perceived, (2) will be perceived by each person, (3) can only be known through perception, or (4) are successfully perceived.

Second, moderate moral intuitionism is *rationalist*, but, again, only in a moderate form. The intuitive knowledge of (self-evident) moral principles or judgments is *a priori*. Yet, experience may play a role in the acquisition of relevant information that may be used for reflection, revision and refinement. Audi claims that,

Rationalists may grant, however, that experience is crucial for *acquiring* the relevant concepts; it is knowledge of their *relations* that they account for non-empirically. A rationalist may also hold to any of several views on the priority of general over particular moral knowledge. . . .

[One of these views] combines virtues of both the generalist and the particularist positions: one must see something *in* the particular in order to know that it is an injustice; and to know the truth of a generalization one must see how it might apply to particulars. Further, we can refine our general moral knowledge in the light of concrete cases and modify our understanding our understanding of concrete cases in the light of our general knowledge. This *interactionist* view seems to me the most plausible; and it is consistent both with rationalism and with the view that experience is a genetic, as opposed to epistemic, requirement of *a priori* knowledge.³²

A moderate rationalism applied to moral intuitionism fits nicely with the moderate foundationalism previously expressed. It does not entail infallibility, indefeasibility, incorrigibility, arbitrariness, etc. Audi sums up the situation well:

A priori knowledge of moral principles need not be mysterious, nor its proponents dogmatic or epistemologically infallibilist; moral properties can be seen

mover, one such that there can be further evidence for it, since the existence of that evidence would move it upward from the lowest possible foundational level.

³¹ Ibid. 50.

³² Ibid. 100.

to play important roles in description, explanation, and inference without being either reduced to natural ones or consigned to the status of epiphenomena; self-evident moral principles need not be immediately obvious or, on the other hand, arbitrary or merely historically conditioned products of culture; moral principles, even if they can be known without prior premises about rationality, can be supported by plausible principles of practical reasoning; and the diversity of moral obligations can be accounted for, in a variety of ways, in a unifying framework.³³

Moral knowledge gained a priori through intuition need not be unqualifiedly rationalistic, thus ruling out experience as playing important roles and providing relevant information.³⁴

Third, moderate moral intuitionism is *internalist*. Epistemological internalism is the view that what justifies my belief is internally accessible to me. I can become aware of the justifier(s), then, by introspection (though not necessarily in every case).³⁵ Epistemological externalism is the view that what justifies my belief is external to me in the sense that it is not introspectively accessible. One form of externalism, reliabilism, generally construes justification in terms of some reliable process (e.g. perception, memory, etc.) that tends, more often than not, to give us true beliefs. The agent is unable to access this process introspectively but through repeated experience that establishes the reliability of that process. The moral intuitionism sketched out here is internalist in that it affirms that what justifies moral beliefs (including those gained by intuition) are internal to and introspectively accessible for the agent.

An internalism with respect to justification most consistently fits with (and quite possibly is demanded by) a moral intuitionism committed to the kind of foundationalism and rationalism presented above. Furthermore, reflectionism appears to be at odds with externalism (especially reliabilism). If reliable processes are the ground for justification, reflection seems unnecessary. Audi claims that in such cases “there would be no need for reflection and perhaps even no role for it: certain judgmental tendencies are simply built into us, whether by evolutionary factors, divine artifice, or some other power.”³⁶ Beyond the apparent essentiality of a moderate moral intuitionism being internalist, other difficulties with externalism in general and externalism in ethics make this view even less palatable.³⁷

I have laid out an intuitionist account of moral epistemology that seems to me to be correct. It is a moderate moral intuitionism that is moderately foundationalist, moderately rationalist and internalist with respect to justifica-

³³ Ibid. 107.

³⁴ For a full discussion see Audi’s chapter “Moral Epistemology and the Supervenience of Ethical Concepts” in *ibid.* 93–111.

³⁵ Again, I want to remind the reader of the distinction between intuition and introspection. For this distinction, see note 12.

³⁶ Audi, *Moral Knowledge* 53–54.

³⁷ It is well beyond the scope of this paper to address these issues. I refer you to Audi’s treatment of these difficulties in *ibid.* 11–31.

tion.³⁸ Now I would like to consider moderate moral intuitionism as a plausible way to understand Rom 2:14–15.³⁹

III. MORAL INTUITIONISM AND THE INTERNAL LAW

In pulling together ideas expressed in the previous two sections, my contention is that a moderate moral intuitionism is a quite plausible explication of the internally existing moral law affirmed in Rom 2:14–15. The innate intuitive ability each human possesses allows us non-inferentially to apprehend and know basic moral principles for which we are accountable. This position, among other considerations, is consistent with the context of Romans 1–2, corresponds to an orthodox theology of the image of God and the reality of sin, and accounts for at least some of our experiences concerning human knowledge of moral principles.

First, given the context of Romans 1–2, a moderate moral intuitionism is not ruled out. We are not forced to take the law or a knowledge of it as innate. Granting that what Paul has in mind are unregenerate people and granting what Paul *does not* have in mind is an epistemological or metaphysical explication of his claim, a moderate moral intuitionism cannot be immediately dismissed. The Apostle to the Gentiles is merely claiming that those who do not have the written law of God are not exempt from God's judgment because moral principles are found in their minds in a more than ephemeral way (i.e. they are inscribed there). How this is accomplished is not addressed and is really not Paul's point. Beyond the fact that the context does not explicitly forbid a moderate moral intuitionist account, the context also lends some positive weight to this position. The parallels between an innate ability to perceive the external physical reality in Romans 1 and the innate ability (on my view) to intuit external moral reality in Romans 2 require some serious attention and cannot be quickly moved over. The allowance of "what has been made" in Rom 1:20 to refer to the whole created order (physical and non-physical), including moral reality, must also be taken seriously especially in light of the focus on behavior and ethics in the remainder of Romans 1 which culminates with verse 32. Though not demanded by Romans 1–2, a moderate moral intuitionism is not denied by it and may even gain support from it.

Second, from Rom 2:14–15 and the irreducibility of moral properties to natural ones (i.e. morality is not explicable solely in physical terms—it is

³⁸ Of course this moral epistemology presupposes a certain ontology of morality and an ontology of the epistemic act. I cannot attempt to argue for either here. I am a moral realist in that moral truths are non-physical, mind-independent realities. I also believe a form of intentionality best explicates an ontology of the epistemic act that allows us direct epistemological access to the external world (physical and non-physical). For some considerations on this last point see my unpublished paper "Sinnott-Armstrong's *Limited Moral Skepticism*: Moral Nihilism With A Happy Face."

³⁹ Though Audi does not explicate his view of moral intuitionism in theological terms, he at least finds it compatible with such an attempt. "Reflectionism is not inconsistent with the theory that moral truths are ultimately (non-definitionally) grounded in divine will and knowable jointly through natural theology and Scripture—a view that can be argued to be supported by reflection of an appropriate kind." Audi, *Moral Knowledge* 53.

ultimately nonphysical), the knowledge of the internal law is *a priori*.⁴⁰ Though I have rejected an innate knowledge of the internal law, this does not commit me to some sort of Lockean empiricism. One need not affirm innate knowledge to hold a rationalistic epistemology. A moderate moral intuitionism affirms a moderate rationalism even while not acknowledging innate knowledge. Moral intuitions are the *a priori* deliverances of an innate rational faculty. A moderate moral intuitionism recognizes the problems of either constructing an empiricist epistemology or affirming the notion of innate ideas while simultaneously recognizing the importance of empirical experience in the acquisition of knowledge and the apparent necessity of a rationalistic approach to epistemology.

Third, the condemnatory context of Romans 1–2 requires we make a distinction between a rational faculty necessary for moral knowledge that justifies judgment and punishment and non-rational natural processes that cannot be said to give us moral knowledge or justify judgment and punishment. A moderate moral intuitionism proposes intuition as that rational faculty whereas capacities such as instinct, impulse and propensity are of the non-rational variety. Some may argue that φύσις in Rom 2:14 is translated as instinct and that the same term is used in Jude 10 to refer to the unreasoning appetites of animals. Therefore, maybe a rational faculty is not in mind. But, the use of φύσις in both Rom 2:14 and Jude 10 shows that the context of each passage must govern the meaning of this term and not a mere word study. The term φύσις insinuates something very different in each passage—in Rom 2:14 to a rational activity for which one is responsible and in Jude 10 to a non-rational activity that is subhuman. Intuition, as a rational faculty, is not rendered implausible as an explication of Rom 2:14–15 by the use of the term φύσις.

Fourth, a moderate moral intuitionism (partially) explains our experience of different levels of moral knowledge in persons. Since an intuitionist position of this kind denies an innate moral law and an innate knowledge of that law, all persons need not possess the same knowledge or amount of knowledge of basic moral principles. A moderate moral intuitionism leaves open the question of the exact content of each person's intuited moral knowledge.

Fifth, a moderate moral intuitionism corresponds nicely with a whole person view of the image of God.⁴¹ Rational capacities have long been recognized as an aspect of the *imago Dei* even if some have falsely defined it exclusively in those terms. Most certainly we image God in our cognitive abilities including our faculty of intuition.⁴² Though we need not attribute intuitive ability to God, he nevertheless is a rational being who grasps and knows truth. We image God in that we (and presumably angels) among all other creatures are the only rational beings who can do the same. How, or by what process, we grasp and know the truth is largely irrelevant to our imaging God.⁴³ I find it

⁴⁰ Demarest would agree on this point. See *General Revelation* 232.

⁴¹ See note 14 for examples of this position.

⁴² Demarest, *General Revelation* 22 seems to connect our intuitive faculty with the *imago Dei*.

⁴³ Consider our empirical knowledge. Certainly God knows the things we come to know through our perceptual faculties even though he does not, as a spirit being, have these faculties.

more acceptable in light of the *imago Dei* that God does not do our thinking and knowing for us (i.e. fixing in us from birth a knowledge of the moral law). Instead, as his reflectors and representatives, we are given the faculties to think and know for ourselves. We image God when we engage our intuitive faculty to grasp and know moral truth. We do so even more when we are successful.

Sixth, one major attraction of a moderate moral intuitionism is that it takes sin and its residual effects seriously as well as provides an explanation for intuitive misfire, malfunction and mistake. The verdict of Scripture, and the whole point of Romans 1–3, is that human beings are holistically depraved⁴⁴—no aspect of the human escapes the devastating effects of sin. The devastating effects of sin reach to our cognitive faculties including that of intuition. Thus, intuiting moral principles or judgments is no guarantee that we have done so correctly or even arrived at the truth. Classical foundationalism does not appear to allow for depravity of at least certain cognitive faculties because it leaves us with non-inferential knowledge that is infallible, indefeasible and incorrigible. This has caused some to abandon epistemological foundationalism altogether.⁴⁵ This is premature. The foundationalist position for which I am arguing is only moderately so. Moderate moral intuitionism insists that moral principles or judgments non-inferentially gained via intuition may be fallible, defeasible and corrigible. In humanity's fallen condition, none of our cognitive faculties function perfectly (again consider perceptual faculties analogously) including our intuition. A moral intuitionism committed to a moderate foundationalism allows and accounts for intuitive misfires, malfunctions and mistakes. This foundationalism takes sin and its effects seriously. Additionally, sin's effects on the human intuitive faculty further explain differences in knowledge of basic moral principles from one person to the next. Though a base level of depravity exists in all humans, I take seriously that some are more depraved than others. Through beliefs, lifestyles, etc., some exist at a deeper level of depravity than others experiencing more intuitive problems, for example, than a person of greater moral integrity. Certainly any epistemology that does not take seriously sin and its effects remains suspect. But a moderate moral intuitionism does and therefore remains a legitimate option.

Seventh, a moderate moral intuitionism commends itself because it corresponds well with the Scriptural affirmation that the sin-marred *imago Dei* is

⁴⁴ "Total depravity" is simply a poor description of human depravity because it conveys the idea that we are as depraved as we could be. This is clearly false. Strong forms of Calvinism notwithstanding, our cognitive equipment has not been destroyed or so seriously damaged that the unregenerate person cannot reason (intuit). In fact, many unregenerate persons reason (intuit) quite well—even extraordinarily well.

⁴⁵ For instance, Andrew Gustafson, "Apologetically Listening to Derrida," *Philosophia Christi* 20/2 (Winter 1997) 15–42 does just this. Gustafson writes, "I am interested in trying to develop a Christian philosophical worldview which isn't rooted in Reidian epistemology because I don't think Reid takes sin seriously enough" (pp. 17–18). Perhaps "Reidian epistemology" (i.e. classical foundationalism) does not take sin seriously, but Gustafson fails to realize that classical foundationalism is not the only foundationalism. Consequently he simply ignores or is unfamiliar with recent epistemological developments within foundationalist thinking.

renewable.⁴⁶ Just as depravity is holistic, so too salvation is holistic. All that sin has done to the human, God's salvific provisions seek to undo. This transformation of the *imago Dei*, begun at regeneration, is a process—this is what we mean by progressive sanctification—whereby the Spirit-empowered person becomes more Christ-like. As an aspect of the *imago Dei*, the Christian's intuitive faculty is regenerated and transformable by the sanctification process. Just as sin has marred and personal sins can continue to mar one's intuitive faculty, so too regeneration brings life to and righteous living empowered by God's Spirit transforms that same intuitive faculty. The intuitive faculty can be trained, disciplined, nurtured, etc., in this process. I also believe some renewing of the intuitive faculty can (and does) take place to a limited extent in the unregenerate, though this is in no way to be equated with sanctification due to the absence of God's empowering presence in their lives. Thus, both the unregenerate (through attempts at moral betterment) and the regenerate (through righteous living and Spirit-empowered lives) can experience renewal and correction of their intuitive faculties. Again, we have further explanation for the fact that intuitive knowledge of moral principles is not uniform in humans. If a moderate moral intuitionism takes sin seriously, it also takes seriously the possibility and reality of correcting problems due to sin—especially in regenerated persons whose lives are drawn into God's.

Before concluding matters, let me briefly address one question that might arise in light of my discussion of Rom 2:14–15 in terms of a moderate moral intuitionism. On an intuitionist account of Rom 2:14–15, isn't it possible that someone might not intuit basic moral principles and thus not be accountable? Is not an innate law or an innate knowledge of that law necessary to guarantee that all do know the law and thus universal condemnation? Here again, though reminding ourselves of overextending analogies, the analogy between our intuitive and perceptual faculties may be helpful. Everyone, barring serious perceptual malfunction, perceives physical reality around them. Those with such malfunctions cannot be held accountable for missing or misconstruing this information. Of course no one human perceives all of physical reality and some perceive more of it than others just because of their location (e.g. living in Montana), the training of their perceptual faculties (e.g. training my eyes to see elk in the forest), and purposely placing themselves in situations to perceive a certain physical reality (e.g. going out in the mountains where the elk are). But all, with the relevant exceptions, perceive some physical reality that is sufficient for them to know that a God exists and some things about his nature (Rom 1:18–20). Though unregenerate persons willfully suppress, deny and distort the knowledge they receive through perceptual faculties, they do perceive and know. Likewise, everyone, barring serious cognitive (intuitive) malfunction, intuits moral reality around them. Those with such malfunctions (e.g. severe mental retardation) cannot be held accountable for missing or misconstruing the information. As with perception

⁴⁶ Consider the overall picture presented by the following verses: Rom 8:29; 12:1–2; 2 Cor 3:18–4:4; Eph 4:22–24; Col 3:9–11.

of physical reality, no one human intuits all of moral reality and some intuit more of it than others just because of their location (e.g. living in a morally oriented community), the training of their intuitive faculty (e.g. moral education), and purposefully placing themselves in situations contributing to their ability to intuit moral reality (e.g. joining a church). But all, with the relevant exceptions, intuit some moral reality that is sufficient for them to know right from wrong and be accountable for that knowledge and living in conformity to it. Unregenerate persons also willingly suppress, deny and distort the knowledge they receive through their intuitive faculty (Rom 1:32). The fact remains, however, that they do know at least some of God's moral demands.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that a moderate moral intuitionism plausibly explicates the notion of the internal law in Rom 2:14–15.⁴⁷ I have rejected an innate law or an innate knowledge of that law in favor of an innate intuitive faculty that allows us to apprehend and know God's basic moral demands. This moral intuitionism is moderately foundationalist, moderately rationalist and internalist with respect to justification. It is consistent with the context of Romans 1–2, corresponds to a biblical understanding of the *imago Dei* and sin, and accounts for experiences of life. At this point modern moral epistemology intersects with the eternal truth of God's word to help us understand the remarkable cognitive abilities of God's image-bearers and the responsibility that entails.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Again, I wish to be clear that I am not suggesting that moral intuitionism was Paul's view. I am only attempting an explication of an issue which Paul chooses not to explore.

⁴⁸ I would like to thank Gerry Breshears and Steve Mathewson for their comments on this paper. I would also like to thank Robert Audi for his helpful comments on section II.