In the last chapter (2.2) I discussed briefly the criticisms made by the deontologists against utilitarian theories of moral obligation. Although the deontologists are probably best known as critics of utilitarianism, they have also developed a theory of obligation of their own. In this chapter I shall examine that theory in the attempt to determine whether it can provide a satisfactory answer to the question of how moral knowledge is possible.

1. THE INTUITIONISM OF THE DEONTOLOGISTS

The deontologists' moral theory, as stated particularly by H. A. Prichard and W. D. Ross, is the most recent expression of a perennial point of view in moral thinking, the conviction that moral philosophy should be concerned primarily with action itself rather than with the ends to be achieved by action. According to this tradition the important moral concepts are not good and bad, but right and wrong. Although this way of thinking is associated historically with the Hebraic-Christian strand in Western thought, it was not entirely absent from Greek philosophy, being found particularly in the writings of the Stoics. In modern times it had its greatest vogue during the eighteenth century, with Kant in Germany and people like Bishop Butler and Richard Price in England. Traditionally it has come to be called "intuitionism."

As a title identifying the deontological tradition—and the contemporary deontological movement in particular—the term "intuitionism" is unfortunate, because it is used in another sense to characterize views to which the deontologists are opposed. For example, in the last chapter I used the term intuitionistic utilitarianism as a label for the views of Moore and Rashdall, which have been the target of much of the deontologists' criticism. Clearly the term "intuitionism" is being used in different ways when it is applied first to utilitarians and then to the deontologists because of their rejection of utilitarian-
ism. To avoid possible confusion I shall distinguish these two uses as follows: As I used the term in the last chapter, intuitionism means a theory which holds that moral truths can be apprehended by means of direct intuition or moral insight. Such truths are for it self-evident. As the term has often been used historically, however—and this is the second use—it means a theory which holds that rightness, duty, or "oughtness" are fundamental, irreducible moral concepts, of at least equal importance to moral philosophy as the concept of goodness. This kind of intuitionism, particularly in the form in which it is held by the deontologists, denies that we can find a satisfactory basis for our duties by an appeal to the goodness either of the consequences of our actions or of our motives in acting.

Having distinguished the two meanings of the term "intuitionism," I should add that the deontologists are intuitionists in both senses of the term. For they believe not only that the notions I have just mentioned are fundamental and non-derivative but also that truths embodying them are apprehended by means of direct intuition or moral insight. In this chapter I shall be concerned with the deontologists as representatives of intuitionism, in both senses of that term. This will not, I hope, cause confusion because I think that the sense in which I am using the term "intuitionism" will be clear from the context in which it appears.

In their formulation of the intuitionistic position the deontologists have improved on the theories of earlier intuitionists in at least three important ways: (1) They have drawn much more careful distinctions among the meanings of the principal concepts of moral theory, in particular, "right," "duty," "good," and "morally good." However, as I shall argue later, they have failed to make clearly enough a distinction of considerable importance to their own theory. (2) They have avoided the extreme position that denies that the goodness of the consequences of our actions has any relevance in determining their rightness, holding instead that one of the reasons making an act our duty is the fact that its performance would result in the best possible consequences. (3) They have avoided the problem raised by the "conflict of duties," which had forced most traditional intuitionistic theories to accept the paradoxical consequence that two incompatible actions could both be our unconditional duty, by making a distinction between what Ross calls *prima facie* duties and actuel duties. For these reasons, the deontological theory is probably the best statement of the intuitionistic position that has so far been made.