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The Possibilities of Foundationalist and Coherentist  
Approaches in Moral Epistemology

Bachelor's thesis

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This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

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## Abstract

The general problem I will address in this paper is related to moral justification. I will discuss what criteria should be satisfied in order to consider a moral belief to be justified. Moral foundationalism offers the approach of moral intuitionism, which is the view that main moral beliefs are justified without inference to other beliefs and are justified directly by intuition. Moral coherentism offers the approach of reflective equilibrium, which is the view that moral beliefs are justified according to how well they cohere with other beliefs. Moral intuitionism tries to justify beliefs by appealing to the direct seeming of some beliefs. If an act seems to be wrong or right, then having that seeming adds at least some justification for belief. Reflective equilibrium tries to justify beliefs by making them coherent with each other. If beliefs are consistent with each other, it indeed seems that they are more likely to be correct. But initial credibility of those beliefs appears to be important as well. Neither moral foundationalism nor moral coherentism are completely successful in producing justified moral beliefs. I'm leaning toward weak moral foundationalism, because of how it deals with the regress problem and how it is open to revision not like strong moral foundationalism.

## Abstrakt

Üldine probleem, mida ma käesolevas töös käsitlen, on seotud moraalse põhjendamisega. Ma arutan, millised kriteeriumid tuleks täita, et lugeda moraalne uskumus põhjendatuks. Moraalifundatsionalism pakub lähenemisviisi moraali-intuitsionism, mis on seisukoht, et peamised moraalsed veendumused on õigustatud ilma teiste veendumusteta ja on otseselt põhjendatud intuitsiooniga. Moraalikoherentism pakub reflektiivse tasakaalu lähenemist, mis seisneb selles, et moraalsed uskumused on õigustatud vastavalt sellele, kui hästi nad ühtivad teiste uskumustega. Moraali-intuitsionism üritab uskumusi õigustada sellega, et pöörduv nende uskumuste otsese näilisuse poole. Kui tegu tundub olevat vale või õige, lisab see näilisus seda, et uskumused on vähemalt mõnevõrra õigustatud. Reflektiivne tasakaal püüab õigustada uskumusi, muutes need üksteisega ühtseks. Kui uskumused on üksteisega kooskõlas, tundub, et need on tõenäolisemalt õiged. Kuid nende uskumuste esialgne usaldusväärsus tundub olevat samuti oluline. Moraalifundatsionalism ega moraalikoherentism ei ole kumbki moraaliuskumuste põhjendmisel täiesti edukad. Ma kaldun nõrga moraalifundatsionalismi poolele, sellepärast, et see tuleb paremini toime regressiooniprobleemiga ja see on samuti avatud muutustele, mitte nagu tugev moraalifundatsionalism.

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Issues in Moral Epistemology</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1	Can Moral Beliefs Be Justified? . . . . .	8
2.2	Are Moral Skeptics Right? . . . . .	9
<b>3</b>	<b>Foundationalist Approach</b>	<b>11</b>
3.1	Moral Foundationalism and Arguments for It . . . . .	11
3.2	Method of Moral Intuitionism for Justifying Moral Beliefs . . . . .	13
3.3	Main Problems for Moral Foundationalism . . . . .	14
<b>4</b>	<b>Coherentist Approach</b>	<b>19</b>
4.1	Moral Coherentism and Arguments for It . . . . .	19
4.2	Method of Reflective Equilibrium for Justifying Moral Beliefs . . . . .	21
4.3	Main Problems for Moral Coherentism . . . . .	22
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>24</b>

# 1 Introduction

Moral epistemology is about moral knowledge, the possibility of it, justification of moral beliefs, and many other things related to moral knowledge.<sup>1</sup> For example, does the belief that it is wrong to torture babies for fun count as moral knowledge?<sup>2</sup> Moral skeptics doubt that it is possible to have moral knowledge and for that they often offer evidence of moral disagreements. People disagree fiercely about a variety of moral issues, which might indicate that there is no moral knowledge to be found.<sup>3</sup>

Some moral philosophers argue that it is possible to acquire moral knowledge by justifying moral beliefs using coherentism or foundationalism. One of the most popular coherentist view is reflective equilibrium, which tries to seek coherence between different moral views and principles. One of the most popular foundationalist view is moral intuitionism, according to which some moral beliefs are justified non-inferentially, meaning they are not deduced from other beliefs. Some moral philosophers argue for moral rationalism, which compares moral knowledge to mathematical knowledge.<sup>4</sup> And finally, some moral philosophers work on finding ways to deal with moral uncertainty, because it is very difficult to predict the moral value of different actions.<sup>5</sup>

There is a debate about the structure of knowledge in epistemology, which is the subfield of philosophy. In one approach, which is called foundationalism, knowledge is viewed as "... structured like a building, with foundations upon which further knowledge is accumulated."<sup>6</sup> According to this view, some beliefs are self-evident and don't require extra justification beyond appearing to be true. In another approach, which is called coherentism, knowledge is "... structured more like a web ... than like a vertical structure with foundations." In other words, knowledge is evaluated according to how well different beliefs cohere with one another.<sup>7</sup>

The general question I will address in this paper is this: what criteria should be satisfied in order to consider a moral belief to be justified? I will not try to give a unique answer to the question, but rather synthesize different views on the topic from the literature. I will also not try to give a very broad answer to this big question, instead my research focuses more narrowly on the possibilities of foundationalist and coherentist approaches in moral epistemology and therefore, the structure of justification.

The more specific questions I try to answer based on the literature are: 1) what

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<sup>1</sup>Christopher Michael Cloos, "Moral Epistemology," PhilPapers, n.d., <http://philpapers.org/browse/moralepistemology>.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Massimo Pigliucci, *The Nature of Philosophy: How Philosophy Makes Progress and Why It Matters*, 2016, <https://platofootnote.wordpress.com/2016/05/30/the-nature-of-philosophy-the-full-shebang/>, 165.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 166.

possibilities do foundationalist approach and coherentist approach offer to justify moral beliefs?, 2) how does moral intuitionism try to produce justified moral beliefs and how does reflective equilibrium try to produce justified moral beliefs?, 3) are these approaches successful in justifying moral beliefs? My main personal task with this research project is to increase clarity about the problems and answers that are offered in the literature.

My research paper is consists of three chapters: 1) Issues in Moral Epistemology, 2) Foundationalism, and 3) Coherentism. The first chapter introduces main problems in moral epistemology such as whether moral beliefs can be justified and whether moral skeptics are right; the second chapter discusses what moral foundationalism is and what arguments are given for it, the method of moral intuitionism for justifying moral beliefs, and the main problems with moral foundationalism; the third chapter discusses what moral coherentism is and what arguments are given for it, the method of reflective equilibrium for justifying moral beliefs, and the main problems with moral coherentism.

## 2 Issues in Moral Epistemology

### 2.1 Can Moral Beliefs Be Justified?

I will begin my article by raising awareness of the problems in moral epistemology. This section is particularly about what is justification and what is required to justify moral beliefs. Justification, in general not just with regard to morality, is "... the right standing of an action, person, or attitude with respect to some standard of evaluation."<sup>8</sup> Epistemic justification is the same relationship, but specifically between belief and knowledge.<sup>9</sup> One account of justification is that "... a belief is justified for a person only if she has a good reason for holding it."<sup>10</sup> For example, holding a belief because I wish it were true or holding a belief because there is evidence in favor of it can be considered different standards for holding a belief. Different types of justification can also be distinguished. Belief justification is justifying what you believe and situational justification is having justification for belief.<sup>11</sup> The first requires actual belief, the other does not, only justification for believing. In other words, someone can have reasons for belief, but not actually have a belief.

Moral justification requires a moral belief to be justified according to moral standards.<sup>12</sup> This might mean, for example, whether a person's belief leads to the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people or whether the belief is compatible with the person's other obligations. In justifying moral beliefs, there is a distinction between having reasons for holding a belief and having reasons for thinking that a moral belief is true.<sup>13</sup> It is possible that someone is justified in holding a false belief, but it is also possible that someone has a true belief that is not justified, for example if it is just a matter of luck that a person got it.

Justification in morality is often considered different from justification in other areas. One obvious reason for this judgment is that there is a lot of disagreement in ethics<sup>14</sup>, it appears that much more than in mathematics and the natural sciences. Many reasons are given for what makes disagreements about morality so prevalent<sup>15</sup>, which may indicate

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<sup>8</sup>Jamie Carlin Watson, "Epistemic Justification," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed October 23, 2016, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/epi-just/>.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, 3rd edition (Routledge, 2010), 3.

<sup>12</sup>Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons, eds., *Moral Knowledge?: New Readings in Moral Epistemology*, 1st edition (Oxford University Press, 1996), 145.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 146.

<sup>14</sup>Throughout my paper, I define ethics as "the branch of philosophy" (also called moral philosophy) and morality as "principles of right and wrong conduct".

<sup>15</sup>Panayot Butchvarov, "The Demand for Justification in Ethics," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 15 (1990): 1–14, 3–8. Since I didn't get access to the original version of this paper, these page numbers are different from the original work. The document I used can be read from <http://myweb.uiowa.edu/butchvar/hutchinson-review.doc>.



that there is no knowledge to be acquired or perhaps that morality is just very difficult. People don't have the same feelings toward mathematics and physics as ethics. They don't want to doubt the claims of mathematics unless they're philosophers<sup>16</sup>, but people absolutely want to doubt claims of moral theories when they are in conflict with their own aspirations. It is, therefore, possible that moral justification must meet higher standards than justification in other areas.<sup>17</sup>

## 2.2 Are Moral Skeptics Right?

I will next highlight views that are at the center of moral epistemology. Moral skepticism is a collection of views that raises doubts about moral reasoning.<sup>18</sup> Different versions of it deny or doubt moral knowledge, justified moral belief, and many other epistemic notions regarding morality.<sup>19</sup> Moral skepticism requires someone to be a moral skeptic, but that doesn't commit to being skeptical about the external world, other minds, or other things.<sup>20</sup> In general, moral skepticism raises doubts about moral knowledge or justified moral belief.<sup>21</sup>

There are two versions of moral skepticism: Pyrrhonian skepticism and Cartesian skepticism.<sup>22</sup> Pyrrhonian skepticism is doubt about moral knowledge or justified moral belief.<sup>23</sup> This type of skeptics doubt that moral knowledge or justified belief is possible and doubt that it is impossible.<sup>24</sup> They are agnostic and don't make claims either way. Cartesian skepticism is, however, the view that nobody ever has moral knowledge or that nobody is ever justified in holding a moral belief.<sup>25</sup>

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong claims the following in the discussion about whether moral skeptics are immoral or not:

Opponents often accuse moral skepticism of leading to immorality. However, skeptics about justified moral belief can act well and be nice people. They need not be any less motivated to be moral, nor need they have (or believe in) any less reason to be moral than non-skeptics have (or believe in). Moral skeptics can hold substantive moral beliefs just as strongly as non-skeptics.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>For more on the difference between philosophers and mathematicians, read Zack Weber's "Issue Introduction" at <http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip/vol12/iss2/1/>.

<sup>17</sup>Butchvarov, "The Demand for Justification in Ethics.", 19-20.

<sup>18</sup>Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral Skepticism," ed. Edward N. Zalta, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2015, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/skepticism-moral/>.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

How is this possible? It indicates that there isn't a causal relationship between holding a belief and acting according to that belief. A person can hold a belief, but not act according to it. In this case, a moral skeptic can act morally even though it is her belief that she doesn't have moral knowledge nor that she is justified in holding a moral belief. And it can go the other way also: a person who is not a moral skeptic can behave against her moral belief and act immoral. But it is open whether there is a correlation between belief and action. It is entirely plausible that a person will act in accordance with her beliefs if she wants to act according to what she perceives to be true beliefs and if there aren't any stronger factors motivating or influencing to behave differently from beliefs such as the law and habits.

Debates on moral skepticism are very heated even in non-academic circles. My discussions with different people on the topic of moral knowledge have shown interesting reactions. One group of people ridicules the idea of moral knowledge, whether they have researched the topic thoroughly or not. These people tend to be very science-friendly to the point of endorsing scientism, meaning that science is the only source of knowledge, especially the natural sciences. The other group, on the other hand, cannot even fathom the idea that moral skepticism could be true or favorable, again whether they have researched the topic thoroughly or not. There are, of course, other positions in these discussions, but these two completely different positions help illustrate the debate on moral skepticism.

What is this problem exactly that is relevant to my paper? As I said earlier, moral skeptics take issue with endorsing justified moral beliefs. On the one hand, it is good to be skeptical of something when there isn't enough reason or evidence to grant its belief; on the other hand, it is hard to imagine a world in which we act according to the belief that there aren't any justified moral beliefs. So, the debate continues in moral epistemology.

## 3 Foundationalist Approach

### 3.1 Moral Foundationalism and Arguments for It

In this section I intend to explain what is moral foundationalism and list main arguments in favor of it. Foundationalism is the view that "... justified beliefs are either foundational or derived."<sup>27</sup> This means that foundational beliefs are not justified by inference from other justified beliefs.<sup>28</sup> They are justified by themselves. According to this view, derived beliefs, however, are justified through direct or indirect inference from foundational beliefs.<sup>29</sup> Foundationalists claim that justification for foundational beliefs can be got from experience and/or from reason.<sup>30</sup> By experience they mean, for example, sense perception, and by reason, they mean, for example, grasp of self-evidence.<sup>31</sup>

There are two main versions of foundationalism: strong and weak. Strong foundationalism of justification holds that derived justified beliefs get all of their justification from foundational beliefs.<sup>32</sup> Weak foundationalism of justification holds that derived beliefs wouldn't be justified apart from foundational beliefs, but there are other factors such as coherence of a belief with beliefs that are not in the chain that can add to this justification.<sup>33</sup> Weak foundationalism can also endorse fallibilist position, meaning that foundational beliefs are open to revision if experience or reason indicates so, while strong foundationalism maintains that foundational beliefs are infallible.

Moral foundationalism is foundationalism of justification applied to morality. The most popular version of moral foundationalism is moral intuitionism. According to moral intuitionism, some moral truths can be recognized non-perceptually and noninferentially.<sup>34</sup> One classical version of it is that some moral beliefs are self-evident, meaning that they are justified merely by understanding them.<sup>35</sup> One example brought up is that there is a prima facie duty to keep promises, unless overridden by a stronger duty.<sup>36</sup>

But what arguments can be given in favor of a foundationalist approach? One argument given can be called stopping the regress problem argument.<sup>37</sup> In standard form, the argument could look like this:

- (1) An approach of justification must stop the regress problem properly to

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<sup>27</sup>Peter Tramel, "Moral Epistemology," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed October 11, 2016, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/mor-epis/>.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Audi, *Epistemology*, 216.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, 216.

<sup>34</sup>Tramel, "Moral Epistemology."

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ted Poston, "Foundationalism," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed November 25, 2016, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/found-ep/>.

provide a justified belief.

(2) Only foundationalism stops the regress problem properly.

(3)  $\therefore$  Foundationalism provides a justified belief.

Justification offered for (1) is basically that every belief that is offered requires another belief to support it and this can last forever unless something is done about it. If that happened, it'd be impossible to actually justify anything, because a skeptic would continue asking "why?" forever. It'd not be a practical approach to justification. Foundationalism makes a specific belief basic so that it doesn't need any support from other beliefs but that it is directly justified.

For (2), foundationalists reject that coherentists could stop the regress problem properly, but that is open to debate as coherentists claim that there are ways to stop the regress problem without becoming a foundationalist such as through a non-vicious circular justification. I find it plausible that foundationalism is able to stop the regress problem more properly than coherentism, because this type of justification happens naturally in the real world as when people's very basic beliefs are questioned, they answer that it seems to them that this claim is the case. In other words, they intuit that something is the case and cannot justify it with another belief. Another way of stating this is that in practical situations assumptions are made. There are also approaches, which don't even try to stop the regress problem such as infinitism.

Another argument given in favor of foundationalism can be called natural judgment argument.<sup>38</sup> In standard form, the argument could look like this:

(1) If it seems evident that some beliefs are properly basic, then foundationalism provides a justified belief.

(2) It seems evident that some beliefs are properly basic.

(3)  $\therefore$  Foundationalism provides a justified belief.

One way to justify (1) is to talk about how people's intuitions provide correct answers in empirical matters quite often. When friends meet each other, it seems to one friend that the other has been having a bad day and it turns out to be correct. It just seemed evident to him, he didn't have any concrete evidence about the matter. Therefore, such evident-seeming appears to work at least some of the time and we are justified to trust it at least to some extent.

For (2), examples like "white is not black", "a circle is not a triangle", "three is one and two" are provided to indicate that it does indeed seem evident that some beliefs are properly basic.<sup>39</sup> Such evidently properly basic beliefs can potentially be offered about

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

morality as well, for example, “one ought to keep a promise”, “one ought not to do harm”, and “one ought to do what is good.”

### 3.2 Method of Moral Intuitionism for Justifying Moral Beliefs

In this section, my aim is to explain what is moral intuitionism and how it tries to justify moral beliefs. One view of moral intuitionism is that with appropriate reflection on the content of moral beliefs intuitive justification for holding them can be had.<sup>40</sup> Moral intuitionism is foundationalist approach meaning that some moral claims can be justified without inferring the claims from any other beliefs.<sup>41</sup> According to different versions of moral intuitionism, beliefs can be justified by a state or emotion, or by self-evidence.<sup>42</sup> Most versions endorse a plurality of moral principles as well as that there are *a priori* moral principles, but there are also other versions.<sup>43</sup> Intuitionism can be dogmatic when claiming that certain knowledge is found, but it can also accept defeasibility.<sup>44</sup>

According to traditional epistemological account of intuitionism, foundational moral judgments and foundational moral principles are justified by a rational and intuitive faculty, something that is different from sense perception or other possible ways of justification.<sup>45</sup> But this rational faculty need not be a part of the mind that is required only for moral thought.<sup>46</sup> Intuitive moral duties can be recognized in the same way as mathematical axioms and logical truths.<sup>47</sup>

I have noticed that many philosophers use the view moral intuitionism to be a synonym for moral foundationalism. They highlight different kinds of foundational strategies such as self-evidence, intuition, some cognitive state, etc. all under the same view named moral intuitionism. The term intuitionism appears to entail intuition, while the term foundationalism appears to entail different noninferential strategies for belief justification. Therefore, moral intuitionism appears to entail just one kind of moral foundationalist approach. Indeed, intuition and self-evidence can be considered different: proposition that is intuitive might not be self-evident and vice versa.<sup>48</sup> For example, a syllogism ‘if p, then q; p; therefore q’ is self-evident, but it is not intuitive until a person studies logic and acquires experience with syllogisms. However, it must be conceded that in the literature, intuitionism is often used as moral foundationalism in general.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Sinnott-Armstrong and Timmons, *Moral Knowledge?*, 124-125.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid*, 25.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid*, 25.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid*, 124-125.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid*, 125.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid*, 102-103.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid*, 106.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid*, 106.

<sup>48</sup>Robert Audi, “Intuition and Its Place in Ethics,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1, no. 1 (April 2015): 57–77, 66.

<sup>49</sup>Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms*, 1st edition (Oxford University Press, 2007).

What is an intuition? One view of intuitions is that they are understandings of self-evident propositions.<sup>50</sup> On this view, there are four main characteristics of intuitions: 1) noninferentiality, 2) firmness, 3) comprehension, 4) pretheoreticalness.<sup>51</sup> Noninferentiality means that an intuition is not held on the basis of a premise. Firmness means that an intuition must be a conclusion, not a matter of still deciding. Comprehension means that an intuition must be formed through adequate reflection and understanding. Pretheoretical means that an intuition is not evidentially dependent on theories nor a theoretical hypothesis. Another view of intuitions is that they are intellectual seeming states similar to other seeming states such as sense perception.<sup>52</sup> In this case, these seemings are initial and intellectual, but they are not beliefs yet.<sup>53</sup>

Traditionally, foundationalist position is considered infallible and fixed, but it doesn't have to be so. Self-evident propositions can be distinguished to be immediately self-evident and mediately self-evident as well as not obvious or even compelling.<sup>54</sup> An intuitionist can make room for error and revision, because a self-evident proposition can seem a non-self-evident proposition and a non-self-evident (and even false) proposition can seem self-evident.<sup>55</sup> It can be an illusion for someone to have grasped a self-evident truth and an intuitionist can accept this view.<sup>56</sup>

How does moral intuitionism produce justified moral beliefs? "If it seems to S that p, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some degree of justification for believing that p."<sup>57</sup> For example in the case of perception, having a seeming state that there is water on the table gives at least some degree of justification for the belief that there is water on the table.<sup>58</sup> However, if several friends come over and say that there is no water on the table, then that may or may not be a defeater of the belief. It could also be said that direct awareness of some things gives us a prima facie reason to believe propositions about those things.<sup>59</sup> Whether or not those propositions are true is a different matter, however.

### 3.3 Main Problems for Moral Foundationalism

While there are potentially many different views under the broad position called moral foundationalism, I will next bring out some of the biggest problems for all views that go

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<sup>50</sup>Matthew S. Bedke, "Ethical Intuitions: What They Are, What They Are Not, and How They Justify," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2008): 253–69, 1.

<sup>51</sup>Sinnott-Armstrong and Timmons, *Moral Knowledge?*, 109-110.

<sup>52</sup>Bedke, "Ethical Intuitions.", 1.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid*, 5.

<sup>54</sup>Sinnott-Armstrong and Timmons, *Moral Knowledge?*, 116.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid*, 116.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid*, 116.

<sup>57</sup>Bedke, "Ethical Intuitions.", 5.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid*, 24-25.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid*, 26.

under moral foundationalism, including moral intuitionism. I don't have space to give an exhaustive list. I call the first problem moral disagreement. Moral disagreements occur among all types of accounts of justification, but moral foundationalism includes specific moral disagreements. The disagreement occurs, because philosophers cannot get to a consensus what counts as a foundationalist belief. Philosophers have different intuitions and they find different self-evident truths.

For example, Robert Audi claims the following:

... mediately self-evident propositions need not be (psychologically) compelling: they need not produce belief the moment they are understood, nor, even after reflection on them, in everyone who understands them.<sup>60</sup>

If these propositions may not be obvious at first sight nor even after reflection to everyone, then how do we actually determine in practice whether a proposition is self-evident or not? If many philosophers cannot agree on a self-evident moral belief even after long reflection and they don't even need to in order for the idea of self-evidence to be justified, then what justification can be given for this idea to persuade skeptics?

What can a moral foundationalist answer to a skeptic who doesn't agree with a specific moral belief a foundationalist endorses? It appears that not much. A moral foundationalist could say that "reflect some more"<sup>61</sup>, but that would unlikely resolve the disagreement, because the skeptic just doesn't agree even after more reflection. Maybe a moral foundationalist really has found a justified moral belief, but one lacks the ability to persuade skeptics to accept it. This limitation wouldn't occur for a coherentist, because one could start inferring this belief from other beliefs and potentially resolve the dispute by providing a belief that a skeptic doesn't want to question anymore and finds persuasive.

The same objection, however, remains for mathematical axioms and logical truths. A mathematician cannot persuade a skeptic of a mathematical axiom, because an axiom is considered self-evident (i.e justified directly without inference) and may be unprovable. While skepticism about mathematical axioms is hard to find, skepticism about ethical axioms is very lively for the reasons I highlighted in the chapter of Issues in Moral Epistemology.

Another objection for moral foundationalism is trustworthiness of intuitions. In other words, are moral intuitions actually good sources of justification? There is a well-known set of thought experiments in ethics called trolley problems. One version of the trolley problem is that a person is standing by a railroad and seeing that a trolley is moving toward five people who are chained to the road and are going to get killed unless the person switches the trolley to another road on which one person is chained to the road. Another version of the problem is that a person is on the bridge behind a fat man and

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<sup>60</sup>Sinnott-Armstrong and Timmons, *Moral Knowledge?*, 116.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid, 25-26.

sees that a trolley is moving toward five people who are chained to a railroad and are going to get killed by it. The person could save those five people by pushing the fat man over the bridge and stopping the trolley but killing the fat man.

In both cases the person could save a net four people instead of only one, but cognitive science indicates that people have different emotional responses to these two thought experiments and they make different judgments even though the consequences are the same.<sup>62</sup> Most people fail to have a negative response to switching the trolley in the first case, but have a negative response in the second case. One explanation for these different intuitions is that one is impersonal (switching the trolley by pulling a lever), the other is much more personal (being violent toward another human being).<sup>63</sup> Assuming that consequences are what matters, moral intuitions in these cases are different.

There are good reasons to doubt the trustworthiness of these kinds of moral intuitions.<sup>64</sup> People have an emotional response to a situation and then they make a snap moral judgment on the situation based on that emotional response just like people have an emotional response to a terrorist attack, which makes them judge terrorism to be a more frequent phenomenon than it actually is. Why should we believe that their intuitions are true at all? I think we shouldn't believe that their intuitions are true in this case, however, it is open whether some moral intuitions could be trustworthy in other situations.

There is an argument to be given regarding the justification of moral intuitions. Let's call it an argument from moderately trustworthy intuitions:

- (1) If sometimes moral intuitions are reached using at least a moderately trustworthy process, then sometimes moral intuitions are trustworthy to at least a moderate degree.
- (2) Sometimes moral intuitions are reached using at least a moderately trustworthy process.
- (3)  $\therefore$  Sometimes moral intuitions are trustworthy to at least a moderate degree.

In order to reach a trustworthy conclusion a trustworthy process has to be used. An example that most people likely accept is that when modus ponens is used and the premises of an argument are assumed to be true, then the conclusion has to be true. Using the inference rule modus ponens is a trustworthy process and a trustworthy conclusion has been reached. However, other methods in real life are not that trustworthy. For example, when someone gives a testimony saying that person A harassed person B, then that is

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<sup>62</sup>Peter Singer, "Ethics and Intuitions," *Journal of Ethics* 9, no. 3-4 (2005): 331-352, 339-340.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid, 341.

<sup>64</sup>I worked on these ideas about trustworthiness of moral intuitions for my Bachelor Seminar's essay.



not necessarily a trustworthy conclusion. It depends on the content of that testimony whether its weakly, moderately, or highly trustworthy.

The same thinking applies to moral reasoning. It depends on the process of moral reasoning whether moral intuitions are trustworthy and to what extent. What counts as a moderately trustworthy process in reaching a moral intuition? I don't have space to provide all possible criteria for deciding when a moral intuition is at least moderately trustworthy, but I will offer two that I think are most important.

The first criterion is that a conclusion has been reached by careful reflection. I have already distinguished snap judgments from careful reflection. We saw what happened when judgments were made very quickly – they were inconsistent among other similar cases. It is a common practice among philosophers to test intuitions by creating various thought experiments. Thought experiments can unpack intuitions and make them stronger or weaker. Intuitions offered merely as self-evident seemings don't have persuasive power if other people don't see the self-evidentiality at first sight. However, they might see it once the conclusion has been mapped out more thoroughly with the help of, for example, thought experiments.

The second criterion that I will highlight is the absence of a plausible explanation for why such as an intuition might have arisen due to evolutionary or other kinds of unreliable mechanisms for determining truth. Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer provide reasons for doubting intuitions that have arisen due to evolutionary mechanisms in the following paragraph:

To show how evolution could shape our evaluative judgments, Street asks us to suppose that we had evolved as a different kind of being. Social insects, for example, have a stronger orientation toward the welfare of the community than to their own individual survival, and male lions kill offspring that are not their own. Assuming that in some way we could be intelligent, but with reproductive patterns more like those of social insects or lions, we would, she claims, have different basic evaluative attitudes that would lead us to make different reflective evaluative judgments. Since not all these judgments could be true, wouldn't it be a remarkable coincidence if we just happened to have evolved as the kind of beings that make true evaluative judgments?<sup>65</sup>

However, as is further discussed by these authors, there are moral intuitions that don't seem to have arisen due to evolutionary mechanisms directly. For example, Henry Sidwick's moral intuition "each one is morally bound to regard the good of any other individual as much as his own, except in so far as he judges it to be less, when impartially viewed, or less certainly knowable or attainable by him" doesn't seem to give any

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<sup>65</sup>Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, "The Objectivity of Ethics and the Unity of Practical Reason," *Ethics* 123, no. 1 (2012): 9–31, 14.

advantage to an individual in terms of survival.<sup>66</sup> Rather, this intuition appears to have arisen due to our capacity to reason.

Philosophers don't seem to agree on moral matters too much. For example, in a survey by Chalmers et al. 56% of philosophers leaned toward moral realism, whereas, 28% leaned toward anti-realism; and 26% favored deontology compared to 24% for consequentialism and 18% for virtue ethics.<sup>67</sup> Assuming that professional philosophers have reflected upon moral matters quite a bit, why is there still so much disagreement? Presumably, philosophers have different moral intuitions indicating that it isn't very trustworthy for justifying moral claims.

I think there are several ways to respond to this. One of the most important ways is to state that moral intuitions don't have to be certain in order to be trustworthy under my account. I'm not claiming to give a knockdown argument in favor of moral intuitions, I only need moderate confidence in these intuitions. Referring to the metaethical claims, it appears that there is moderate amount of convergence toward moral realism. In addition, it might be the case that all three popular views in normative ethics are trustworthy if they've been reached by careful reflection and by explaining why evolutionary or other mechanisms couldn't have favored adopting these claims for survival.

I concede that it is very difficult to draw the lines between weak, moderate, and high levels of confidence in moral claims under my account, however, it isn't impossible. For example, we can refer to moderate levels of convergence in philosophy surveys. It isn't correct to say that there is no convergence on matters of ethics, there is definitely some.

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid, 27.

<sup>67</sup>David Bourget and David J. Chalmers, "What Do Philosophers Believe?," *Philosophical Studies* 170, no. 3 (2014): 465–500, 15.

## 4 Coherentist Approach

### 4.1 Moral Coherentism and Arguments for It

In this section, I will explain what is moral coherentism and list main arguments in favor of it. Coherentism is the view that beliefs are justified through their inference from other beliefs creating a coherent set of beliefs.<sup>68</sup> Beliefs support each other and no beliefs are foundational.<sup>69</sup> According to coherentism, "... justification of a belief depends on its coherence with other beliefs one holds."<sup>70</sup> Coherence usually means, at a minimum, logical consistency, but it can also entail other standards depending on the version of coherentism.<sup>71</sup> Pure version or strong version of coherentism claims that all justified beliefs are justified by coherence. This means that no beliefs are justified by other methods. A weaker version claims that some beliefs are justified by coherence.<sup>72</sup>

Moral coherentism is coherentism of justification applied to morality. The most popular version of moral coherentism is reflective equilibrium. Reflective equilibrium is a method used to justify moral beliefs. More specifically, one has achieved reflective equilibrium when one has brought all of her moral judgments into harmony with each other.<sup>73</sup> In other words, all moral beliefs are, at a minimum, logically consistent with each other. For example, let's suppose Mary believes that it is wrong to punish a child physically, but she also believes that when a child does something very bad, she should be shaken. In this case, her two beliefs are not at reflective equilibrium, because her second belief endorses a form of physical punishment, while her first belief endorses no physical punishment. In order to achieve a balance, she should modify her first or second belief.

But what arguments can be given in favor of a coherentist approach? The first argument given can be called increased probability argument.<sup>74</sup> In standard form, the argument could look like this:

- (1) If coherence increases probability that a belief is correct, then coherentism provides a justified belief.
- (2) Coherence increases probability that a belief is correct.
- (3)  $\therefore$  Coherentism provides a justified belief.

To justify (1), it must be added that in order for a belief to be justified, it doesn't have to be the case that coherence increase probability that a belief is correct to 100%. If

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<sup>68</sup>Tramel, "Moral Epistemology."

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, 3rd edition (Routledge, 2010), 217.

<sup>71</sup>Tramel, "Moral Epistemology."

<sup>72</sup>Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral Skepticism.", 220.

<sup>73</sup>Tramel, "Moral Epistemology."

<sup>74</sup>Peter Murphy, "Coherentism in Epistemology," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed November 25, 2016, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/coherent/>.

our standard was that high, then in many cases coherentism wouldn't provide a justified belief. We need a sufficient probability that a belief is correct, and that is dependent on the situation at hand.

For the justification of (2), the following example is given to show that in a case where one individual source of belief is unreliable, several of those sources increase the probability of a belief being true:

A number of witnesses report the same thing about some event – for example, that Nancy was at last night's party. However, the witnesses are unreliable about this sort of thing. Moreover, their reports are made completely independently of one another – in other words, the report of any one witness was in no way influenced by the report of any of the other witnesses.<sup>75</sup>

It's important to clarify here that unreliable doesn't mean that the content of belief is incorrect in terms of truth-value. If it were the case that an individual source of justification was incorrect, then having more of those incorrect sources of justification wouldn't increase the probability of a belief being true. What is meant here is rather that a single such source doesn't give sufficient justification, but several together could increase the justification to a sufficient level. In other words, suppose that one source would give 5% justification for the truth of a belief, another source would double that, and eventually we might be quite justified to believe that claim. In addition, it might be the case that we are unaware of how much justification a single source gives, but having several such sources might increase the probability that a belief is true.

Another argument given in favor of coherentism can be called only beliefs can justify other beliefs argument.<sup>76</sup> In standard form, the argument could look like this:

- (1) If only beliefs can justify other beliefs, then coherentism provides a necessary condition for the development of a justified belief.
- (2) Only beliefs can justify other beliefs.
- (3) ∴ Coherentism provides a necessary condition for the development of a justified belief.

This argument doesn't say that only coherentism provides a necessary condition for the creation of a justified belief, other accounts which provide premises in the form of beliefs can work as well. But it does imply that a foundationalist approach doesn't work if it doesn't offer premises in the form of beliefs. Perceptual seemings cannot justify other beliefs according to this argument.

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

(2) means that nothing else than another belief can give a reason for holding a belief.<sup>77</sup> In other words, intellectual or perceptual seemings don't justify a belief unless they take the form of propositions, and only then do they actually justify beliefs. Coherentists might say that intellectual or perceptual seemings can either take the form of propositions or they don't justify a belief. One reason why they might think that is that only then might these seemings have persuasive power for skeptics. If a skeptic is told that there is a seeming which justifies a belief, then that has almost no persuasive power, but if it's expressed in the form of propositions that might be more persuasive.

## 4.2 Method of Reflective Equilibrium for Justifying Moral Beliefs

In this section, my aim to explain what is reflective equilibrium and how it tries to justify moral beliefs. Reflective equilibrium is the most popular method for justifying moral beliefs in the coherentist approach. Reflective equilibrium has been used in philosophy in general, in logic and inductive reasoning, but most of all in normative ethics and political philosophy.<sup>78</sup> The main idea is that beliefs are justified based on coherence between each other.<sup>79</sup> When challenges arise to some beliefs, they can be revised and refined to fit in a coherent set of beliefs.<sup>80</sup> Reflective equilibrium can also be a foundationalist approach if some beliefs are justified by intuition, considered to be basic and then fit into a coherent system. But in my paper, I will focus on the version that is coherentist, because that is what reflective equilibrium is usually known for and also because that is what I have chosen to focus on.

The method of reflective equilibrium is roughly the following: first, one states a small set of moral judgments and moral principles that support those judgments, and two, one revises those judgments and principles to fit with each other as well as other facts and views.<sup>81</sup> At a minimum, consistency is evaluated, but other epistemic virtues can be evaluated as well, for example, explanatory power.<sup>82</sup> Once coherence between principles, judgments, and relevant facts is reached, one is said to be in reflective equilibrium.<sup>83</sup>

How does reflective equilibrium try to produce justified moral beliefs? Reflective equilibrium justifies moral beliefs using the following standards: 1) beliefs must at least be consistent with each other, 2) the beliefs that are taken into consideration must have ini-

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>Thomas Kelly and Sarah McGrath, "Is Reflective Equilibrium Enough?," *Philosophical Perspectives* 24, no. 1 (December 1, 2010): 325–59, 326.

<sup>79</sup>Norman Daniels, "Reflective Equilibrium," ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reflective-equilibrium/>.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

<sup>81</sup>K. Kappel, "The Meta-Justification of Reflective Equilibrium," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 9, no. 2 (April 1, 2006): 131–47, 131-132.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

tial credibility, 3) reflective adjustments must be made so that the initial system remains, 4) the resulting moral theory must have relevant qualities based on pragmatic-epistemic goals, for example, be simple, clear, effective guide to action, etc.<sup>84</sup>

The starting point for reflective equilibrium is judgment, but not any judgments as judgments just made out of nowhere are not reliable to be evaluated by this method.<sup>85</sup> In other words, bringing propositions from a fairy tale into this evaluation and making them coherent with each other doesn't make them more justified. They're still propositions from a fairy tale. But how can a proposition be produced so that it has initial credibility? It cannot be merely empirical evidence that is the source of this moral proposition, because empirical evidence is about how things are, while morality is about how things ought to be. Empirical evidence can, of course, inform it, but the proposition must come from a foundational source such as intuition, etc.

### 4.3 Main Problems for Moral Coherentism

While there are potentially many different views under the broad position called moral coherentism, I will next bring out some of the biggest problems for all views that go under moral coherentism, including reflective equilibrium. I don't have space to give an exhaustive list. I call the first problem skeptical regress. Since moral coherentism doesn't endorse any noninferential beliefs, then all beliefs must be inferred from other beliefs. Why should I accept belief 1 (B1)? Because it is inferred from belief 2 (B2). Why should I accept B2? Because it is inferred from belief 3 (B3). This leads to an inferring process that could last forever.

What could a moral coherentist do about the regress problem? One could stop the regress problem by bringing the justification process into a circle. Why should I believe B1? Because it is inferred from B2. Why should I accept B2? Because it is inferred from B3. Why should I accept B3? Because it is inferred from B1. Therefore, the justification process doesn't continue forever anymore. However, such a solution brings a new problem, which is called problem of circularity. However, moral coherentists claim that while this process is circular indeed, it is not vicious circularity as B1 isn't inferred from B1, but from another belief.<sup>86</sup>

But how exactly can such an inferential circle be maintained is up for debate. I don't really see how this objection can be overcome other than ending the regress problem with a foundational belief. I also don't understand why this kind of circularity (larger circle) is better than the one called vicious circularity unless I appeal to intuitive judgments,

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<sup>84</sup>Georg Brun, "Reflective Equilibrium Without Intuitions?," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 17, no. 2 (April 1, 2014): 237–52, 241–242.

<sup>85</sup>Carl Knight, "Reflective Equilibrium," in *Methods in Analytical Political Theory*, ed. Adrian Blau (Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming), 2.

<sup>86</sup>Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms*, 221.

which coherentists wouldn't want to do.

Another objection that has been commonly offered can be called the demandingness problem. This objection says that coherentism makes it very difficult to have justified beliefs.<sup>87</sup> In the case of morality, this means that nobody actually has justified moral beliefs, because meeting the standards of coherence is impossible for humans. First and foremost, people have inconsistent beliefs, but they also lack comprehensive sets of beliefs as well as understanding of different areas, and they are unaware of meta-beliefs (beliefs about beliefs).

I actually think this objection isn't very strong. First of all, moral coherentism doesn't have to be simple in order for it to be true. It's very plausible that humans cannot achieve the highest standards of moral epistemology, but it doesn't mean that these standards aren't the ideal to strive toward. In addition, this type of account might be computable and used by machines better than by humans. If it were the case that we should accept moral coherentism, we might be best off using a device that makes our moral beliefs into as coherent system as possible even if it's above than what humans are capable of doing by themselves.

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<sup>87</sup>Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms*, 1st edition (Oxford University Press, 2007), 237.

## 5 Conclusion

What possibilities do foundationalist approach and coherentist approach offer to justify moral beliefs? Moral foundationalism is the view that main moral beliefs are justified without inference to other beliefs and are justified directly, for example by intuition. Moral coherentism is the view that moral beliefs are justified according to how well they cohere with other beliefs.

How does moral intuitionism try to justify moral beliefs and how does reflective equilibrium try to justify moral beliefs? Moral intuitionism tries to justify beliefs by appealing to the direct seeming of some beliefs. If an act seems to be wrong or right, then having that seeming adds at least some justification for belief. Reflective equilibrium tries to justify beliefs by making them coherent with each other. If beliefs are consistent with each other, it indeed seems that they are more probably correct. But initial credibility of those beliefs appears to be important as well.

Are moral foundationalism and moral coherentism successful in producing justified moral beliefs? I'm leaning toward weak moral foundationalism, because I think it deals with the regress problem better than moral coherentism and I like how it is open to revision not like strong moral foundationalism, but there are also compelling aspects about moral coherentism such as requiring a reason as a proposition for every belief and being able to deal with disagreements better due to that.

What are some approaches in moral epistemology that could be studied to contribute to this discussion? One approach is called foundherentism<sup>88</sup>, which tries to combine both foundationalist and coherentist approaches and use each others' strengths and minimize weaknesses. It sounds compelling as both approaches have their strengths and weakness. It seems *prima facie* that both views could be made compatible when using moderate versions of each one.

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<sup>88</sup>I haven't studied foundherentism closely, but this is a method/view developed by Susan Haack. More can be read from [https://www.academia.edu/19772875/A\\_Foundherentist\\_Theory\\_of\\_Epistemic\\_Justification\\_2002](https://www.academia.edu/19772875/A_Foundherentist_Theory_of_Epistemic_Justification_2002).



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