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The University of Southern Mississippi

Moral Foundherentism

by

J. L. Cain

A Thesis

Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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Abstract:

There exists a long standing debate between foundationalism and coherentism in epistemology. To resolve this debate, Susan Haack argues for a third, alternative theory—foundherentism—that incorporates the good elements of both foundationalism and coherentism while avoiding their shortcomings. It incorporates the foundationalist view that experiential input is necessary for empirical justification. And it incorporates the coherentist view that all beliefs can be justified in virtue of their mutually supportive relationships with other beliefs.

The debate between foundationalism and coherentism extends to moral epistemology. I will employ the same sort of strategy in an attempt to resolve this intractable dispute. I will construct and defend an alternative theory—moral foundherentism—and argue that it incorporates the good elements of moral foundationalism (intuitionism) as well as moral coherentism (the method of reflective equilibrium) while avoiding their shortcomings. The proposed theory incorporates the moral foundationalist view that intuitive input is necessary in order for moral beliefs to be justified to any degree. And it accommodates the moral coherentist view that all moral beliefs can be justified in virtue of their mutually supportive relationships with other (moral and non-moral) beliefs.

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Key terms: Epistemology, Moral Epistemology, Justification, Ethics, Metaethics, Intuition, Knowledge

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In moral philosophy, it is common practice to consult moral intuitions in developing theories and in arguing for the rightness or wrongness of particular kinds of actions. In some ways, moral intuition plays an analogous role in moral theorizing to that played by observation in scientific theorizing. Scientific theories are unjustified if they are not based in observation. Likewise, it is difficult to see how a moral theory can be justified without being based in moral intuition. Intuitions constrain theory acceptance and are the “data” from which theories (in part) are developed.

To the extent philosophers agree on anything, they agree that moral intuitions are an indispensable part of moral theorizing. There is significant disagreement, however, on the exact justificatory role that intuitions play. On one hand, foundationalists claim moral beliefs must be derived from basic, intuitive moral propositions (e.g., general principles or particular moral judgments). On the other hand, coherentists claim that intuitions are only a starting place; they are provisional and revisable. For the coherentist, the actual justification for holding any particular moral belief comes only after one’s intuitive beliefs and other (moral or non-moral) beliefs are made to reciprocally support one another by “hanging together” properly.

There also exists a long standing debate between foundationalism and coherentism in empirical epistemology. To settle this debate, Susan Haack argues for a third, alternative theory—foundherentism. She argues that foundherentism incorporates the best elements of both foundationalism and coherentism while avoiding their shortcomings. It accommodates the foundationalist view that experiential input is necessary for empirical justification, and it accommodates the coherentist view that each and every one of an agent’s beliefs can (and probably should) be justified by their

mutually supportive relationships with other beliefs.

Here I will employ Haack's strategy in moral epistemology. I will outline and defend a third, alternative theory—moral foundherentism—and argue that it accommodates the good elements of moral foundationalism (intuitionism) and moral coherentism (the method of reflective equilibrium) while avoiding their problems. It accommodates the moral foundationalist view that intuitive input is necessary for the justification of moral beliefs, and it accommodates the moral coherentist idea that each of our moral beliefs can and should also be justified by their mutually supportive relationships with other (moral and non-moral) beliefs. These two claims are consistent with one another and a theory which combines them is better than either a purely foundationalist or a purely coherentist theory of moral epistemology. According to moral foundherentism, intuitions play a parallel role to that played by experiences in empirical foundherentism.

In the first section, I will sketch and contrast two standard conceptions of the structure of epistemic justification—foundationalism and coherentism—and give reasons for thinking that both theories are unsatisfactory. In section two, I will describe how these theories apply to the structure of justification of moral beliefs and show that both theories rely on moral intuitions. I will also show that these theories have similar problems as their non-moral counterparts. In the third section, I will describe the alternative, foundherentist approach to empirical justification. Finally, in the fourth section, I will outline and argue for a moral analogue of empirical foundherentism.



1. *Epistemic Justification in General*

What does it mean for an agent, S, to be justified in believing some proposition,  $p$ ? One sense of 'justified' entails that S is justified in believing that  $p$  if and only if believing that  $p$  is in S' best interests. This is to say that S is prudentially *justified* in believing that  $p$ . Another sense of 'justified' entails that S is justified in believing that  $p$  only if S has adequate reasons or evidence for believing that  $p$ . This is to say that S is *epistemically* justified in believing that  $p$  is true.

Prudential justification has an agent's best interest as its aim; epistemic justification has truth as its aim. To see this distinction, consider the following situation. I am gravely ill. However, I know that the probability of my survival would increase if I were to believe that I will survive. In this situation, it would clearly be prudent of me to believe that I will survive. Yet in order to *know* that believing that I will survive would increase probability of my survival, I need epistemic justification. An agent's prudential justification for believing relies on a notion of epistemic justification in situations where the agent needs to know that something is in his interests in order to intentionally act to serve his interests. (All practical action relies on a notion of epistemic justification in an exactly analogous fashion.) This indicates the primacy of epistemic justification to prudential justification.

While an S' epistemic justification for believing that  $p$  is tied to the truth of  $p$ , it is important to notice that S can be justified yet mistaken. That is, S can be epistemically justified in believing that  $p$  is true even if  $p$  is actually false. This is because S' justification for the belief that  $p$  simply indicates the greater likelihood of  $p$ 's truth. Justified mistakes are possible because one can have good reasons or evidence for

thinking that false propositions are true (and for thinking that true propositions are false). For example, take my belief that there are five beers in my refrigerator. This belief is justified because I know that I bought a six-pack yesterday and that only drank one beer. However, unbeknownst to me, someone burglarized my house while I was away and took a beer on the way out. Despite the fact that there are actually only four beers in the refrigerator, my belief that there are five beers in the refrigerator remains justified until I happen to look in the refrigerator and notice a beer missing.

We have said that justification is a matter of the evidence or reasons one has to believe that a proposition is true. But what counts as evidence or a reason? Thus far we have characterized justification in terms of inferences from other known propositions. My belief that there are five beers in my refrigerator is justified in that I infer it from my beliefs that I bought six last night, that I drank one, and that six beers minus one beer equals five beers. My justification for the belief that there are five beers might also be strengthened by inferences that eliminate possible defeaters, as in inferences from the beliefs that I live alone and that burglaries are not common occurrences in my neighborhood (and that even if they were common, a burglar would not take my beer of all things).

The problem with this purely inferential characterization of justification is that it is impossible for all of an agent's beliefs to be inferentially justified. Each belief that serves as inferential evidence for another belief would need its own inferential evidence. So, if all justification were inferential, we would need an infinite number of beliefs in order to justify a single belief. This is a problem because as finite agents we cannot hold an infinite number of beliefs.

To see this problem, consider the following argument—the *regress of justification argument*.<sup>1</sup> First, assume that (1) all justification is inferential, and that (2) beliefs cannot be justified by unjustified beliefs. Assumption (1) entails that an agent's justification for believing that *p* must consist in beliefs from which she infers *p*. Further assume that (3) a belief cannot be justifiably inferred (directly or indirectly) from itself. In other words, assume that circular reasoning is unjustified. Assumptions (1)-(3) entail that, in order for S to be justified in believing *p*, S must infer *p* from some *other* belief or set of beliefs (*q*). However, assumptions (1)-(3) also apply to *q*. S' belief that *q* must be justified in order for it to provide any justification for S' belief that *p*. According to assumptions (1) and (2), *q* must be supported by a further belief set (*r*). And according to (3), *r* cannot include *p* or *q*. And (1)-(3) also apply to *r*; *r* must be inferred from a belief set which excludes *r* (*t*). And so on *ad infinitum*.

If the regress argument is sound, none of our beliefs can be justified. So, the regress argument presents a problem for the common sense view that at least some of our beliefs are justified. It is useful to think of theories of justification as defenses of this common sense view and attempts to avoid the regress problem and skepticism in general. Of course, in order to avoid the problem, theories must show that at least one of its premises is false. One traditional response consists in denying (1). This view posits a special class of beliefs that are non-inferentially justified and maintains that the rest of one's justified beliefs must be inferred from this special class of beliefs. This is the foundationalist response. Another response denies (3) (and perhaps (1) as well). This response is to say that beliefs are justified in terms of their mutually supportive

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Dancy, *Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1985): 55

relationships with one another (and that mutual support is not circular reasoning). This is the coherentist response.

### 1.1 *Foundationalism*

Foundationalism posits two kinds of beliefs—basic and non-basic. Basic beliefs are non-inferentially justified and thereby provide a foundation for all other knowledge. Non-basic beliefs are ultimately justified by inference from basic beliefs. Hence the foundationalist holds that “justification by inference is conditional justification only.”<sup>2</sup> The justification for one’s non-basic beliefs is conditional upon one’s basic beliefs. A valid inference justifies the belief in some conclusion only if its premises are also justified. And its premises are justified only if they belong to, or are themselves inferred from, a special class of non-inferentially justified beliefs. If foundationalism is true, it is possible for finite agents (such as ourselves) to end the regress and have justified beliefs. Sooner or later, an agent’s chain of inferences must end with a foundational belief.

It is easy to see why the metaphor of a foundation is used. Non-inferential (basic) beliefs are dubbed “foundational” because they are thought to hold all of the epistemic “weight” of the rest of an agent’s beliefs in the same way that the foundation of a building holds the weight of its entire superstructure. But what are foundational beliefs exactly, and how are they able to hold so much justificatory “weight?” We have said that they are supposed to be non-inferentially justified—but how? Classical foundationalists claim that basic beliefs are non-inferentially justified because they are infallible and have no chance of being false.<sup>3</sup> For instance, many classical foundationalists of the empiricist

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 55

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 57

variety have claimed that beliefs about our sensory states (e.g., the belief that I am seeing blue now) are infallible. (They do not claim that sensory states themselves are infallible because one cannot infer anything from a sensory state. This is because sensory states lack propositional content and therefore cannot be true or false.)

There are good reasons to doubt classical, infallibilist foundationalism. First, it is doubtful that infallible beliefs could have enough propositional content to justify other beliefs. Second, even if they were to have enough content to justify some other beliefs, infallible beliefs would nevertheless not have enough content to justify enough beliefs to truly avoid skepticism.<sup>4</sup> The foundationalist is faced with a dilemma. There are two options for basic beliefs. They must be either (1) infallible but nearly vacuous and devoid of content, or (2) less rich in content but more fallible.<sup>5</sup> This implies that (all things being equal) the more content a belief has, the higher chance it has of being false.

To see this dilemma, consider beliefs about one's sensory states, such as the belief "X appears blue." Interpreting "X appears blue" in a way that renders it infallible would make it synonymous with "appears the way this thing appears to me now." This seems rather certain, but it also lacks enough content to be useful as a foundational belief. On the other interpretation, "X appears blue" means "X appears the way blue things usually appear to me." On this interpretation, the proposition has content about one's past states and therefore has more content. But it is also fallible because it relies on memory (which is capable of error).

If statements like "X appears blue" are interpreted in the first, infallible way, an agent *might* have an infallible foundation. She will have basic and non-basic beliefs. But

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 58

<sup>5</sup> Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry: a Pragmatist Reconstruction of Epistemology*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 2009): 69-70

it would turn out that only a very small subset of her beliefs would be justified. Most of her every-day, common-sense beliefs would not be justified. The foundation obtained by Descartes' methodological skepticism is a good example of such a foundation. He was unable to infer much from the proposition that he exists and found himself faced with skepticism about the external world. From knowledge of my own existence I can infer a few other beliefs—that something exists, for example. But this bit of knowledge obviously does not get me as far as I would like.

It seems that requiring basic beliefs to be infallible leads to radical skepticism. But it also seems we do know many things. So, perhaps 100% certainty is not required after all. Notice that in order for a belief to serve as a foundation it must be (1) justified by something other than beliefs, (2) justified by itself, or (3) without need of justification.<sup>6</sup> A basic belief need not be infallible in order to fulfill one of these conditions and do its justificatory work. Indeed, the more plausible versions of foundationalism attempt to fulfill (at least one of) these conditions by positing a more modest kind of non-inferentially justified belief. Robert Audi is a good example of a modest foundationalist. He claims that foundational beliefs are self-evident. Thus he attempts to fulfill condition (2). Audi thinks that it is possible to appeal to self-evidence without depending on implausible notions of infallibility.

Audi defines a self-evident proposition as one that agent is justified in believing on the basis of adequate understanding alone.<sup>7</sup> Given this definition, an agent can have an adequate understanding of a self-evident proposition without necessarily being compelled to believe it. It is just that if S *were* to believe self-evident proposition *p* on the basis of

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<sup>6</sup> Dancy, 63

<sup>7</sup> Robert Audi, "Self-Evidence," *Nous*, Supplement: Philosophical Perspectives 13: Epistemology (1999): 206

adequate understanding, then S' belief that *p would* be justified. If S does believe that *p*, that belief is an instance of knowledge. It is possible for an agent to have a perfect understanding of a self-evident proposition and nevertheless refrain from believing it. For example, a philosopher who doubts the existence of self-evident propositions might refrain from believing on the basis of adequate understanding alone.

Given Audi's conception of self-evidence, there can be uncertainty about whether or not the proposition at hand is actually self-evident. This uncertainty is partially a function of the fact that not all self-evident propositions are easily understood. To account for this, Audi distinguishes between *immediate* and *mediate* self-evidence.<sup>8</sup> Immediately self-evident propositions are those that are "readily understood by normal adults."<sup>9</sup> Mediate self-evident propositions, on the other hand, require a higher degree of reflection. Immediately self-evident propositions are more obvious and thus are more psychologically compelling than mediate self-evident propositions.

The reflection required to justifiably believe a mediate self-evident proposition does not consist in inferring it from some other proposition. It does, however, consist in drawing inferences "internal to" the self-evident proposition.<sup>10</sup> The point of reflection is to aid in the understanding of self-evident propositions. In other words, hard to understand self-evident propositions are less obvious and less compelling than more easily understood ones (though even easily understood self-evident propositions are not necessarily compelling). The more uncertain one is about whether or not one understands a proposition, the less likely one is to believe that proposition on the basis of adequate understanding alone.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 214

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 214

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 215

Simple mathematical propositions are good examples of immediately self-evident propositions. It is just obvious that six minus one equals five. An example of a mediately self-evident proposition given by Audi is this: “If there have never been any siblings then there never have been any first cousins.”<sup>11</sup> In order to adequately understand this proposition, one might have to make the following internal inferences. If I were to have no siblings, then I would be a single child. And if I were to have children, then my children would not have aunts or uncles. It is necessary to have aunts and uncles in order for my children to have cousins because their cousins would be the sons or daughters of their aunts and uncles (which would not exist).

Audi argues that it is possible to not know that one knows a self-evident proposition.<sup>12</sup> This is because the justified belief in a self-evident proposition does not require that one knows the proposition’s self-evident status. One need not even have a concept of self-evidence in order to adequately understand and thus justifiably believe a self-evident proposition. In other words, S’ belief in the seemingly self-evident proposition *p* is defeasible in case it is not certain that *p* is self-evident. Perhaps if S had an adequate understanding of *p*, believed that *p* on the basis of this understanding, and had self-evident knowledge of *p*’s self-evident status, then S would have something close to infallible and certain knowledge of *p*. But this is obviously not required (and probably quite rare).

A problem with Audi’s theory is that it is not clear that a foundation made solely of self-evident beliefs will be sufficient enough to support our every-day beliefs. That is,

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Audi, “Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics,” Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons (eds.), *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 47

<sup>12</sup> Audi (1999), 217



it is not clear that such a foundation will make possible the justification of enough of our beliefs to avoid radical skepticism. Even though self-evidence does not rely on infallibility, it is hard to imagine that one could infer all of one's every day beliefs (which seem justified) from self-evident beliefs alone. This is another instance of Descartes' problem. It seems that what explains Descartes' failure is not only the demand for an infallible foundation, but also the claim to self-evidence.

## 1.2 *Coherentism*

The most interesting thing to note about the foundationalist's response to the regress problem is this. Even though foundationalists deny that justification is purely inferential, foundationalism is nevertheless motivated by the more general assumption that all justification is transitive and linear.<sup>13</sup> To say that a justificatory relationship is transitive and linear is to say that the justification provided by one belief is transmitted, in a one-way fashion, to another belief (via inference, for example). Foundationalism entails two kinds of justified beliefs—basic and non-basic. Since foundationalist justification is transitive and linear, all of the justification for non-basic, derived beliefs must be originally contained in basic, foundational premises. The relationship between foundational (basic) beliefs and derived (non-basic) beliefs is the only kind of justificatory relationship that exists for the foundationalist. This asymmetrical relationship is transitive and one-way in that the justification for non-basic beliefs must *necessarily* be transmitted from basic beliefs to non-basic beliefs (and *not* vice versa).

In contrast to the foundationalist, the coherentist rejects the idea that all

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<sup>13</sup> Laurence Bonjour, "The Structure of Empirical Knowledge," Michael Heumer (ed.), *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings* (Routledge, 2002): 390-392

justificatory relationships are transitive and one-way. Instead, the coherentist holds that justification is reciprocal and non-linear.<sup>14</sup> For the coherentist, a belief is justified only if certain logical or quasi-logical relationships of mutual support exist between that belief and other beliefs held by the same agent.<sup>15</sup> Put simply, the coherentist holds that an agent's beliefs are justified insofar as they hang together properly. Therefore, the coherentist needs no special class of basic beliefs from which all justification is transmitted. Reciprocal justification or is a sort of emergent property; it cannot be reduced to any special category of beliefs. It exists only when beliefs have the proper mutually supportive relationships with one another. So, if coherentism is true, there might be hope for our every day beliefs after all.

Logical consistency is usually thought to be a necessary relationship for coherence, but logical consistency is clearly not sufficient. It is possible for an agent to have a belief set composed of unrelated beliefs that are consistent with one another. The mere consistency of these unrelated beliefs does not give us any reason to think those beliefs are true. For this reason, coherentists appeal to further quasi-logical relations, such as *evidential consistency*, *connectedness*, *comprehensiveness*<sup>16</sup> and *explanatory coherence*.<sup>17</sup> A set of beliefs is evidentially consistent if "the weight of the evidence provided by the various beliefs in the set don't tell, on balance, against any of the others."<sup>18</sup> Evidential consistency is described as a necessary condition for coherence in general as well as a sufficient condition for minimal coherence. If the weight of the evidence provided by the various beliefs in the set were to tell *in favor of* other beliefs in

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<sup>14</sup> BonJour, 392

<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "Coherentist Epistemology and Moral Theory," in *Moral Knowledge?*, 166

<sup>16</sup> Sayre-McCord, 167

<sup>17</sup> Haack, 129

<sup>18</sup> Sayre-McCord, 166

the set, the set is not just evidentially consistent; it is also *connected*. The stronger the supportive, evidential relationships between beliefs are, the more connected those beliefs are. Comprehensiveness is a matter of the number of beliefs in a set and the variety of different kinds of beliefs in that set. A belief set containing 1,000 beliefs of 10 different kinds is comprehensive than a belief set containing 100 beliefs of 5 different kinds (as long as the other coherence relationships in that set are not weakened).

The skeptic might object to mutual support on the grounds that it seems like a kind of circular reasoning. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that fallacious reasoning is justified. However, mutual support should be distinguished from circular reasoning. The coherentist is *not* claiming that a belief should be used as a premise for an inference that establishes itself. In fact, this claim is inconsistent with coherentism because it rests on the assumption that justification is transitive and one-way or linear.<sup>19</sup> That is, the circular reasoning objection rests on the mistaken view that coherentism entails that the justification S has for believing that *p* is transmitted to other beliefs and then relayed back to *p*. What the coherentist actually claims is that S' justification for *p* does not exist apart from *p*'s relationship(s) with other beliefs held by S. In other words, because the justification in a belief set emerges from the way(s) the beliefs in that set relate to one another, the justification for the beliefs in that set cannot be traced back to any particular evidentially privileged belief(s).

According to coherentism, it is only when an agent is concerned the justification of a small subset of her beliefs (i.e., at the local level) that justification seems linear and inferential.<sup>20</sup> Hence it is only at the local, inferential level that the agent needs a

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<sup>19</sup> BonJour, 390

<sup>20</sup> BonJour, 391

“foundation” of sorts to stop a regress. That is, in order to settle an argument, we must reach dialectically acceptable beliefs that serve as temporary, pragmatic “foundations.” However, these will not be genuinely basic beliefs. They are only assumptions that are taken for granted in a certain context. For instance, the success of a biological experiment depends on the scientists’ having dialectically acceptable explanations for their findings.

The justificatory relationships posited by the coherentist do not exist to any noticeable degree at the local level. The actual relationships that justify one’s beliefs exist in their entirety only at the *holistic* level. That is, in order to know the extent to which a belief is actually justified, one must consider the holistic doxastic context of that belief.<sup>21</sup> When beliefs are considered from the global, holistic perspective, relationships of evidential consistency, connectedness, comprehensiveness, and explanatory coherence are made apparent.

One interesting thing to note about the holistic conception of justification is that it might require externalism about justification.<sup>22</sup> Externalism is the view that an agent can have justified beliefs without knowing those beliefs to be justified and without having access to that justification. At the local level, justification seems to be internalist in nature because the agent is consciously drawing upon premises to support a given belief; hence the agent obviously has access to his justification. However, it does not seem that an agent can view his own beliefs holistically because this would require him to position himself “outside” of his beliefs. An agent cannot survey all of his beliefs at once (or even form a belief about all of his beliefs). Therefore, the agent does not have cognitive access to the totality of the relationships that actually justify his beliefs.

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<sup>21</sup> BonJour, 391

<sup>22</sup> Sayre-McCord, 147

One might object to the idea that the holistic conception of justification entails externalism by claiming that the agent does have access to all of these relationships; it is just that the agent does not have access to all of them at once. In other words, he has potential access to all of his justification, and perhaps this is all that is necessary. The problem with this objection is that at least some of the justification for the agent's beliefs will, nevertheless, remain external to the agent at any given point in time. Hence coherentism does entail externalism in some sense or to some degree.

The externalist, holistic conception of justification can solve the regress problem without ever evoking a regress stopper because it denies that justification is one-way. (By the same token, it entails that, in some sense, justification is non-inferential.) It should be noted, however, that the coherentist might not need to appeal to holism to solve the regress problem. Perhaps the coherentist can include a concept of one-way, linear justification as well. Along with mutually supportive justificatory relationships, the coherentist might posit regress stoppers in the form of *permissively justified beliefs*. A belief in some proposition is permissively justified (as opposed to positively justified or unjustified) in the sense that the agent has no epistemic reason to reject or accept that proposition. It is thought that permissively justified beliefs can provide positive justification for other beliefs without themselves being positively justified.<sup>23</sup> Permissively justified beliefs are evidentially neutral. So, it is impossible to infer a permissively justified belief from another (justified or unjustified) belief. As soon as S infers the permissively justified belief that *p* from another justified belief that *q*, S' belief that *p* ceases to be permissively justified and becomes positively justified. As soon as S infers *p* from unjustified beliefs, *p* ceases to be permissively justified and becomes unjustified.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 164

This makes permissive justification a linear, one-way concept. Thus permissively justified beliefs are potential regress stoppers.

Despite being one-way, permissive justification differs from foundationalist justification in that permissive justification is not transitive. That is, permissive justification does not entail evidential relations that are mere “conduits of justification.”<sup>24</sup> Positive justification emerges from permissively justified beliefs without permissively justified beliefs containing any positive justification. An agent can be justified in believing a proposition while being justified in believing in the evidence for that proposition to a lesser degree. Even if S’ only reason for believing that  $q$  is her permissively justified belief that  $p$ , S’ belief that  $q$  will have a higher degree of justification than her belief that  $p$  (assuming that S has no reasons against  $q$ ).

## 2. *Intuitions and the Epistemic Justification of Moral Beliefs*

Now that we have an adequate grasp of foundationalism and coherentism, we may consider how these theories apply to the justification of moral beliefs. A glaring feature of theories of moral epistemology is that they tend to rely on moral intuition. That is, the intuitiveness of a proposition is usually thought to play some important role in its justification.

But what does it mean to say that a proposition is intuitive? We can say, at the very least, that intuitive justification is non-inferential. Intuitive beliefs are justified without needing to be derived from other beliefs. Vaguely speaking, to say that a proposition is intuitive is to say that it *feels* or *seems* true. Moral intuitions can be about particular cases as well as general principles. That it was wrong for the burglar to steal

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 164

my beer is an intuition about a particular case. The intuition that theft is wrong is an intuition about a general principle.

It is a common practice in moral philosophy to make latent intuitions about moral principles explicit by means of thought experiments (i.e., imagining specific moral cases). Take, for example, two famous thought experiments—the axe murderer and the magistrate and the mob.<sup>25</sup> The axe murderer thought experiment elicits intuitions against the Kantian principle that it is always wrong to lie. Imagine that you answer the door to find an angry, axe wielding man with an obvious intent to kill. The man asks you if your friend, Fred, is inside. You know that Fred is inside. You also know (or have good reason to believe) that you might have to lie in order to save your friend’s life. It seems that, in this situation, you probably have a duty to lie and that the principle that it is always wrong to lie is obviously false.

The magistrate and the mob thought experiment elicits intuitions contrary to the utilitarian principle that one should always act to maximize pleasure and minimize harm. It consists in imagining the following situation. A mob threatens to riot if a magistrate does not execute a man whom they have accused of committing some heinous crime. However, the magistrate knows that the man is probably not guilty. She also knows that the mob’s rioting would cause more harm than the act of having the innocent man executed would. According to the principle of utility, she has a *duty* to execute the innocent man. However, it seems that the magistrate should not execute the innocent man.

Intuitions elicited by thought experiments such as these (as well as intuitions

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<sup>25</sup> Philippa Foot, “The problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect,” *Oxford Review* 5 (1967): 5

about real-world situations) seem relevant. Indeed, non-skeptics about morality generally agree that intuitions play an indispensable role in moral theorizing. Yet there is significant disagreement about the nature of intuitions and the exact role they should play in the justification of moral beliefs. Foundationalists claim our intuitions are relevant because intuitive beliefs serve as foundations for moral knowledge. By contrast, coherentists claim that intuitive beliefs are only relevant insofar as they have the proper relationships with other (moral and non-moral) beliefs held by the same agent.

### 2.1 *Intuitionism and Self-Evidence*

W. D. Ross' moral theory is paradigmatically intuitionist and strongly foundationalist in structure. Ross posits a plurality of *prima facie* duties that are representative of general moral principles.<sup>26</sup> These duties are *prima facie* in the sense that they are conditional upon the particular moral and non-moral facts of a given situation. Ross distinguishes one's *prima facie* duties from one's final duty. One's final duty is one's actual, all-things-considered moral duty; it is the duty upon which one should act. This distinction is necessary because, in many situations, there will be multiple conflicting *prima facie* duties in play, and only one of them can be one's final duty.

For our purposes, the important thing to notice about Ross' theory is how one comes to know one's *prima facie* duties. According to Ross, in order to be justified in believing that one has a particular *prima facie* duty (or in the moral principle representative of that duty), one need only to believe it on the basis of intuition. Hence one's justification for believing *prima facie* duties and moral principles is non-inferential.

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<sup>26</sup> W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, "What Makes Right Acts Right?," 1930, <http://www.ditext.com/ross/right2.html> (Accessed October 24, 2011)



The reason intuitions are thought to be relevant is because the basic moral principles representative of our *prima facie* duties are supposed to be self-evident. For Ross, this meant that basic moral principles are known as soon as they are understood.<sup>27</sup> Ross thought that moral principles are like basic mathematical axioms. If a person denies that the square root of four is two, that person must not understand the proposition ‘the square root of four is two.’ Analogously, Ross claims that if a person denies that it is *prima facie* wrong to lie, that person must not understand the proposition ‘it is *prima facie* wrong to lie.’

Since Ross holds that only way to be mistaken about moral principles is to misunderstand them, his theory seems to be an infallibilist variety of foundationalism about morality. According to Ross, if one does grasp the content of self-evident moral propositions, then one’s knowledge of them is certain. Because of the infallibilist character of this theory, there are good reasons to think that it is false. Besides facing the problems with infallibilism in general, Ross’ view has its own problems. One such problem is that moral beliefs do not seem like basic mathematical axioms. Contrary to Ross’ view, it seems that we can be mistaken about self-evident moral propositions while having a perfect understanding of those propositions. In other words, there seems to be room for genuine disagreement about moral propositions. Given his understanding of self-evidence, this is something Ross cannot admit. (He does leave room for disagreement about non-basic moral beliefs. We can be mistaken about our actual duties in particular cases because he does not claim that actual duties are self-evidently known.)

Despite these problems, it might be possible to salvage Ross’ moral theory. Perhaps his views about the certainty of intuition can be weakened to such a degree as to

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 41-43

make them immune to these problems but still capable of providing a sufficient foundation for moral knowledge. As we have seen, Audi formulates a concept of self-evidence that does not make claims to infallibility. Perhaps Audi's views on self-evidence make possible a sufficient, self-evident moral foundation (even though many of our non-moral beliefs probably do not rest on self-evident foundations).

Like Ross, Audi maintains that there are multiple, irreducible moral principles and that these principles are self-evidently known on the basis of intuition. What makes Audi's theory more plausible than Ross' is that Audi distinguishes between being *psychologically compelled* to believe a self-evident proposition and being *justified* in believing a self-evident proposition.<sup>28</sup> Given this distinction, it is possible for S to not be compelled to believe the self-evident moral proposition  $p$  even if S would be justified in believing that  $p$  if S were to believe that  $p$ . In other words, agents can adequately understand self-evident moral propositions but not be compelled to believe them. Hence Audi's theory allows for the possibility of genuine disagreement about self-evident moral propositions.

According to Audi, general moral principles and basic mathematical axioms are similar in that they are both self-evident. However, they differ in that moral principles are less compelling than mathematical axioms. To account for this difference, Audi holds that moral principles and mathematical axioms involve different kinds of self-evidence. Recall his distinction between mediate and immediate self-evidence. Moral propositions are probably mediately self-evident. Simple mathematical axioms are immediately self-evident. In order to adequately understand and be justified in believing a self-evident moral proposition, one will probably have to draw inferences internal to that proposition.

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<sup>28</sup> Audi (1999), 207

This kind of inference making or reflection is meant to clarify moral concepts, thereby making moral principles more intuitive.<sup>29</sup> Audi says that intuitions emerge from reflection instead of being conclusions from premises.

According to Audi, intuitions must meet four requirements in order to be epistemically relevant—(1) the firmness requirement, (2) the comprehension requirement, (3) the pre-theoretical requirement, and (4) the non-inferential requirement.<sup>30</sup> In order to satisfy (1), our intuitions must be held with sufficient conviction. In Audi's words, "one must come down on the matter at hand."<sup>31</sup> (2) requires that the agent adequately understands moral propositions in order for their intuitions about moral propositions to be evidence for their truth. Satisfying (3) entails that one's intuitions are not "evidentially dependent on theories nor themselves theoretical hypothesis."<sup>32</sup> This does not mean that intuitions are (or should be) pre-conceptual or completely independent from theorizing. It does mean that we would have moral intuitions even if we had no explicitly formulated moral theory and that these intuitions would be epistemically relevant. (4) restates what we have assumed from the beginning: a proposition's being intuitive does not depend on that proposition being a conclusion.

Intuitions that meet these four requirements are supposed to be evidential in that they reliably indicate self-evident propositions. From this it follows that the agent's intuitions themselves do not justify the agent's foundational moral beliefs. What actually justifies an agent's foundational moral beliefs is that their content is self-evident and that the agent has an adequate understanding of this content. One's intuitions simply lead one

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Audi, "Moderate Intuitionism and the Epistemology of Moral Judgment," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 1 (1998): 24

<sup>30</sup> Robert Audi, "Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics," in *Moral Knowledge?*, 109

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 109

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 110

to believe self-evident propositions. (As we shall later see, this point is an important one.)

## 2.2 *Intuitions in Reflective Equilibrium*

As with all beliefs, the coherentist holds that moral beliefs are justified by their relationships of mutual support (i.e., evidential consistency, connectedness, comprehensiveness, and explanatory coherence). According to the coherentist, if moral beliefs can be justified, such justification must consist in the successful systematization of an agent's moral beliefs. Systematizing moral beliefs consists in systematizing intuitive propositions about particular moral cases and general moral principles. This systematization will probably result in the elimination or modification of at least some of (and possibly all of) one's antecedent moral beliefs. The hope is that an agent will end up being justified in believing some comprehensive moral theory

The conventional method of coherentist systematization is known as the method of reflective equilibrium (RE). There are two methods of reflective equilibrium; one is narrow and the other is wide. The method of narrow reflective equilibrium (NRE) is simpler than the method of wide reflective equilibrium (WRE). NRE consists in making one's beliefs about a given domain (i.e., a subset of an agent's beliefs) coherent. In ethics, this requires an agent to consider her (relatively confident) moral judgments about particular cases alongside general principle(s) that she finds intuitively plausible.<sup>33</sup> The point is to establish coherence between considered judgments and general principle(s) by eliminating or modifying inconsistent beliefs and increasing the supportive relationships between moral beliefs. For example, an agent's considered judgments should probably be explained and supported by (a) more general principle(s), and her general principle(s)

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<sup>33</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1971): 48

should be explained and supported by her considered judgments.

Since NRE is a coherentist method, none of one's considered judgments or general principles can be set in stone. All of an agent's moral beliefs must be revisable and non-basic. Even if perfect NRE is obtained at one point in time, an agent's beliefs might be thrown into disequilibrium when he has relevant intuitions about new cases or newly considered principles. He might begin with a general moral principle and then be subject to various thought experiments or real-world moral situations. If the application of a general principle to a particular situation results in a moral judgment that seems too counter-intuitive to be true, then the agent should cease believing the principle, subtly alter the principle, or systematize his intuitions under an entirely different principle. On the other hand, the agent might decide to retain his original principle and reject his intuitions about that particular case. He might decide that the thought experiment or particular situation is an outlier, and that his intuitions about it are unreliable.

One problem with NRE is that it might make the choice between moral theories indeterminate. That is, it will be possible to formulate many different sets of moral beliefs that are equally internally consistent and coherent but contain beliefs that are incompatible with beliefs in the other, equally coherent sets of moral beliefs. Because of this, NRE gives us little reason to think that our moral beliefs are true. A second problem with NRE is that it is impossible to formulate a coherent moral theory without including non-moral beliefs. To make moral judgments in particular situations, we need to be informed about the non-moral facts about that situation. That is, our non-moral beliefs inform our moral judgments. Many coherentists have opted for WRE in order to avoid problems such as these.

WRE is similar to NRE in that the goal is to increase the coherence of a set of beliefs. However, WRE is obtained by considering not only those moral beliefs an agent finds intuitive, but also the relevant non-moral theories she is willing to endorse upon reflection.<sup>34</sup> Arguments from relevant non-moral background theories are employed, perhaps causing a shift in one's equilibrium point. If there is a shift in one's initial equilibrium point, the agent must select among various new coherent moral belief sets (or become a moral nihilist). She must either revise her set of accepted moral judgments and principles, or revise the background theory in question. WRE is an attempt to increase the mutual justificatory relationships between our moral and non-moral beliefs. Specifically, it is meant to increase the comprehensiveness as well as the logical and explanatory connectedness of the considered belief set.

Notice that WRE does not reduce moral beliefs to non-moral beliefs. One's non-moral beliefs will constrain and perhaps give independent support for one's moral beliefs, and one's moral beliefs will constrain and perhaps give independent support for one's non-moral beliefs.<sup>35</sup> However, background theories should not be mere generalizations of an agent's moral judgments and principles. Background theories should be independent in the sense that they should give us relevant information about moral theories that moral judgments by themselves could not.<sup>36</sup> For instance, Rawls' theory of justice is constrained by his metaphysical views about personal identity, as well as his views about human psychology and society. Rawls also argues that utilitarianism assumes implausible metaphysical views about persons in that it assumes that people can have each other's

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<sup>34</sup> Norm Daniels, "Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics," *The Journal of Philosophy* 76.5 (May, 1979): 258

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 262

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 259-260

experiences. According to Rawls, utilitarianism “does not take seriously the distinction between persons.”<sup>37</sup>

One advantage of WRE is that it makes moral disagreement more tractable than NRE does. One can provide reasons for the differences between individual agents’ equilibrium points by tracing them back to disagreements about non-moral background theories. Moral disagreements would be very hard to resolve if we could only consult other moral beliefs of ours. Tracing disagreement to less controversial areas has the benefit of making agreement more possible because there will potentially be more ways to resolve disagreement.<sup>38</sup> Another potential benefit of WRE is that it might give us a greater understanding of moral thought, which may, in turn, gives us constraints on the things we can legitimately cite as evidence for our moral beliefs.<sup>39</sup>

Notice that intuition plays a prominent role in NRE and WRE. It seems that, in order to achieve reflective equilibrium, an agent’s intuitions need to meet Audi’s comprehension, firmness, pre-theoretical, and non-inferential requirements. It is obvious that an agent must have an adequate understanding of her considered judgments and accepted moral principles to achieve equilibrium. So it seems that an agent must meet the comprehension requirement. Achieving reflective equilibrium also requires “that we come down on the matter at hand.” The conviction one has in believing based on one’s intuitions is obviously relevant in achieving equilibrium. In fact, NRE can be interpreted as a method for discovering which moral propositions one has the most conviction in believing. In this respect, the method of reflective equilibrium has the firmness requirement. It is not as clear that achieving reflective equilibrium requires intuitions to

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<sup>37</sup> Rawls, 27

<sup>38</sup> Daniels, 262

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 263, 268

be pre-theoretical. In RE, an agent's intuitions do precede the theory that emerges from the method in that the agent's intuitions are used to construct that theory. Even in WRE, moral judgments are not derived from background theories. So, RE has the non-inferential requirement insofar as it *begins* with intuitions that are, by their very nature, non-inferential. RE is unavoidably intuitionist in these respects.

RE is thought to be a coherentist method because achieving a narrow or wide equilibrium turns on systematizing beliefs in order to increase their mutually supportive relationships (and because the intuitions considered are all held to be revisable and non-foundational). However, the intuitionist nature of RE might be a problem. Ross and Audi explain the importance of our intuitions by tying them to self-evidence. In this way, they attempt to explain the reliability of moral intuitions. It may be objected that the coherentist proponent of RE gives us no explanation for the reliability of our moral intuitions.<sup>40</sup> We have not been given a reason to think that the intuitiveness of moral beliefs is relevant to their justification. According to this objection, we need a reason to give initial credibility to intuitions *prior to* including them in our moral theorizing.

It seems the coherentist proponents of RE want intuitions to do the same sort of work that observations do in science. Observation reports are thought to be reliable yet capable of error. We sometimes have reason to think that our observations are unreliable. For example, I can trust my observation that that I am writing this paper under the assumption that I am awake, am not a brain in a vat, have not recently ingested LSD, etc. In other words, we can give causal explanations for observation reports and thereby know that they are reliable in normal situations. For example, if I were to knowingly ingest LSD, I would have a good reason to suspect that my sensory experiences do not reflect

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 273



reality. We know how vision works. Hence we know when not to trust it. The problem for the coherentist is that no such explanation has been successfully given for the reliability of our moral intuitions. And unlike vision and the other senses, there is no intuition faculty that can be located in the body and judged to be working properly or not.

Daniels claims that the argument from the dis-analogy between moral intuitions and observation reports is a burden-of-proof argument. As such it “notices that the credibility we assign to observation reports is itself based on an inference from a non-moral reflective equilibrium.”<sup>41</sup> The problem, he suggests, is that we have not yet worked out a moral reflective equilibrium well enough to give us reason to trust (or not to trust) our moral intuitions. However, Daniels claims that there is no reason to think that such a reason will not be forthcoming. Indeed, this precisely what occurs in science. We use observations to support scientific theories, and these scientific theories give explanations for the credibility of our observations. Furthermore, even though we do not have a good positive reason for including our moral intuitions, we do know that, in some situations, moral intuitions are unreliable. For instance, an agent’s intuitions are unreliable if they are the result of bias and self-interest, or if the agent is unable to sympathize or empathize with other agents.

### 3. *Empirical Foundherentism*

Susan Haack argues that foundationalism and coherentism both fail to give us an adequate account of empirical justification. However, Haack is not a skeptic about the justification of our empirical beliefs. She argues against the dichotomy between foundationalism and coherentism and for a third theory—foundherentism.

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 273

Foundherentism accommodates the intuitions that motivate foundationalism and coherentism while avoiding their shortcomings.

Haack's strategy consists in giving several problems for foundationalism and coherentism and insisting that the only way to solve these problems is to move towards foundherentism. If the foundationalist and coherentist can solve these problems while remaining foundationalist and coherentist, they must do so by altering their theories to the degree that they "lack cogent rationale."<sup>42</sup> The alterations would have the effect of making both theories kinds of "proto-foundherentism." These proto-foundherentist theories are better than the original foundationalist and coherentist theories. But, as the name '*proto-foundherentism*' suggests, they actually indicate a better theory. This better theory is foundherentism.

### 3.1 *Against Coherentism*

In Haack's words, coherence theories maintain that "a belief is justified [if and only if] it belongs to a coherent set of beliefs."<sup>43</sup> Coherentists hold that the justification of any belief turns on its logical or quasi-logical relationships with other beliefs. The coherentist makes justification a purely evaluative matter. For the coherentist, the causal history of one's beliefs is intrinsically irrelevant. Haack thinks that the purely evaluative nature of coherentism is the primary reason for its failure.

Haack objects to the coherentist's claim that the consistency of a set of beliefs justifies the beliefs in that set and that any inconsistency renders the entire set unjustified.

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<sup>42</sup> Haack, 71

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 55

According to Haack, this is “too much to ask” of the agent.<sup>44</sup> If justification requires complete consistency, nobody would have justified beliefs because nobody has completely consistent beliefs. Having even one pair of inconsistent beliefs is a problem because one can validly infer anything and everything that one can imagine from two inconsistent propositions. Since agents are justified in believing anything that they can validly infer from their justified beliefs, agents would be justified in believing anything. That consistency is a *minimal* condition for coherence makes the too much to ask objection even more salient.

Justification probably does not require complete consistency. This is for the better because, according to Haack, it seems odd in the first place to think that a contradiction in one specific subset of an agent’s beliefs would render another unrelated beliefs unjustified. It seems that, even though “a justified belief will always be one enmeshed in a whole complex of other beliefs, nevertheless not *all* of a person’s beliefs are relevant to the justification of *every* belief of his.”<sup>45</sup>

Haack also insists that consistency is *not enough* to ask. According to Haack’s “consistent fairy story objection,” the mere consistency of an agent’s beliefs is not enough to make it probable (to any degree) that the agent’s empirical beliefs are true.<sup>46</sup> Even if an agent is able to achieve complete consistency, the agent is still not justified in believing solely in virtue of that consistency. The problem is that it is possible for a completely consistent set of beliefs to have no connection with reality. Haack notes that adding further quasi-logical properties (e.g., comprehensiveness, explanatory coherence, etc.) to the mix does not help the matter. These are also evaluative properties, and, as

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 64

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 64

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 65

such, they do not ensure that an agent is connected to the world via experiential input.

The consistent fairy story objection indicates Haack's basic problem with coherentism. This problem is that logical or quasi-logical properties alone do not ensure that our beliefs represent or map onto the world. They alone do not accommodate the intrinsic justificatory relevance of certain kinds of non-belief input. To be specific, coherentism cannot allow for causal input from the world (via experience) to have any direct role in the justification of our beliefs about the world.

Haack gives ways in which coherentists can respond to the consistent fairy story objection. Consider her distinction between egalitarian and inegalitarian coherence theories.<sup>47</sup> The egalitarian coherentist holds that all beliefs in a coherent set of beliefs are justified to the same degree. The inegalitarian coherentist, on the other hand, denies this; the inegalitarian coherentist holds that some beliefs in a coherent set can be more justified than others in that same set. Perhaps the inegalitarian coherentist can meet the consistent fair story objection by claiming that an agent's beliefs about her experiences (or sensory states) are somehow justified to a higher degree than other beliefs in the same set.

According to Haack, there are two ways in which coherentists can be inegalitarian.<sup>48</sup> First, it can be claimed that S is more justified in believing that *p* than she is in believing that *q* because *p* has a higher *degree-of-embeddedness* in S' belief set than *q*. Second, it can be claimed S is justified in believing that *p* to a higher degree than she is justified in believing that *q* because *p* is *more heavily weighted* than *q*. Roughly, to say *p* is more embedded than *q* is to say that more beliefs evidentially depend on *p* than on *q*. If more beliefs evidentially depend on a belief, then that belief is justified to a higher degree

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 56

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 56

than it would otherwise be. To claim that  $p$  is weighted is to claim that the intrinsic nature of  $p$  somehow gives it a greater degree of justification than other beliefs (regardless of how many beliefs depend on  $p$ ).

An empiricist version of degree-of-embeddedness coherentism might entail that S' empirical beliefs are justified to a higher degree than her other beliefs because many of her other beliefs evidentially depend on her empirical beliefs. Nevertheless, according to Haack, this account suffers from the basic problem: it does not necessarily require the agent to have experiential non-belief input. A belief's degree of embeddedness does not necessarily ensure that it is connected to the world. It *just so happens* that our empirical beliefs are highly embedded. It seems that experiential input is necessary for justification even if empirical beliefs happen not to be highly embedded in an agent's belief set.

An empiricist version of weighted coherentism would suggest that an agent's beliefs about her sensory states are justified because their intrinsic empirical nature. Bonjour's coherentist theory might be weighted in virtue of his Observation Requirement. Bonjour distinguishes between a belief's being non-inferential in *origin* (and cognitively spontaneous), and a belief's being non-inferential in *justification*. Bonjour claims that no beliefs are non-inferential in justification. He claims that a cognitively spontaneous belief can only be justified insofar as one can formulate an argument that shows that specific kind of cognitively spontaneous belief to be reliable.<sup>49</sup> This, however, does not make it necessary that agents have experiential input; it only *permits* experiential input into the agent's belief set, given that the agent is properly situated in the world. The purpose of the Observation Requirement is to make it necessary that agents have experiential input in order to be justified.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 99

Haack gives two interpretations of the Observation Requirement—the *doxastic* interpretation and the *experientialist* interpretation. In her words,

On the doxastic interpretation, the Observation Requirement requires that the subject *believe that he has* cognitively spontaneous beliefs, and that the subject believe that cognitively spontaneous beliefs are generally reliable. On the experientialist interpretation, it requires that the subject *have* cognitively spontaneous beliefs, and that he believe that cognitively spontaneous beliefs are generally reliable.<sup>50</sup>

Haack thinks that the doxastic interpretation fails because it does not actually guarantee experiential input. She thinks that the experientialist interpretation might succeed, but, insofar as it does, it renders Bonjour's theory non-coherentist because it denies that justification is a purely doxastic and evaluative matter.

Coherentism cannot adequately explain why experiential beliefs should have higher initial evidential or justificatory status than non-experiential beliefs. The reason for this failure is that the origin of a belief, according to coherentism, is intrinsically irrelevant to the justification of that belief. Since the egalitarian versions of coherentism fail to meet the basic problem indicated by the consistent fairy story objection, they fail to give a satisfying account of empirical justification.

### 3.2 *Against Foundationalism*

We have said that foundationalism requires two kinds of beliefs—basic and non-basic—and that justification flows one-directionally from basic beliefs to non-basic beliefs. There is no justification for non-basic beliefs that does not have its ultimate origin in basic beliefs. This definition of foundationalism is loose enough to be consistent with various sorts of foundationalist theories (in addition to the infallibilist and fallibilist

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 99

theories that we have already discussed). As she does with coherentism, Haack distinguishes between various kinds of foundationalist theories and gives problems for each of these theories.

First, Haack distinguishes between empirical and non-empirical versions of foundationalism.<sup>51</sup> Since her theory is about the justification of empirical beliefs, she does not argue against non-empirical foundationalism. However, Haack has a somewhat broad notion of what is meant by ‘empirical.’ She says that ‘empirical’ “should be understood roughly as equivalent to ‘factual,’”<sup>52</sup> and that “one must allow a coherentist, or for that matter a foundationalist of the non-experientialist stripe, the possibility of modifying the usual meaning of ‘empirical’ so as to detach ‘concerning how things are in the world’ from ‘depending on experience.’”<sup>53</sup> In other words, empirical justification simply requires *some* sort of relevant non-belief input to ensure that an agent’s beliefs represent how things are in the world. Experiential input is just the usual sort of such non-belief input.

Haack says that there are three ways in which empirical beliefs might be foundational—*experientially*, *extrinsically*, and *intrinsically*.<sup>54</sup> Experientialist foundationalists claim that basic, foundational beliefs are justified by (but not inferred from) an agent’s sensory and introspective experiences. Extrinsic foundationalists claim that basic beliefs are justified “because of a causal or law-like connection between the subject’s belief and the state of affairs which makes it true.”<sup>55</sup> Intrinsic foundationalism posits basic beliefs that are justified in virtue of their self-justifying content.

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 52

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 52

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 85

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 53

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 53

Haack further distinguishes between *strong* and *weak* foundationalist theories.<sup>56</sup> Strong experiential, extrinsic, and intrinsic foundationalists claim that all basic beliefs are *completely* justified on their own (i.e., without the support of other beliefs). Weak foundationalists claim that basic beliefs are justified only to some degree without the support of other basic beliefs.

Finally, Haack contrasts *pure* and *impure* foundationalist theories.<sup>57</sup> Pure foundationalists claim that non-basic beliefs must derive all of their justification from basic beliefs (in a transitive, linear fashion). In other words, justification is *always* transmitted from (weak or strong) basic beliefs to non-basic beliefs. Non-basic beliefs get every last bit of their justification from basic beliefs. Impure foundationalists, on the other hand, allow for mutual support among non-basic beliefs, but maintain that non-basic beliefs must be inferred from basic beliefs. According to the impure foundationalist, non-basic beliefs must receive at least some of their justification from basic beliefs, but their degree of justification can be strengthened by their relationships with other non-basic beliefs. Even for the impure foundationalist, non-basic beliefs would not be justified to any degree without being inferred from basic beliefs.

Haack, of course, thinks that all kinds of empirical foundationalism fail. Intrinsic, self-justificatory foundationalism fails for the same reason that coherentism fails: it does not adequately accommodate the role that experience should play in the justification of our empirical beliefs.<sup>58</sup> To repeat, Haack maintains that our beliefs *about* the world can only be justified if we have some input *from* the world. (This bars self-evidence as an adequate basis for *empirical* justification.) In contrast to the intrinsic foundationalist, the

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 55

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 55

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 67



extrinsic foundationalist does attempt to account for the intuition some sort of non-belief input is intrinsically relevant to empirical justification. However, Haack argues that extrinsic foundationalism fails because it runs counter the view that “what justified a belief should be something of which [...] the subject is aware.”<sup>59</sup>

We are left with the experientialist kinds of foundationalism. Haack’s first argument against these theories is called the “swings and roundabouts argument.”<sup>60</sup> The argument begins by noticing that foundationalism requires basic beliefs to be both secure and rich. The more secure a belief is, the more justified it is, independently of the support of other beliefs. The richer a foundational belief, the larger the superstructure is that it is able to support. According to Haack, the problem is that in order to fulfill one of these requirements, the other must be sacrificed. Very secure beliefs will probably not have enough content to support a large enough superstructure. Very rich beliefs will have more content, but will be less justified. An example of a secure but fruitless belief is the belief that the sun appears the way things appear to me now. Not much can be inferred from this belief. In contrast, the belief that the sun appears to rotate around the earth is a rich but less secure belief.

Haack notes that the swings and roundabouts argument is

less effective against weak foundationalism than against strong foundationalism (since the former does not require basic beliefs to be absolutely justified independently of the support of other beliefs), and less effective against impure foundationalism than against pure foundationalism (since the former does not require basic beliefs to do all of the work of supporting the superstructure of derived beliefs).<sup>61</sup>

So the weak and impure versions of experientialist foundationalism remain. Haack’s next

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 67

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 69

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 70

arguments—the “up back and all the way down arguments”—have these remaining theories as their targets.<sup>62</sup> According to Haack, the weak foundationalist is right to insist that some beliefs (i.e., experiential beliefs) are justified to some degree, but not completely.<sup>63</sup> But it also seems that experiential beliefs are capable of being supported by non-basic beliefs. Consider my belief that I hear a police siren. Surely I am more justified in believing that I hear the siren if I know that my sensory organs are operating normally. The impure, weak foundationalist must either deny this, or give up on foundationalism in favor of foundherentism. Haack thinks that, once any amount of mutual support is permitted, there is no good reason for the impure foundationalist to deny that justification can go “back all the way down” from non-basic beliefs to basic beliefs.

### 3.3 *Towards Foundherentism*

Foundherentism consists of two ideas. One is coherentist in origin. It is the idea that *all* beliefs can be justified (in part) by mutual support. The other is foundationalist in origin. It is the idea that experiential input is necessary for the justification of our empirical beliefs. According to Haack, her theory is distinct from both coherentism and foundationalism because “a theory which allows non-belief input cannot be coherentist; a theory which does not require one-directionality cannot be foundationalist.”<sup>64</sup> Foundherentism combines the best aspects of foundationalism and coherentism into one unique theory; it acknowledges “the relevance of experience to justification, but requires no class of privileged beliefs justified exclusively by experience with no support from

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 70

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 71

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 57

other beliefs.”<sup>65</sup>

To clarify Haack’s foundherentist theory, consider her analogy of a crossword puzzle. Just as the justification of a single belief depends, in part, on its coherent relationships with other beliefs, the plausibility of a potential entry in a crossword puzzle turns on how well that entry fits with other entries.<sup>66</sup> And just like all of an agent’s beliefs would be unjustified if that agent were not to have experiential input, no potential entry in a crossword puzzle would be plausible if there were no clues. Haack notes that “the clues don’t depend on the entries, but the entries are, in variable degree, interdependent.”<sup>67</sup>

Further,

how reasonable one’s confidence is that a certain entry in a crossword puzzle is correct depends on: how much support is given to this entry by the cue and any intersecting entries that have already filled in; how reasonable, independently of the entry in question, one’s confidence is that those other already filled-in entries are correct; and how many of the intersecting entries have been filled in.<sup>68</sup>

Weak, impure foundationalism and inegalitarian coherentism both move towards foundherentism, but they do not move far enough. Like the weak, impure foundationalist and the inegalitarian coherentist, the foundherentist acknowledges that justification admits of degrees. Weak, impure foundationalism posits basic beliefs that are justified to some degree but not completely; it also allows for mutual support among non-basic beliefs. This entails that beliefs can be justified to higher or lower degrees. The inegalitarian coherentist also maintains that beliefs are justified in differing degrees; some beliefs are more deeply embedded or more heavily weighted than others.

According to Haack, the role of experience in justification is “to contribute its part

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 57

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 126

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 126

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 130

to the justification of all justified empirical beliefs, all of which can be, in varying degrees, justified in part by the support of other beliefs.”<sup>69</sup> Thus foundherentism is able to sustain the intuition that justification admits of degrees better than the foundationalist or coherentist. It is the relationship between the logical and quasi-logical (coherentist) aspect of justification and the experientialist (foundationalist) aspect that gives rise to a theory of justification which entails that beliefs are justified to differing degrees.

#### 4. *Moral Foundherentism*

Now that we have a sufficient understanding of foundherentism, we may consider what, if anything, it has to offer about the justification of our moral beliefs. It is obvious that we *can* construct a moral analogue to empirical foundherentism. It is not obvious that such an analogue will have any advantages over the traditional foundationalist and coherentist approaches to moral epistemology. In what follows, I will construct a moral analogue to empirical foundherentism and defend the plausibility of this theory. On moral foundherentism (MFH), moral intuitions play a similar justificatory role to that played by experience in empirical foundherentism. To motivate MFH, I will show that coherentist and foundationalist theories of moral epistemology face analogous problems to those faced by coherentist and foundationalist theories of empirical epistemology. Specifically, moral coherentists face a version of the *consistent fairy story argument*, and moral foundationalists face a version of the *up back and all the way down argument*.

##### 4.1 *A Sketch of Foundherentist Moral Epistemology*

Recall that empirical foundherentism (FH) has two central elements. The first

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 91

element is the claim that an agent's having experiential input is a necessary condition in order for her empirical beliefs to be justified to any degree. The second element is the claim that all empirical beliefs are capable of having, and probably should have, relationships of mutual support with other beliefs. The first element is borrowed from foundationalism. The most plausible versions of empirical foundationalism claim that experience plays an essential role in justification. At the same time, the first element runs counter to a key claim of coherentism; it makes non-belief input necessary for empirical justification. The second element, on the other hand, borrows the coherentist concept of reciprocal justification. The second element runs counter to the foundationalist claim that basic empirical beliefs are "justified exclusively by the support of experience, independently of the support of other beliefs."<sup>70</sup>

Moral foundherentism (MFH) has two parallel elements. The first element is the claim that an agent's having moral intuitions, and basing at least some of his moral beliefs on his intuitions, is a necessary condition for that agent's moral beliefs to be justified to any degree. The second element is the claim that intuitive moral beliefs should be further justified by their relationships of mutual support with other moral and non-moral beliefs. The first element accommodates the intuitionist, foundationalist idea that our moral beliefs would not be justified if we did not have moral intuitions while rejecting the coherentist claim that intuitions are only a starting place for justification. According to MFH, if one has moral intuitions, but believes moral propositions unrelated to those intuitions, then (in contrast to coherentism) one's moral beliefs would not be justified to any degree. The second element of MFH accommodates the coherentist (and anti-foundationalist) idea that there is no special class of moral beliefs incapable of being

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 57

further justified by having mutual relationships with other moral and non-moral beliefs. According to MFH, even though moral intuitions are a necessary aspect of the epistemic justification of moral beliefs, intuitive beliefs are all capable of being justifiably supported (and rejected) depending on their relationships with other beliefs. In other words, the justification of our intuitive moral beliefs can go “up and back all the way down.”

Like FH, MFH accommodates the view that justification admits of degrees. Our intuitive moral beliefs are justified to some degree by their intuitive nature, but intuitiveness alone is not enough to make moral knowledge possible. The degree of justification of intuitive moral beliefs needs to be increased by their having coherent relationships with other (intuitive or non-intuitive) beliefs.

Haack’s analogy of the crossword puzzle is helpful in explaining MFH. The intuitions supporting our moral beliefs serve as clues to the crossword puzzle that is moral inquiry. Without clues, there is no one correct way to fill out a crossword puzzle; there will be numerous, equally plausible ways to fill it out. Analogously, without intuition, there is no one correct coherent set of moral beliefs. A theory of moral epistemology that does not require moral intuition entails moral relativism. The plausibility of an entry in a crossword puzzle also depends on how well that entry fits with other entries. Analogously, how justified an agent is in believing any moral proposition depends (in part) on that belief’s relationships with other beliefs held by the same agent.

#### 4.2 *Defending Moral Foundherentism*

Unsurprisingly, the reasons for accepting MFH are analogous to the reasons for accepting FH. Recall Haack's consistent fairy story argument. It states that coherentism cannot give an adequate account of empirical justification because coherentism makes justification solely an evaluative matter (i.e., a matter of relations among beliefs). There is no reason to think that a coherent set of beliefs with no experiential input will reflect reality. An analogous objection can be raised against moral coherentism. The coherentist cannot give an adequate account of the justification of our moral beliefs because the coherentist cannot permit non-belief input in the form of *intuition*. Having moral intuitions ensures that one's moral beliefs reflect the moral facts. One could come up with various counter-intuitive but coherent moral theories. For example, an agent could be a coherent ethical (i.e., universal) egoist and claim that each person should act only in ways that promote his or her own interests. The coherentist has trouble showing why such theories are not justified.

To see more clearly that this is a problem for the coherentist, consider Daniels' response to the objection that we have no reason to give initial credence to our moral intuitions. According to Daniels, while it is true that we *currently* have no reason to require intuitions in moral theorizing, we also have no reason to think that such a reason is not forthcoming. Daniels thinks that WRE might give us such a reason. In my view, Daniels' response faces the same objections that Haack levels at Bonjour's Observation Requirement.

Recall that one interpretation of the Observation Requirement (OR1) makes it necessary that an agent actually *has* certain experiential states and believes that beliefs

based on those states are reliable in order for her empirical beliefs to be justified. The second interpretation (OR2) makes it necessary that the agent *believes* that she has experiences and that she believe that her experiences are generally reliable. The problem with OR1 is that, by definition, a theory that incorporates it cannot be kind of coherentism. It would really be a form of proto-FH. OR2, by contrast, is consistent with coherentism. However, it runs counter to the idea that experiential input is necessary for knowledge about the objective world.

Moral coherentism (i.e., the method of reflective equilibrium) has what can be called the “Intuition Requirement.” In order to achieve reflective equilibrium, it seems that agents must start by consulting their intuitions. Hence it seems that, according to MRE, it is impossible for us to formulate a justified moral theory without relying on our intuitions. We can give two interpretations of the Intuition Requirement. One interpretation (IR1) requires an agent to *actually have* moral intuitions (and to believe them to be reliable) in order for his moral beliefs to be justified. The other interpretation (IR2) requires an agent to *believe* that he has moral intuitions (and to believe his intuitions to be reliable). Any theory that incorporates IR1 is not genuinely coherentist. This is because intuitions, like experiences, are not kinds of beliefs. IR2 is consistent with coherentism. The problem, however, is that IR2 does not necessarily ensure that the agent actually has intuitions. Thus we should reject IR2. It is possible to falsely believe that some moral proposition is intuitive. In reality, that belief might be the result of habit, brain washing, or conformity.

Recall BonJour’s distinction between a belief’s being non-inferential in *origin* (and cognitively spontaneous), and a belief’s being non-inferential in *justification*.



Intuitive beliefs are, like experiential beliefs, cognitively spontaneous in origin. Bonjour denies that beliefs can be non-inferentially justified, and this is why Bonjour has a problem with formulating a substantive version of the Observation Requirement. The moral foundherentist, like the empirical foundherentist, rejects the premise that no beliefs are non-inferentially justified. Therefore, the moral foundherentist does not face the dilemma that Bonjour and the moral coherentist face. MFH accommodates IR1.

Perhaps moral coherentism can be saved by claiming that intuitive moral beliefs are permissively justified. Daniels says that we have no reason to think moral intuitions are unreliable, and that we are therefore justified in including them in our moral theorizing. Maybe Daniels is relying on a notion of permissive justification. Perhaps our intuitive moral beliefs will not be positively justified until we have reason to think they are reliable. Daniels would be claiming that intuitive beliefs do positive justificatory work (even if they themselves are not positively justified).

Notice that the coherentist can make this move and remain a coherentist because it maintains that intuitive moral beliefs are not justified by their intuitive nature. It is thus a virtue of MFH that it does not rely on a notion of permissive justification. According to MFH, our intuitive moral beliefs are *positively* justified by their intuitive nature from the get go. Nevertheless, intuitive beliefs can be justified to a greater degree if we come to have a reason to think that our intuitions are reliable (and then they are no longer basic or foundational). MFH entails that intuitive moral beliefs are justified to some degree, but that the full (or sufficient) justification for our moral beliefs comes later when they are made to cohere with the rest of our (moral and non-moral) beliefs.

Because the most plausible version of it incorporates IR1, RE should be

considered a moral foundherentist method. Coherentism cannot allow our moral intuitions by themselves to do any justificatory work. MFH can and does. To see that this is a good thing, imagine two agents, S and A, that have the same (moral and non-moral) beliefs. This implies that S and A both believe that their moral beliefs are based on intuition. Imagine further that S actually has moral intuitions while A does not. It seems obvious that S' moral beliefs are at least justified to a higher degree than A's moral beliefs. According to the coherentist, this cannot be the case. (Of course, MFH entails something stronger—viz. that A's moral beliefs are not justified to any degree.)

Despite accommodating the foundationalist view that intuitive input is necessary for the justification of moral beliefs, MFH rejects the foundationalist view that justification is linear and transitive as well as the distinction between basic and non-basic beliefs. According to the moral foundationalist, non-basic beliefs are completely unjustified without the support of basic beliefs. And non-basic moral beliefs can never provide any extra support for basic, self-evident beliefs. This makes self-evidence (or something like it) necessary for foundationalism. MFH requires no concept of self-evidence from which all of the justification for moral beliefs is transmitted. And this is all for the better because it seems intuitively possible for any kind of moral belief to provide support for another moral belief.

MFH differs from moral foundationalism in that MFH allows for coherence to add justification to all moral beliefs. For instance, MFH allows for explanatory coherence between general moral principles and considered moral judgments. Moral judgments can be explained by certain general moral principles, and moral principles can be explained by our judgments. Even a modest foundationalist such as Audi cannot permit this. MFH

does not face the moral foundationalist's problem of having to decide whether it is general principles or specific moral judgments that are basic; MFH leaves open the possibility for any of our moral beliefs to be justified by intuitive input.

Another point in favor of MFH is that it makes more sense of (and allows for better resolution of) moral disagreement than foundationalism. Audi's weaker notion of self-evidence (unlike Ross' strong notion) makes genuine moral disagreement possible. However, it also makes such disagreement more difficult to solve. Seemingly self-evident beliefs are fallible. S can think  $p$  is self-evident and A can think that  $\sim p$  is self-evident. According to Audi, the only potential way to solve this disagreement is for S and A to increase their understanding of  $p$  by reflection. Yet, after reflection, S and A might still disagree. MFH, on the other hand, can resolve disagreement by tracing it to less controversial areas and showing that either S or A have incoherence in their beliefs. This, of course, is the same way that the coherentist approaches disagreement, but MFH has the advantage of doing so while avoiding the problems with coherentism.

Interestingly enough, intuitionist foundationalism also seems to face a version of Haack's consistent fairy story objection. Any theory that appeals solely to self-evidence makes justification solely a doxastic, evaluative matter. In Haack's terms, self-evidential foundationalism is a kind of intrinsic foundationalism. For the intuitionist foundationalist, intuitions are only relevant insofar as they compel one to believe self-evident propositions. It is conceptually possible for S to be justified in believing the self-evident proposition  $p$  on the basis of understanding alone without basing the belief that  $p$  on intuition. So, for the intuitionist foundationalist, intuitions are not *intrinsically* relevant to the justification of our moral beliefs.

### 4.3 *Objections and Conclusion*

We have said that moral intuitions are neither beliefs nor experiences (i.e., that they are neither sensory nor introspective). One might conclude from this that intuitions are simply kinds of emotions, and that they are therefore irrelevant to epistemic justification. One problem with this conclusion is that it assumes that emotions cannot be good evidence for moral truth—a claim that the sentimentalist would deny. However, MFH is not committed to sentimentalism. The major problem with this objection is that to say that intuitions are neither beliefs nor experiences does not entail that intuition is a kind of emotion. To say that intuitions feel a certain way is not to say that they are emotions. It is simply to say that they have a distinctive phenomenological quality. To say that some moral proposition is intuitive could be interpreted to mean that it feels true, that one feels confident in affirming it, or that the proposition “makes sense.” And, unlike emotions (which, of course, also have a phenomenological quality), intuitions have propositional content. In this way they are quasi-doxastic, like experiences.

Nevertheless, one might have the feeling that intuitions are not like experiences in the relevant way. According to FH, an agent’s beliefs about the world are justified only if the agent has experiences of the world. This is because our empirical beliefs need to be connected with reality. On FH, this connection is causal. One might object that, on MFH, it is not clear how moral intuitions have a connection with that which makes moral beliefs true—viz., the moral facts. (Note that I do not take the term “moral fact” to imply moral realism.)

This objection can be met by noticing that there are many possible ways for our moral intuitions to be connected to the moral facts. There are multiple realist options, two

of which allow moral intuitions (like experiences) to have an external causal connection with the moral facts. First, the non-naturalist realist would claim that there is a direct causal connection between moral properties and intuitions. For example, according to this view, my intuition that charity is virtuous is directly caused by the moral property of goodness. Second, the naturalist realist can claim that my intuition about charity is caused by moral properties that supervene on non-moral, natural properties. This is to say that my intuition is caused by the natural features that make charity good (e.g., that it tends to promote the wellbeing of those in need). A third realist option is to explain the relevance of intuition by appealing to self-evidence. Self-evidence can be made consistent with MFH by claiming even self-evident beliefs can be supported by other moral beliefs that are not self-evident.

The non-realist can also give an account of how our moral intuitions can do justificatory work independently of their coherence with other beliefs. For the non-realist, the connection that intuitions have with the moral facts will not be externally causal in character. This is because the non-realist claims that morality is mind-dependent. And if morality is mind-dependent, it makes perfect sense for our intuitions (which are products of our minds) to be intimately connected with the moral facts. This would be to claim that moral intuitions are like mathematical intuitions. That is, the non-realist might explain the relevance of moral intuitions by appealing to certain canons of rationality. A kind of Kantian constructivism could give an account for how moral intuitions connect to the moral facts.

MFH is consistent with each of these accounts. MFH need not be exactly analogous to FH in terms of the kind of connection our intuitions have to the moral facts.

MFH leaves the causal origin of our intuitions open. Intuitions need not be like experiences in their causal origin in order for intuitions to play an analogous role in justification. In fact, it is a virtue of MFH that the exact connections between intuition and moral truth are left open precisely because there are many plausible explanations for the justificatory relevance of our intuitions. If moral realism is true, our intuitions might have a causal source external to our minds similar to that of experiences. If moral realism is not true, our intuitions might be explained by certain features of our minds.

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