

Reflective Equilibrium: Justification without Intuitions

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ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE – RECEIVED: 13/01/17 ACCEPTED: 16/05/17

ABSTRACT: Does the method of reflective equilibrium (henceforth, RE) involve ethical intuitions? If not, what are the so-called “considered judgments” invoked at the beginning of the process of reflective equilibrium? Contrary to the principal tendency in moral and political philosophy, I provide a negative answer to the first question. I hold that ethical intuitions are non-inferential beliefs. I then claim that RE does not involve ethical intuitions because its coherentist character rejects, by definition, any type of non-inferentiality. Concerning the second question above, I provide an answer that preserves the epistemological consistency of RE: considered judgments should be defined as inferential beliefs. The possibility of their inferential character relies on the role of background beliefs in the process of reflective equilibrium. In brief, I criticise and reformulate the standard interpretation of RE by claiming that it does not involve ethical intuitions but only inferential beliefs.

KEY WORDS: Reflective equilibrium, Intuitions, Considered Judgments, Justification, Foundationalism, Coherentism.

“[...] justification is a matter of the mutual support of many considerations, of everything fitting together into one coherent view.”

Rawls (1999: 19)

I. Introduction

Suppose Jack addresses an ethical question by following the method of reflective equilibrium in its standard version (henceforth, RE).¹ Jack begins the process of reflective equilibrium from some of his considered judgments at all

¹ The *locus classicus* of that standard version is Rawls (1999: 40–46). For some classic explorations of this standard version, see: Daniels (1979), DePaul (1993).

levels of generality such as “slavery is wrong”, “torturing babies is wrong” and so on. After an extensive process of mutual adjustment, Jack holds a justified set of beliefs integrated by considered judgments, explanatory principles and background theories. In this paper, I focus my attention on two main questions: Does RE involve ethical intuitions? If not, what are the so-called “considered judgments” invoked at the beginning of the process of reflective equilibrium? Contrary to the principal tendency in contemporary moral and political philosophy, I provide a negative answer to the first question. Following the main trend in contemporary moral epistemology, I hold that ethical intuitions should be understood as non-inferential beliefs (Audi 1997; Bedke 2010; Brun 2014; Huemer 2005; Kirchin 2005; McMahan 2000). I then claim that RE does not involve ethical intuitions because its coherentist character rejects, by definition, any type of non-inferentiality. Concerning the second question above, I argue that considered judgments are (necessarily) inferential beliefs held by the individual on the basis of background beliefs – i.e. second-order beliefs about the reliability of considered judgments.

I proceed as follows. Firstly, I set out relevant features of RE and specify the concept of an ethical intuition (Section II). After analysing Daniels’ classic responses to the questions mentioned before (Daniels 1979; 2013), I develop the argument summarised above (Sections III and IV). Finally, I address some possible objections (Section V). I conclude by emphasising the relevance of coherentism in the interpretation of RE.

II. Some Relevant Aspects of RE & Intuitions

For Goodman, the justification of rules of inference is “the delicate one of making mutual adjustments between [these] rules and accepted inferences” (Goodman 1983: 64). RE is based on this notion of “mutual adjustment”. It should be understood via two ideas. The first idea refers to the concept of reflective equilibrium: the justification of considered judgments, principles and background theories depends on their mutual support (Daniels 1979; 1980; 2013; Rawls 1999).² The second idea refers to the process, wherein RE starts from considered judgments conceived under favourable conditions. It should be noted that these judgments are beliefs at all levels of generality – e.g. judgments about particular cases, normative principles, moral conceptions, etc. (Rawls 1974: 8; 2001: 30). After this, explanatory principles are proposed, and background theories are integrated into the process of reflective equilib-

² In Daniels’ words: “The method of wide reflective equilibrium is an attempt to produce coherence in an ordered triple of sets of beliefs held by a particular person, namely, (a) a set of considered moral judgments, (b) a set of moral principles, and (c) a set of relevant background theories” (Daniels 1979: 258).

rium. Finally, all these components are mutually adjusted by the individual (Daniels 1979: 258–259; DePaul 1993: 16–23; Rawls 1999: 40–46).

The first question of this paper is whether RE involves ethical intuitions. But there is an important preliminary query that should be addressed by any serious answer to that question: what is an ethical intuition? For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to provide an exhaustive definition (i.e. an exhaustive set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions). Rather, it is necessary to specify some necessary features. Let me introduce an incomplete definition with an example: Suppose there are two philosophers (Jack and Susan) discussing. Jack says: “I believe W”. Susan asks: “why do you believe W?” Jack responds: “I believe W because Y”. Susan asks: “why do you believe Y?” Jack responds: “I believe Y because Z”. Susan asks: “why do you believe Z?” Jack responds: “because Z is self-evident”.

For foundationalism, there are two types of justified beliefs in this hypothetical case. First, some justified beliefs are held on the basis of other beliefs (in this case: W, Y). For example, if someone claims “I believe that war is morally impermissible because killing is wrong”, it is said that the first belief (i.e. “war is morally impermissible”) is justified on the basis of another belief – i.e. “killing is wrong”. Call them “inferential beliefs”. Second, foundationalism holds that some justified beliefs are not held on the basis of other beliefs (in this case: Z). For the foundationalist model of reasoning, this type of belief overcomes the well-known “regress problem”. For example, if someone says “I believe that killing is wrong because it is self-evident”, this alleged justified belief is not justified on the basis of another belief. Call them “non-inferential beliefs”. This straightforward categorisation of two different types of justified beliefs can be summarised as follows:

- (P1) P is an inferential (justified) belief iff it is held by the individual on the basis of other beliefs. E.g. Jack states: “I believe W because Y”
- (P2) Q is a non-inferential (justified) belief iff it is not held by the individual on the basis of other beliefs. E.g. Jack states: “I believe Z because it is self-evident”

It is widely accepted that “intuitions” fall under the second category: ethical intuitions are defined as non-inferential (sometimes called: “self-evident”, “basic”) beliefs.³ Let me provide some examples. Audi holds that “an

³ There is discussion on whether intuitions are just “beliefs”. For example, Brun (2014) defines intuitions as non-inferential beliefs, but Huemer (2005) holds that intuitions are not beliefs but “intellectual seemings”. This conceptual discussion goes beyond the limits of this work because this paper is only focussed on the inferential character of intuitions. For this reason, I follow Audi’s generalisation: “In the contexts that concern us, intuitions will typically be beliefs” (Audi 1997: 40).

intuition must be non-inferential, in the sense that the intuited proposition” is not held on the basis of other beliefs (Audi 1997: 47). For Alexander & Weinberg, ethical intuitions are the “non-inferential, defeasible justificatory foundation” of our theories (Alexander & Weinberg 2014: 189). Bedke holds that an intuition is “non-inferential” because its justification does not depend on other beliefs (Bedke 2010: 1069). Brun argues that “non-inferentiality is the best candidate for a common denominator of the various accounts of intuitions” (Brun 2014: 244). Huemer holds that ethical intuitions are non-inferential in the sense that intuitions are the starting points of normative reasoning (Huemer 2005: 101–105).⁴ It should be noted that this agreement between moral epistemologists is not arbitrary at all. There are two reasons suggested in the literature. First, some authors suggest that such an incomplete definition (to be more precise, the necessary inferential character of intuitions) seems to capture our intuitions about the concept of “intuition”. Consider the straightforward categorisation specified above. For some authors, it seems intuitively correct to say that intuitions fall under the second category (Alexander & Weinberg 2014). But the standard reason is that such an incomplete definition seems to capture an important aspect of the ordinary usage of the term. For example, it is an undeniable fact that contemporary philosophers tend to use the term “intuition” when they try to conceptualise the phenomenon of (supposed) immediate justified beliefs about several thought experiments – e.g. ethical intuitions about trolley cases, prima facie duties, moral principles, the transitivity of value, the definitional structure of moral concepts, etc. (Bedke 2010).

To sum up, RE is based on Goodman’s notion of “mutual adjustment”. RE integrates three crucial elements: considered judgments at all levels of generality, explanatory principles and background theories. The fundamental question is whether RE involves ethical intuitions (i.e. non-inferential beliefs). In what follows, I shall analyse the classic response provided in the literature – i.e. Daniels’ influential response (Daniels 1979; 2013). After that, I shall present an argument, based on the content of this section, which is superior to his account.

III. The Basic Problem of the Classic Response

Daniels (1979; 2013) provides the most prominent answer to the question of whether RE involves ethical intuitions by defending an alleged distinction between considered judgments and ethical intuitions. Let me analyse this classic argument in some detail. For Daniels, intuitions carry “epistemic

⁴ See also: (Kirchin 2005; McMahan 2000).

privilege". This type of "privilege" implies "self-evidence" and low levels of "revisability" (Daniels 1979: 264). Daniels quickly suggests that considered judgments should not be understood as self-evident beliefs, but he does not develop this further (Daniels 1979; 2013). For him, the general distinction between considered judgments and ethical intuitions mainly refers to the different level of revisability of these beliefs. In Daniels' (1979: 266–267; see also Daniels 2013) own words:

Wide [reflective] equilibrium does not merely systematize some determinate set of judgments. Rather, it permits extensive revision of these moral judgments. There is no set of judgments that is held more or less fixed as there would be on a foundationalist approach, even one without foundations. It will be useful to see just how far from the more traditional view of a moral intuition the considered moral judgment in wide reflective equilibrium has come. (...) [W]ide reflective equilibrium, as I have described it, allows far more drastic theory-based revisions of moral judgments. (...) No one type of considered moral judgment is held immune to revision.

The distinction defended by the author is straightforward: considered judgments are more revisable than ethical intuitions because RE "allows far more drastic theory-based revisions of moral judgments" (Daniels 1979: 266). Put in other words, the distinctive feature of considered judgments would be their high level of revisability because RE requires us "to revise our beliefs at all levels as we work back and forth among them and subject them to various criticisms" (Daniels 2013). This distinctive feature of considered judgments is emphasised by Rawls himself when he says that considered judgments "must eventually be revised, suspended, or withdrawn" (Rawls 2001: 30). For this reason, Daniels argues, it would be wrong to claim that RE involves ethical intuitions (convictions with a low level of revisability) in the form of considered judgments (convictions with a high level of revisability).

From an epistemological perspective, it is evident that Daniels' response is inherently problematic. As he rightly suggests, the level of revisability of our beliefs is not an intrinsic but an accidental feature because it is modeled by an epistemological background. For example, as he rightly suggests in the quote above, RE is what "allows far more drastic theory-based revisions of moral judgments" (Daniels 1979: 266). Given this premise, Daniels' distinction is problematic because there are two types of foundationalism that imply different levels of revisability of our beliefs. For the strong version of foundationalism, ethical intuitions are infallible – that is the so-called "Cartesian foundationalism". In this case, Daniels' distinction applies without any problem. For the modest version of foundationalism, however, ethical intuitions do not carry such an epistemic privilege because our beliefs can be refuted by further evidence. In this case, Daniels' distinction is blurred. Let me give an example that clarifies this point. According to Huemer, the principle of

“phenomenal conservatism” plays an important role in epistemology. This basic principle states that intellectual inquiry “proceeds by assuming things are the way they appear, until evidence (...) arises to cast doubt on this” (Huemer 2005: 101). Huemer provides an example. Suppose I see a glass of water on the table. Under the principle of phenomenal conservatism, my visual perception is enough to justify the belief that there is a glass of water on the table. Nevertheless, he adds, “I may still hold this open to revision: if I reach for the glass and find my hand passing through it (...) I may decide there wasn’t a glass there after all” (Huemer 2005: 107). Under this foundationalist framework, the author holds that “as long as our foundationalism is of a moderate form, it is not impossible to reason about intuitive moral principles. We may hold even intuitive moral principles open to revision” (Huemer 2005: 143).

In brief, Daniels provides a negative answer to the question of whether RE involves ethical intuitions by defending an alleged distinction between them and considered judgments. However, Daniels’ classic distinction is inherently problematic because modest foundationalism blurs it: for the modest version of foundationalism, ethical intuitions can be understood as non-inferential but revisable beliefs. In what follows, I shall present an argument that avoids the basic problem of Daniels’ classic response. The argument is partially based on the categorisation presented in the second section (P1, P2).

IV. The Coherentist Response: Justification without Intuitions

In this section, I provide an argument that is neutral regarding the well-known discussion between coherentism and foundationalism. My starting point is the very definition of RE. The standard version of this method is widely interpreted as an expression of coherentist-based justification (Little 1984; Daniels 1979; 2013; DePaul 1993; Nielsen 1989; Timmons 1990). The coherentist interpretation is primarily supported by Rawls’ systematic idea that “justification is a matter of the mutual support of many considerations, of everything fitting together into one coherent view” (Rawls 1999: 19; see also: Rawls 1999: 320, 507; 1980: 534; 2001: 31).⁵ Some points deserve attention. First, it is well-known that the central idea of coherentism is that the justification of any belief depends on its coherence with other beliefs held by the individual (Audi 2011; BonJour 1985). Call this the “coherentist

⁵ Additionally, it is supported by Rawls’ rejection of non-inferential beliefs (P2). In his own words: “A conception of justice cannot be deduced from self-evident premises or conditions on principles” (Rawls 1999: 19); “I have not proceeded then as if first principles, or conditions thereon, or definitions either, have special features that permit them a peculiar place in justifying a moral doctrine” (Rawls 1999: 507).

thesis". What does "coherence" mean? It is widely accepted that the lack of logical contradiction is not sufficient because we need mutually supportive connections too. For this reason, coherent sets of beliefs imply the property of "connectedness" which can be understood as a "dynamic property" because it depends on the level of connection of several beliefs. As an author nicely summarises, "the idea is then that the members of a coherent system of beliefs stand in fairly pervasive inferential relations of this sort to each other, with the degree of coherence depending on the degree to which this is so, that is, on the number and strength of these inferential connections" (BonJour 2010: 188). For example, an investigative report done by the FBI reflects that epistemic property: the large amount of evidence gathered, testimonies of witnesses, etc. form a coherent set of justified beliefs whose internal support can increase if the FBI adds more evidence. Second, given that the justification of our beliefs relies on supportive relations, there is no belief that is independent, in terms of its justification, from the connection with other beliefs. Call this the "coherentist restriction" – the negative side of the "coherentist thesis". What this means is that coherentism rejects precisely what any type of foundationalism supports – i.e. the possibility of non-inferential justification. For the sake of my argument, I shall return to this later.

Due to the coherentist thesis and restriction, it is not difficult to see, in principle, that considered judgments should not be defined as ethical intuitions (i.e. non-inferential beliefs) but (P1) inferential beliefs even at the first stage of the process of reflective equilibrium. Call this the "coherentist claim".⁶ The reason behind the negative side of the coherentist claim (i.e. considered judgments should not be defined as non-inferential beliefs) is straightforward: if considered judgments are ethical intuitions (i.e. non-inferential beliefs), the coherentist restriction is violated and, therefore, the epistemological background of RE would be inconsistent. Put in other words, to say that RE involves ethical intuitions in the form of "considered judgments" goes simply against the completely inferential character of its epistemological background. Let me explain this further by returning to the hypothetical example presented at the outset of this work. Suppose Jack begins the process

⁶The objector could say: "such an assertion assumes that it is possible to make a distinction between intuitions (i.e. non-inferential beliefs) and considered judgments (i.e. inferential beliefs). But the problem is that if coherentism is true, that distinction is undermined by the coherentist thesis because there are no non-inferential beliefs". It should be noted that this objection is avoided here because my argument is neutral on the discussion between coherentism and foundationalism. To clarify the point, consider this analogy. Suppose Giulio is writing an introduction to political philosophy. In his introductory book, he analyses influential theories such as Bentham's utilitarianism, Rawls' theory of justice, etc. Even if Giulio is neutral regarding substantive discussions between these theories, it is evident that he may legitimately claim that the inclusion of the principle of utility in the Rawlsian framework is inherently problematic because it generates an inconsistency in the theory. I am doing something similar here.

of reflective equilibrium from some of his considered judgments. After an extensive process of mutual adjustment, Jack holds a set of justified beliefs formed by considered judgments, explanatory principles and background theories. For some reason, Jack holds that considered judgments are non-inferential beliefs. This would be inherently problematic. If Jack says that, what he is really saying is that the process of reflective equilibrium can increase an independent level of justification (of some non-inferential beliefs) by coherence. However, this is problematic because the presence of any level of non-inferential justification in the process of reflective equilibrium violates the coherentist restriction specified above. In brief, as soon as the epistemological perspective is adopted, it is inherently problematic to hold that RE involves ethical intuitions (defined as non-inferential beliefs) because of the requirements imposed by its epistemological background:⁷

- (P3) RE is an expression of the coherentist model of reasoning. Given such an epistemological background, this method cannot involve ethical intuitions (i.e. non-inferential beliefs) because that would imply the violation of the “coherentist restriction”.

So far so good. Nevertheless, (P3) raises this complex question: if considered judgments are not ethical intuitions (i.e. non-inferential beliefs), what are they? Given the coherentist thesis and restriction, it is not difficult to see, in principle, that considered judgments should be defined as inferential beliefs (P1). However, this seems to be inherently problematic because considered judgments are the primary data (the starting point) of the process of reflective equilibrium. Therefore, there are no previous beliefs apparently. This complexity can be formulated in another way. The satisfaction of the coherentist thesis seems to create an impasse in this paper. On the one hand, I argued that considered judgments should not be defined as non-inferential beliefs because this would imply the violation of the coherentist restriction specified above. On the other hand, considered judgments cannot be defined as inferential beliefs because they are the starting point of the process of reflective equilibrium.

Fortunately, that impasse is artificial. The reason is mostly unexplored in the literature on RE. The point is that considered judgments can be defined as inferential beliefs even at the first stage of the process of reflective equilibrium because of the unexplored role of background beliefs in that process.

⁷ This argument should be differentiated from Brun's (2014) account. For Brun, intuitions are non-inferential beliefs (Brun, 2014, p. 244). I agree. He holds that the “method of reflective equilibrium does not essentially involve intuitions”. Nevertheless, he adds: “intuitions can enter the process of developing a reflective equilibrium” (Brun, 2014, p. 237). From my perspective, this is inherently problematic because of the reason provided in this section.

This assertion is mainly based on BonJour's classic objection to basic beliefs (BonJour 1985).⁸ In few words, BonJour's claim is that beliefs are necessarily inferential because they are held by the individual on the basis of background beliefs about their reliability. I read Rawls' conceptualisation of considered judgments (Rawls 1951; 1999; 2001) under such an argument: considered judgments can be defined as inferential beliefs because they are held by the individual on the basis of background beliefs – i.e. second-order beliefs about the reliability of considered judgments. Let me explain this further. BonJour's (1985: 30–31) classic objection is presented as follows:

[T]he fundamental role which the requirement of epistemic justification serves in the overall rationale of the concept of knowledge is that of a means to truth; (...) Thus if basic beliefs are to provide a secure foundation for empirical knowledge, (...) then that feature, whatever it may be, by virtue of which a particular belief qualifies as basic must also constitute a good reason for thinking that the belief is true. (...) If we let F represent the feature or characteristic, whatever it may be, which distinguishes basic empirical beliefs from other empirical beliefs, then in an acceptable foundationalist account a particular empirical belief B could qualify as basic only if the premises of the following justificatory argument were adequately justified: (1) B has feature F. (2) Beliefs having feature F are highly likely to be true. Therefore, B is highly likely to be true. (...) But if all this is correct, we get the disturbing result that B is not basic after all, since its justification depends on that of at least one other empirical belief.

BonJour's influential argument can be reconstructed in four steps.⁹ (1) Suppose I believe "p". There are two possibilities: (a) I have a truth indicative feature argument for it; (b) I do not have a truth indicative feature argument for it. (2) If (a) is the case, "p" is not a basic belief because it is supported by such an argument. (3) If (b) is the case, "p" is not a justified basic belief because it is not justified. (4) Therefore, independently from the case, the conclusion is that "p" cannot be defined as a justified basic belief. The argument is complex but refers to something common in daily life. For example, any belief based on visual perception is held on the basis of background beliefs about the accuracy of visual perception (e.g. the belief that my visual perception is reliable because I do not suffer the problem of Mr. Magoo). If my little sister believes that she is sick on the basis that the doctor said that, her justification implies the background belief that the doctor's opinion is reliable because he is an expert. In brief, the argument claims that any belief is held by the individual on the basis of background beliefs about the reliability of

⁸ I do not invoke BonJour's objection in order to reject the very possibility of basic beliefs. I simply use it to show that considered judgments can be defined as inferential beliefs even at the first stage of RE.

⁹ The following reconstruction is based on Feldman's interpretation (Feldman 2003: 76).

the belief's source; therefore, there are no basic (i.e. non-inferential) beliefs in the strict sense of the term:

- (P4) For BonJour, justification is truth-conducive. The individual holds the belief P on the basis of background beliefs about the reliability of the belief's source (which affect the reliability of P). Therefore, P is not basic.

Rawls' conceptualisation of considered judgments invokes the relevance of background beliefs but not in an equivalent sense. For BonJour, justification is truth-conducive. To avoid meta-ethical controversies, Rawls disassociates the theory of justification from the question about truth and holds that its aim is to ground reasonable principles: "in ethics we are attempting to find reasonable principles" (Rawls 1951: 178).¹⁰ In order to reach this aim, Rawls systematically imposes two types of conditions on the emergence of considered judgments which would make them reliable judgments.¹¹ First, moral conditions: "it is required first that the judgment on a case be given under such conditions that the judge is immune from all of the reasonably foreseeable consequences of the judgment" (Rawls 1951: 181); "it is required that the case, on which the judgment is given, be one in which there is an actual conflict of interests" (Rawls 1951: 182); "considered judgments are simply those rendered under conditions favorable to the exercise of the sense of justice" (Rawls 1999: 42); "those judgments (...) given when we are upset or frightened, or when we stand to gain one way or the other can be left aside" because "all these judgments are likely to be erroneous or to be influenced by an excessive attention to our own interests" (Rawls 1999: 42); among others. Second, in terms of general conditions about cognitive reliability, "the relevant judgments [considered judgments] are those given under conditions favorable for deliberation and judgment in general" (Rawls 1999: 42); "these are judgments given under conditions in which our capacity for judgment is most likely to have been fully exercised and not affected by distorting influences" (Rawls 2001: 29), among others.

¹⁰ In moral epistemology, it is disputed whether the correspondence theory of truth is correct, whether moral beliefs can be true, whether moral beliefs are truth-apt and so on. For a concise discussion about truth in ethics, see Lynch (2013). The *locus classicus* of the error theory is Mackie (1997). The *locus classicus* of emotivism is Ayer (1971). For a recent discussion on these matters, see Miller (2003).

¹¹ The relevance of this type of "reliability" is nicely captured by DeGrazia (1996) in his interpretation of Rawls' method of reflective equilibrium: "(...) we begin with a set of judgments that we have good reason to consider *reliable*, dropping judgments formed in circumstances known to make judgments unreliable. Thus, we discount wavering judgments, ones formed in a rage or in a knee-jerk way, ones likely to be biased by self-interest, and so on" (DeGrazia 1996: 19–20; emphasis original).

Two points deserve attention. First, the conditions listed above can be translated into several moral and non-moral background beliefs. For example, the requirement that considered judgments must emerge under conditions which prevent them from being “influenced by an excessive attention to our own interests” implies background beliefs against egoism (Rawls 1999: 42). The requirement that considered judgments must emerge under conditions which favour our capacity for judgment implies background beliefs about cognitive reliability. Put briefly, the conditions imposed by Rawls on the emergence of considered judgments can be translated into several background beliefs that justify them. Second, as soon as Rawls’ conceptualisation of considered judgments is interpreted under BonJour’s argument, considered judgments can be defined as inferential beliefs even at the first stage of the process of reflective equilibrium. The reason is that their justification relies on background beliefs concerning their reliability: S holds the considered judgment P because it emerges under favourable conditions (justified by several moral/non-moral background beliefs) which make P reliable – i.e. conducive to reasonable principles. Put in other words, S holds P on the basis of other beliefs about P’s reliability; therefore, both the coherentist thesis and restriction are successfully satisfied even at the first stage of the process of reflective equilibrium. It should be emphasised that the crucial point here is not that background moral and non-moral beliefs affect the content of considered judgments. Rather, the point is that considered judgments cannot be held in non-inferential terms and, therefore, the presence of background beliefs becomes meaningful and necessary.¹²

Let me clarify this further with some “why?” questions. Suppose Jack holds the considered judgment P at the first stage of the process of reflective equilibrium. As Rawls’ framework requires, P was conceived under conditions C that make it reliable (e.g. conditions that prevent considered judgments from being “influenced by an excessive attention to our own interests” (Rawls 1999: 42)). I ask him “why do you believe P?” Put in other words: “why do you integrate P in the process of reflective equilibrium?” Jack should not provide the following justification: “because P is self-justified – i.e. an ethical intuition”. As it was argued before, the reason is that this response would violate the coherentist restriction and, therefore, the epistemological background of RE would be inconsistent (P3). Fortunately, Jack provides the following response that satisfies both the coherentist thesis and restriction:

¹² Of course, the point defended here is not that the content of considered judgments logically follows from moral and non-moral background beliefs – that would be absurd. Rather, under the coherentist thesis and restriction, the point defended here is that beliefs (in this specific case, considered judgments) necessarily rely, to some relevant extent, on background beliefs about the reliability of first-order beliefs. From my interpretation, this is the general idea of BonJour’s objection to the possibility of non-inferential beliefs analysed before.

“because it was conceived under conditions C which imply beliefs B (e.g. “egoism is wrong”, among other beliefs) that make P reliable – i.e. conducive to reasonable principles”¹³:

- (P5) Considered judgments should be defined as inferential beliefs. The possibility of their inferential character – which preserves the consistency of the epistemological background of RE – relies on the role of background beliefs in the process of reflective equilibrium.

To sum up, does RE involve ethical intuitions? If not, what are the so-called “considered judgments”? Concerning the first question, I argued that RE does not involve ethical intuitions (defined as non-inferential beliefs) because its coherentist character rejects, by definition, any type of non-inferentiality. Put in other words: to say that RE involves intuitions is inherently problematic because that would imply the violation of the coherentist restriction. Concerning the second question, I argued that considered judgments should be defined as inferential beliefs because of the epistemological background of RE. The possibility of their inferential character relies on the role of background beliefs in the process of reflective equilibrium (P4, P5). In what follows, I shall address some fundamental objections to my argument.

V. Two Objections

For the purposes of this paper, I need to address possible objections against *my* argument (not against coherentism in general).¹⁴ The first (I would say, “standard”) objection is based on the standard critique against BonJour’s account of second-order beliefs. For Feldman (2003), BonJour’s argument is inherently problematic because “beliefs about the reliability of your perceptual system simply are not necessary for justification”. “Of course”, Feldman adds, “most of us do have beliefs about this type of reliability, but these beliefs are not needed for justification” (Feldman 2003: 77). It should be emphasised that such an objection does not deny the possible justificatory role of

¹³ A common mistake is to claim that this coherentist framework cannot avoid the so-called “regress problem” because second-order beliefs should be justified on the basis of other beliefs and so on. That claim is unjustified because it simply omits the coherentist-thesis. For coherentism, background beliefs are justified by relations of mutual support. For an exploration of this point: (Bonjour, 2010, pp. 191–192).

¹⁴ I have avoided some possible objections in the previous section. For example, someone could claim that the central claim of this paper (i.e. considered judgments should not be defined as ethical intuitions but inferential beliefs) is inherently problematic because the coherentist framework rejects the possibility of non-inferential beliefs. I avoided that objection because my argument is simply about the formal consistency of RE.

background beliefs but the necessary character of this type of justification; in his own words, it is just an “extra-justification” (Feldman 2003: 77). In order to criticise my argument, Feldman’s point could be reformulated as follows: the justification of considered judgments is independent from background beliefs. Consequently, it would be right to claim that RE involves ethical intuitions (i.e. non-inferential beliefs) in the form of considered judgments. My reply is two-fold. First, it should be noted that the objection begs the question. The reason is that the objection assumes precisely what coherentism rejects – i.e. the possibility of self-justified beliefs. Put in other words, the problem is that such an objection assumes the falsity of the principle that is at the heart of coherentism: in order to justify the belief *P*, it is necessary to appeal to another belief. Second, the objection generates the problem specified in the previous section of this work. If we say that considered judgments are non-inferential beliefs, we violate the coherentist restriction assumed in RE. Consequently, we generate an inconsistent system of beliefs that integrates the coherentist thesis, coherentist restriction, but also the assertion that non-inferential beliefs can play an important role in the justification of our theories.

The second objection runs as follows. The claim defended in this paper holds that considered judgments should not be defined as ethical intuitions but inferential beliefs even at the first stage of the process of reflective equilibrium. The reason is that the coherentist character of RE rejects, by definition, any type of non-inferential justification. Nevertheless, the objector claims, that is just an analytical (maybe, “terminological”) claim without any substantive relevance in our theories. I argue that the objection is unjustified. It is evident that the minimum condition of any good theory is to have a rational basis. The argument presented in this paper is precisely about that requirement. If my theory is constructed on the basis of an alleged coherentist method of justification in which non-inferential beliefs play an important justificatory role, the very methodological basis of my theory is irrational because it is inconsistent. Consider this example. For Rawls, “justification is a matter of the mutual support of many considerations, of everything fitting together into one coherent view” (Rawls 1999: 19). If “justification is a matter of the mutual support”, it is plausible to conclude that there are no self-justified beliefs. Nevertheless, in some passages, Rawls accepts the existence of “provisional fixed points which we presume any conception of justice must fit” (Rawls 1999: 18). If these provisional fixed points are non-inferential beliefs, there is an inconsistency in the epistemological background of his theory because it would violate the principle that “justification is a matter of the mutual support”. This is precisely the type of problem that my interpretation of RE tries to avoid.

VI. Conclusion & Further Question

Does RE involve ethical intuitions? I argued that RE does not involve ethical intuitions because its coherentist character rejects, by definition, any type of non-inferentiality. If RE does not involve ethical intuitions, what are the so-called “considered judgments”? I argued that considered judgments should be defined as inferential beliefs because of the epistemological background of RE. The possibility of their inferential character relies on the role of background beliefs in the process of reflective equilibrium. I conclude by emphasising two points. First, as this work hopefully shows, the coherentist framework clarifies the Rawlsian method of reflective equilibrium in many ways: it allows us to specify its main concepts, distinguish it from the intuitionistic model of reasoning and elucidate the unexplored motivation behind the conditions imposed on the emergence of considered judgments. Second, as Rawls’ theory suggests, these conditions are necessary requirements in the process of reflective equilibrium. The practical implication of these conditions is mostly unexplored in the literature. Consequently, that needs further analysis in future research.

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