Can Social Reflective Equilibrium Delineate Cornell Realist Epistemology?

Sushruth Ravish (sravish@iitk.ac.in)

Vikram Singh Sirola (v.s.sirola@iitb.ac.in)

Abstract:

Cornell realism (CR), a prominent meta-ethical position that has emerged since the last decades of the twentieth century, proposes a non-reductionist naturalistic account of moral properties and facts. This paper argues that the best version of CR's chosen methodology for arriving at justified moral beliefs must be seen as a variant of reflective equilibrium. In comparison to the traditional versions, our proposal offers a 'social' reinterpretation of reflective equilibrium in delineating CR's epistemology. We argue that it satisfactorily accounts for objectivity and calls for the inclusion of the social nature of both moral and scientific inquiries. Emphasising the social dimension of their epistemological account also nudges debates in metaethics into incorporating the much-needed social dimension while dealing with questions of moral beliefs and facts that have been of CR's concern.

Keywords: reflective equilibrium, social moral epistemology, Cornell realism, moral epistemology, moral realism

Introduction:

Cornell realism (CR), a prominent meta-ethical position that emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century, proposes a robust account of moral properties and facts.[1]

CR's metaphysical stance (non-reductionist naturalism) and their interrelated semantic stance

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[1] It gets this moniker from the affiliations of its main proponents Richard Boyd, David Brink, Nicholas Sturgeon and Geoffrey-Sayre McCord with the said university.

(causal fixed reference for moral terms) perhaps capture the spirit of naturalism better than most other moral naturalist accounts (Matthew and Lenman 2021). However, this paper does not intend to defend CR as a superior metaethical position compared to non-naturalist or even other naturalist positions. Thus, it does not attempt to reconcile the debates concerning the empirical testability of moral judgments or the causal regulative account for moral terms. Instead, we offer a possible moral epistemology that syncs well with CR's moral metaphysics and semantics. Contrary to what the critics think, CR does not privilege the scientific over the moral but calls for a unified methodology.[2] We attempt to show that an epistemological account of CR could be formulated through 'social reflective equilibrium'. Our proposal attempts to account for the objectivity[3] of moral judgments and the inclusion of the social nature of both moral and scientific inquiries. We claim that such a formulation offers a naturalistic and a social reinterpretation of Rawlsian reflective equilibrium such that the metaethical commitments of Cornell realists towards naturalistic moral realism are reconciled with the social nature of moral inquiry.[4] By emphasising the social dimension, our account also nudges debates in metaethics into incorporating the much-needed social dimension while dealing with questions of moral beliefs and facts that have been of CR's concern.

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[2] Cf Tropman (2012), and Oliveira and Perrine (2017).

[3] While the notion of objectivity is contested, Both Brink and Boyd agree that it stands for a sense of the truth and falsity of moral statements being independent of our moral theory. Brink provides a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for objectivity: a domain is objective if there are truths independent of the evidence we possess for claiming them (Brink 1989, 14-17). In this paper, achieving moral objectivity should mean arriving at epistemically reliable representations of moral properties, or facts. At the very least, such a notion assumes that the truth and falsity of such representations can be independent of the evidence we have for it. For more on objectivity, see Tropman (2018).

[4] While there have been a few efforts to provide a social turn to reflective equilibrium like Baderin (2017), our novelty is in attempting to model a social reflective equilibrium framework such that the commitments of Cornell realists towards naturalistic moral realism are reconciled with the social nature of moral inquiry. This contrasts with most traditional works on reflective equilibrium, which either do not require moral enquiries to be social or many contemporary works, which might take reflective equilibrium to be a social enterprise but dispense with any naturalistic metaethical commitments. *Pace* some accounts where there is only a nudge towards a collective reflective equilibrium, we offer a more substantive account of how the social turn and objectivity can be accommodated at both the level of considered moral judgments and coherence-seeking processes. We thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

In the first section, we briefly introduce CR and show how its central commitments lead us to argue that reflective equilibrium could be their chosen moral epistemology. The second section contrasts the traditional understanding of RE with a novel interpretation (in the context of the literature on CR) in terms of two of its key features – 'considered moral judgments' and 'coherence seeking processes.' In the third section, we present a defence of CR against detractors of such a reinterpretation and argue that a comprehensive system of naturalistic social moral epistemology is possible.

1. CR's Methodological Commitments and the Case for RE

CR is perceived to be attempting to mirror scientific methodology in moral inquiries closely. Their metaphysical stance of non-reductionist naturalism and the associated moral semantics draw from the developments in the philosophy of science, the philosophy of language, and naturalistic epistemology.[5] CR's critics assume that a defence of CR's naturalistic realism rests on a defence of scientific realism and therefore are keen to identify how the domain of morality differs from that of science. For instance, Kurth points out that the analogy with science fails to support moral realism, and the most promising alternatives proposed are unable to deliver the needed analogy with the critical practices of science (2013, 51). Similarly, Oliveira and Perrine, in disputing CR's ability to fetch moral knowledge, focus on the "differences between scientific and moral explanations." (2017, 1022). Tropman has criticised CR for trying to account for moral knowledge by "establishing parity between scientific knowledge and moral knowledge" (2012, 26-27). Despite the differences among these critiques, they attempt to expose how moral properties have specific characteristics that scientific properties lack and vice-versa.[6] Therefore, critics mentioned above seem to assume

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[5] The appeal of CR also lies in the fact that it provides a way to ascribe cognitivist and realist commitments to ethical discourse without the metaphysical and epistemological 'baggage' that accompanies intuitionism (Brink 1999, 197)

[6] For example, it is claimed that moral properties are theory-independent while scientific ones are not, and scientific properties are empirically testable while moral properties are not

that the validity of CR's epistemology rests on the analogy between the moral and the scientific domains and that CR is interested in merely transposing the scientific method to the moral domain. However, we argue that CR's moral epistemology is not one of ad-hoc application of scientific epistemology to moral beliefs but a pursuit of a unified methodological framework to undertake both moral and scientific inquiries. CR attempts to arrive at a "conception of unified knowledge" in an attempt to bring both scientific and moral knowledge within the same analytical framework" (Boyd 1988, 184). A methodological unity can exist despite disanalogies. Given that the moral and the scientific are two distinct domains of inquiry, it is to be expected that there are disanalogies between the two.[7] Acknowledging the differences between scientific and moral properties does not undermine the methodological inquiry.

> [T]he metaphysical and epistemological commitments of moral realism are very similar to, and no less plausible than, those of realism about commonsense physical theory and the natural and social sciences (Brink 1989, 12)

The shared inhabitancy of moral and scientific properties, as part of the natural world, makes moral properties explanatorily relevant in the same way as biological or psychological properties. Thus, a careful reading of CR could help us understand that the crux of their argument lies in demonstrating that the methods deployed in scientific inquiries are similar to the methods that one could apply in a moral enquiry (Boyd 1988, 183).

At this point, it becomes necessary to explicate the unified methodology of CR, by which moral facts and properties are known in "basically the same way other natural facts and properties are known" (Sturgeon 2007, 95). We argue that reflective equilibrium (RE) can provide the required epistemological framework for moral and scientific enquiry[8]. The choice of RE as CR's epistemology can be seen as arising from their methodological stance, which

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[7] Boyd stresses the unified framework by conceptualising philosophy as a "normative science" with epistemology involved in understanding which belief-forming mechanisms are credible for obtaining truth (1983, 72).
[8] Although Sayre McCord (1996, 142) and Brink (1989) have made mentions of reflective equilibrium, to the best of our knowledge the scholarship on Cornell realism has not engaged with the role of reflective equilibrium as CR's epistemology.

holds that the essence of discovery procedures employed by empirical scientists or moral philosophers while investigating their respective disciplines involves a "dialectical interplay of observations and theory" (Boyd 1988, 199–200).[9] In this paper, we attempt to lay out what we believe is an account of RE that can specifically for CR's project, act as a central cog for their moral epistemology.[10] We argue that such an account while departing significantly from the more canonical versions of RE, establishes objectivity and embeds sociality in the process of moral inquiry. These twin characteristics emerge from CR's realist commitments and draw on debates in the philosophy of science that came up as a response to criticisms from constructivists[11] who contend that the *theory-dependent* methodology lacks the right sort of 'objectivity' to inquire into the *theory-independent* world (Boyd 1983, 57). While granting the constructivists the claim of theory-dependence of the methodology, CR claims that objectivity could still be achievable if the theoretical traditions backing the methodology often arrive at approximately true propositions, from which point dialectical nature of the methodology could lead to more accurate theories.

> What's required to establish epistemic reliability in a particular research domain is that the existing social, economic, political, and cultural factors be such that, often enough, an approximately true answer to a question within that domain will be publicised and that, often enough, research investigating it will be funded (Boyd 2010, 218).

Thus, through complex social practices and the emergence of research traditions, the epistemic reliability of the scientific method can be assured. CR also acknowledges the relevance of the social, linguistic, and political conditions sheltering the domains of inquiry in response to the 'equivalence postulate' posed by Barnes and Bloor (1982, 23). According to this proposed

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[9] Brink too claims that his coherentist theory of moral justification is "essentially John Rawls's method of wide reflective equilibrium" (1989, 104).

[10] The burden of proof then is on critics like Tropman to show either that RE is not a plausible scientific epistemology or that while RE might be applicable in scientific inquiries, it fails in moral inquiries (perhaps because of the discontinuities between the two domains). Such a criticism though, is yet to formulated.

[11] By Constructivists, we are referring to proponents of the Strong program like Bloor, who claimed that the methodology of science used to study reality is deeply theory-dependent and if such a methodology were to be trusted to fetch knowledge, then the reality which the scientists study itself must at least be partly constituted by their theoretical tradition.

postulate, beliefs, whether scientific or non-scientific are "on a par with one another with respect to the causes of their credibility" (Barnes and Bloor 1982, 23).[12] Barnes and Bloor accuse historians of science and philosophers of violating the equivalence postulate when they met out different treatment to true and false scientific theories. While false and irrational beliefs and theories are attributed to local, psycho-social factors, the true theories and rational beliefs are claimed to be typical and expected applications of the scientific method. Constructivists call for attributing true and false theories to contextual social factors, thus leading to relativism. The realists' response is to accept this equivalence postulate without conceding their aim of objectivity. CR contends that looking for which social conditions are detrimental to the epistemic reliability of the method is itself an empirical matter (Boyd 1983, 71). Our reinterpretation of RE can be expected to integrate both objectivity and the social nature of moral inquiry. In the next section, we present a brief exposition of the canonical method of RE before we offer our reinterpretation of RE.

2. Reinterpreting Reflective Equilibrium

RE as a method of theory construction and justification is most famously credited to Rawls, with noteworthy later contributions by Daniels (1979) and Scanlon (2014). Given the wide range of interpretations of RE that exist in the literature, we focus on two essential structural elements of RE to conduct our analysis.[13] Firstly, the inputs - called 'Considered Moral Judgments', are drawn upon while moral theorisation is attempted. These are essentially screened and filtered moral judgments from our initial stock of moral judgments. Such screening must occur under conditions favourable "for deliberation and judgment in general" and "to the exercise of the sense of justice" in the absence of conflict of interest and distortion

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[12] Barnes and Bloor call it (the equivalence postulate) the "third feature of relativism", which requires sociologists, historians, philosophers and the like to treat rationally and irrationally held beliefs to be subjected to similar appeals of applications of mind and influenced by similar patterns of "social organisation". They argue that irrespective of whether they are considered true or false, beliefs must be subjected to similar scrutiny of their credibility and offered similar kinds of explanations. (1982, 23-28).
[13] McPherson (2015, 655) has offered a similar analysis.

(Rawls 1999, 42). Daniels adds that any judgments that appear suspect upon reflection must be eliminated and only those that can be asserted with confidence retained. (Daniels 1980, 85–86). Scanlon views these considered moral judgments as moral judgments of any generality, including judgments about particular actions, moral principles, or any judgments about the kind of considerations relevant to determining the rightness of actions (Scanlon 2014, 76–77). Thus, the procedure for filtering and arriving at considered moral judgments is not to be seen as ad-hoc but as a prescription for a general procedure for any considered judgments delivered under favourable conditions. In other words, whether it is in mathematics or morality, the criterion of arriving at considered judgments remains unchanged.

Secondly, there are coherence seeking processes - operations to be performed on the inputs, seeking maximum possible coherence among the inventory of considered moral judgments. As part of this stage, more general moral principles are formulated to systematise and explicate the considered moral judgments. These independently feasible principles are supposed to be ones that can account for considered moral judgments. It is expected that there would be discrepancies, divergences and conflicts among considered moral judgments and the general principles. Rawls suggests "dropping and revising… reformulating and expanding" them till there is coherence or a "systematic organisation" between the two, which helps us reach a reflective equilibrium (1974, 8).[14] Although an incremental improvement over considered moral judgments, such a reflective equilibrium is still "narrow" and must not be seen as a destination. (Rawls 1999). A 'wide' reflective equilibrium would seek maximal coherence between "(a) a set of considered moral judgments, (b) a set of moral principles, and (c) a set of relevant background theories"[15] (Daniels 1979, 258).

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[14] Rawls does not adequately clarify what achieving coherence entails. It is often suggested that it involves maximising relations of support and minimizing conflicts between the members of the belief set (Cath 2016). Consistency, systematicity, generality and simplicity have all been considered as desirable features of the resulting belief set Kappel (2006).

[15] Background theories would include aligned non-moral judgments, such as the epistemic or pragmatic importance of various moral theories

We attempt to show how the account of RE we are proposing presents CR in a new light regarding how they interpret considered moral judgments and coherence seeking processes to achieve the twin aims mentioned earlier —objectivity and acknowledging the social nature of moral inquiry. Such an effort is necessary because traditional interpretations have overlooked these concerns. Rawls himself was not in favour of a realist construal of RE and suggests that it should be understood as a descriptive procedure (Rawls 1974, 9). He further adds

> [T]he procedure of reflective equilibrium does not assume that there is one correct moral conception. It is, if you wish, a kind of psychology and does not presuppose the existence of objective moral truths. (Rawls 1974, 9)

Even if one were not inclined to see RE as an entirely descriptive method, it is clear from the above quote that Rawls does not vouch for RE as a truth generating/preserving activity. On the second count of including the 'social' dimension, too traditional interpretations have primarily argued for an individualistic understanding of RE. For example, Daniels suggests that RE aims to "produce coherence in an ordered triple set of beliefs held by a particular person" (Daniels 1979, 258). Rawls too claims that

> If we can characterise one (educated) person's sense of justice, we might have a good beginning toward a theory of justice. We may suppose that everyone has in *himself* the whole form of a moral conception (1999, 44).[16]

Both Rawls and Daniels' attempt, we have presented above could be seen as paradigmatic of the dominant interpretation of RE (as an internal, individualistic endeavour) and is relevant to appreciating how our proposed reading addresses such a misconstrual. Our version of RE (through considered moral judgments and the coherence seeking processes) would proceed by looking at how objectivity is aimed at without losing the socially embedded nature of moral inquiry.

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[16] To be fair, in one of his earlier writings, Rawls uses the first person plural 'we' while referring to how we can arrive at considered moral judgments and claims that the legitimacy of considered moral judgments is to be granted when competent judges arrive at a consensus (1951, 180). However, he quickly abandons that in his later works as seen in the quote.

2.1 Considered Moral Judgments as Moral Observations

CR posits a broad continuity between moral and scientific inquiries. In sciences, objective claims are considered possible because observations form the basis of arriving at epistemic judgments. It would be crucial to identify its counterpart in ethics. We argue that a possible response could be built on Boyd's claim that observations can play the "same role in moral enquiry that they play in the other kinds of empirical enquiry about people" (Boyd 1988, 206). The response could posit that moral properties like goodness are similar to other properties that natural and social scientists study. In the case of scientific reasoning, perceptual observations are treated as considered judgments and contribute to epistemically significant causal interactions between scientists and reality. Similarly, 'moral' observations too could be treated as considered moral judgments in the case of moral reasoning. Such moral observations could include "observation of oneself… and self-observation involved in introspection" as well as "observations of other people…[with] trained judgment and the operation of sympathy". (Boyd 1988, 206). While other moral beliefs and theoretical considerations would influence these moral observations, the mere theory-dependence of the methodology alone does not undermine a realist interpretation. Thus, both moral and the associated non-moral observations are acknowledged to be theory-dependent but not epistemically unreliable purely on that count.

Regarding theory-dependence of moral beliefs, it could be added that to test "observational consequence of any one moral belief, we must rely on other considered moral beliefs as auxiliary hypotheses" (Brink 1989, 138). Non-moral beliefs remain relevant since RE, understood as a coherence theory of justification, demands that moral and associated non-moral beliefs be systematised and aligned. While discussing the testing of non-moral beliefs, Brink is adverting to the developments in the philosophy of science, which showed that a scientific theory is testable only in conjunction with other scientific principles and not in isolation. Brink suggests that a similar requirement be also realised in the case of moral beliefs.

Interpretation of moral observations would require relevant background theories, and as long as these theories are approximately true, it would result in these observations being epistemically reliable. In Rawls' RE, one begins with considered moral judgments (containing certain moral presuppositions) and then engages in trade-offs between principles and background theories to achieve coherence and equilibrium. We believe in our reinterpretation, there are near true moral beliefs in the light of which further observations, experiences and historical developments can be interpreted to pave the way for a gradual expansion of moral knowledge. In sync with the naturalistic commitments of CR, goodness should be treated as a natural property, and therefore it would be strange if observations did not play a role in ethics while being critical in other empirical inquiries. As Boyd puts it, no "naturalistic account of the foundations of psychological or social knowledge" will fail to treat observations of self, observation of others and even introspection as legitimate observations (Boyd 1988, 206). Therefore, observations can play the crucial role of infusing objectivity in moral inquiries on lines similar to their role in scientific enquiries.

As claimed earlier, our representation of CR involves providing a realist as well as a social turn to moral enquiries. The causal regulation account can be for moral terms can be employed to serve this purpose.[17]

> [W]e may think of the properties of *k* [a *kind* term] as regulating the use of *t* [term] (via such causal relations), and we may think of what is said using *t* as providing us with <u>socially coordinated epistemic access</u> to *k*: *t* refers to *k* (in nondegenerate cases) just in case <u>the socially coordinated</u> use of t provides significant epistemic access to k, and not to other kinds (properties, etc.) [emphasis added] (Boyd, 1988, 195).

Boyd's usage of the phrase 'socially coordinated' is instructive for showing that the process of verifying and correcting is not an individual pursuit but a group activity. No single individual

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[17] CR's moral semantics built on Boyd's causal regulation account has come under challenge from what has been referred to as the Moral Twin earth problem (Horgans and Timmons 1992). As mentioned earlier, the focus of our paper is on their epistemology, and hence we have chosen not to engage with it. However, several interlocutors including Brink have responded to the issue (Copp 2000, Brink 2001). Väyrynen (2020) and Geisson (2005) have also provided useful accounts of possible responses from the naturalists.

has unmediated epistemic access to a natural kind. Therefore, this iterative process involving verification and corrections must be a social endeavour. Further, for Boyd, moral predicates refer to those natural properties which regulate beliefs using predicates such that our belief systems move closer to truth in every iteration. Natural referents for moral terms become possible even if individuals using these terms are unaware of that referent. Boyd's causal referential theory and conceptualisation of moral properties like goodness as natural kinds show us how moral terms are to be treated as labels for properties that contribute directly to the propositions expressed by sentences in which these terms occur. [18] Such predicates are conceived as referring to natural properties that in turn regulate the beliefs expressed by these moral predicates, such that systems of belief get nearer to truth over iterations. Boyd draws out how natural kinds are real and yet social constructions in his answer to how these terms come to contribute (2010). He considers the example of alarm calls of Belding ground squirrels when faced with predators. The alarm calls seem to differ based on whether the predators are aerial or terrestrial. Even though the calls, predators and distinction (aerial/terrestrial) are relative to the ground squirrel, it seems legitimate to say that there are two different alarm calls (Boyd 2010, 221). Similarly, the ontological standing of kinds is not undermined when they are defined relative to human capacities, interests, and responses. Kinds are based on human "linguistic, classificatory, inferential practices" and are thus socially coordinated, but they do not impact the causal structures of the phenomena under study and therefore affirm their realist commitments (Boyd 2010, 221).

Maintaining the analogy between the development of scientific and moral knowledge, one could affirm that like scientific inquiry, moral inquiry too is undoubtedly a species of social inquiry. Considered moral judgments can act as reliable propositions regarding objective moral

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[18] See Timmons (1991) for a supporting claim that Brink and Boyd can be employed to show how we can have epistemic access to moral facts, although Timmons finds Boyd's naturalistic semantics to be problematic.

properties because the reference of these moral terms is socially coordinated. Such a proposal amends traditional interpretations of RE where considered moral judgments are individually held without reference to others and could not have laid any substantive claim to objectivity.

2.2 Coherence Seeking Processes as Interpersonal Deliberations

Our proposal, on behalf of CR, offers a reinterpretation of the second structural element in RE, namely, coherence seeking processes, and ensures that objectivity and the social turn get reinforced within RE. Coherence seeking processes, as mentioned earlier, are undertaken after the enumeration of considered moral judgments to achieve consistency and order among them. Objectivity in such processes can be achieved on the shoulders of second-order beliefs about morality. First-order moral beliefs would be beliefs about the moral rightness or wrongness of actions or moral depravity of an individual. Our first-order moral beliefs do refer to features of the external world, but the justification for first-order beliefs could be considered incomplete in the absence of beliefs about what kind of beliefs are these and why such types of beliefs must be considered as true. Second-order non-moral beliefs fill this gap by explaining the connection between the first-order beliefs of varying generalities and the world. Therefore, while coherence among first-order moral beliefs is significant,[19] it is limited and stands revisable when coherence is sought with second-order beliefs.

> [Second-order beliefs] are realist beliefs because they are beliefs about our relation to a world that though causally dependent on us in some ways, is metaphysically or conceptually independent of our evidence about it. Our realist second-order beliefs include beliefs about our psychological makeup, our cognitive and perceptual equipment, and their hook up to the world. The result is a theory of the world and our place in it that identifies certain features of the world that we reliably detect and explains why this should be so (Brink 1989, 127).

Thus, the second-order beliefs are critical to the project of accommodating coherentism within a realist framework. They not only tend to provide the most suitable explanatory account of the

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[19] Especially when coherence is sought under "impartial and imaginative consideration of the interests of the relevant parties" (Brink 1989, 132).

first-order moral beliefs but also with other theoretical beliefs we might hold. The internal coherence of our specific moral beliefs, when supplemented by the external coherence with our second-order beliefs, suffice as justification to claim the truth of the set of moral beliefs we hold. The assumption of a metaphysically and conceptually independent world ensures that our second-order beliefs are causally connected to reality, and this, in turn, confers objectivity in the coherence seeking processes.

We claim that the social turn in coherence seeking operations could be achieved through the method and objective of a social reflective equilibrium - a naturalistic method, where interpersonal deliberations are an essential feature of the coherence seeking process. While there have been attempts to interpret RE as a method that can be adopted collectively, as seen earlier, Rawls himself does not say much about this possible interpretation. In fact, most proponents of RE like DePaul and Daniels have, in fact, explicitly stated that they believe that the method of RE has to be individualistic (DePaul 2011). As individuals, we often have substantial limitations in terms of the life experiences we possess, our ability to process information and how we empathise with others. However, it is possible that as a group, through appropriate discussion and argumentation, we could overcome these lacunae.[20] The argument is that even with diverse starting points, it is possible for the method of social reflective equilibrium to resolve disagreements as the method is primarily revisionary with provisions for altering our starting presumptions (considered moral judgments) too, if needed.

We believe a synthesis of Boyd's reinterpretation of considered moral judgments as moral observations and a recognition of Brink's reinterpretation of coherence seeking operations as interpersonal deliberations together offer a sound epistemological method for CR. Objectivity is reinforced in the reinterpreted RE by giving prima facie credence to

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[20] In a later work Brink (1999) talks of a dialectical equilibrium that could be closely seen in connection with our proposal. Brink however, doesn't offer any defense of his position and restricts himself to the concept and its virtues.

considered moral judgments as moral observations and subsequently attaining coherence with our second-order beliefs. Employing a causal regulation account for moral kind terms, and a social reflective equilibrium provides a more robust social turn to RE.

3. Responding to Criticisms

While RE is often spoken of as the preeminent method of moral inquiry, it has received its fair share of criticism, including that of being conservative, being too weak or being too demanding (McGrath 2019, Arras 2009, McPherson 2015). We restrict the discussions here to those criticisms in contemporary discourse that seek to call into question the two central features of our reinterpretation — objectivity and the socially embedded nature of moral inquiry.

3.1 Challenges to the Claim of Objectivity

We have attempted to show that objectivity in RE can be consolidated both at the level of arriving at considered moral judgments and in the process of coherence seeking. Critics have raised objections against either or both of these stages. Our response to these criticisms, in addition to making use of existing arguments made by Cornell realists in different contexts, also presents novel rebuttals on behalf of CR. We first take up for discussion worries over objectivity being preserved within the input stage (or at the level of considered moral judgments). Two pertinent criticisms levelled by Street (2006) and McGrath (2019) are worth discussing. Street expresses doubts over the possibility of objective considered moral judgments by claiming that considered moral judgments are guided by evolutionary forces and do not track moral truths.[21] She claims that evolutionary forces exert a "distorting influence on our [moral] judgments, having pushed us in evaluative directions that have nothing whatsoever to do with the [moral] truth" (Street 2006, 121).[22] If considered moral judgments are

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[21] Our response to Street is limited to her possible objections to CR's naturalism and not a refutation of the Darwinian dilemma in general.

[22] Street uses the term 'evaluative' to capture a broader range of judgments that are under the influence of evolutionary forces. We have replaced it with the narrower term 'moral' to maintain continuity.

systematically mistaken, as Street claims, the coherence seeking process might not be able to perform the requisite course correction. This is a genuine concern since RE in such a case stands undermined, leading to a worry that it will just turn out to be a case of garbage-in-garbage-out (Jones 2007).[23]

McGrath, on the other hand, asserts that 'unreasonable' moral beliefs can easily percolate into considered moral judgments. She uses examples of what she calls *perverse* considered judgments like "One is morally required to kill randomly occasionally", which might appear to us in the third person as perverse, but would still qualify as a considered judgment for the individual considered (McGrath 2019). As long as the individual asserts it with confidence and appears impartial, and avoids conflict of interest, *perverse* judgments might qualify as considered moral judgments. Such criticisms are potent because considered moral judgments are expected to provide access to an inquiry-independent reality and thus bear a significant burden of showing how truth gets accounted for in a coherent theory of justification. The apparent conceptual separation of truth from justification in coherence seeking systems like RE leads to the apprehension that any undesirable intrusion at the level of considered moral judgments would not get weeded out through the coherence seeking processes. While the coherence seeking operations might result in the belief set under review becoming coherent and providing internal justification, whether the individual beliefs are credible might still be up for questioning.

We believe a Quinean response can be mustered on behalf of CR to the criticisms against the objectivity of considered moral judgments. Consider the analogy of perceptual knowledge obtained through our senses' ability to detect external objects. The approximate reliability of our senses, however, is itself *a posteriori* fact (as explained by evolutionary theory) that is, in some sense, non-accidental and non-contingent too. In a similar vein, Boyd

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[23] Such criticisms are often called as input objections (Timmons 1996).

understands goodness as a homeostatic cluster property, closely tied to the fulfilment of individual and community needs. In such a conception, acquisition of moral knowledge can hardly be termed accidental and "our initial relevantly approximately accurate beliefs about the good may well have been produced by generally reliable psychological and perceptual mechanisms" (Boyd 1988, 209). Once we comprehend what moral conduct and behaviour amount to, it becomes apparent how moral judgments are adaptive and could have been selected for by evolution. This gives us strong reasons to claim that an average individual might be able to detect moral properties reliably

> [M]orality sometimes requires people to restrain their pursuit of their own aims … Moreover, because of the generally beneficial character of cooperative and restrained behavior, together with the cognitive and affective advantages of acting from fairly coarse-grained dispositions, people will have reason to develop and act on social sentiments and other-regarding attitudes (Brink 1999, 207-8).

Thus, objectivity in considered moral judgments is accounted for by our moral observations. These observations act as the input to the process of RE, and as these observations are not systematically mistaken, there is every reason to believe that objectivity is preserved within the inquiry. The general reliability of our moral observations also substantially neutralises the threat of McGrath's "perverse" moral judgments. We can be reasonably confident that these would be stray marginal judgments and do not represent the main body of our moral claims and observations. Further, her objections seem to apply to traditional, individualistic interpretations of RE. Under such interpretations, considered moral judgments are treated as self-evident truths with high credibility and the coherence seeking processes are undertaken by an individual indulging in isolated first-person reasoning and belief evaluation. McGrath might be right in estimating that under such conditions, an input error might persist till the end. Our proposal differs from such accounts and argues for a social and naturalistic RE, where considered moral judgments are not treated as self-evident truths but are naturalistically interpreted. They have prima-facie credibility but are ultimately revisable during the coherence

seeking operations. Individual judgments that appeared impartial and reasonable from the first-person point-of-view can come out to be perverse. However, they will be weeded out when subjected to dialectical equilibrium, which involves deliberations and negotiations within the collective.

Detractors of RE have also raised doubts over the ability of coherence seeking operations to achieve veritistic goals. Coherence seeking operations involve juxtaposing principles, beliefs, our background assumptions and modifying them one at a time to achieve holistic equilibrium. This onerous task demands a rational self, employing a reasoning process that has impeccable discernment. What adds gravity to the role of reasoning is that coherence seeking is not merely finding deductive relationships between different propositions. If it were, it would have been easy to formalise an approach that deals with these diverse elements. However, this stage of RE involves rational reflection exploring mutually supportive (and explanatorily useful) relationships between different elements and therefore requires an involved and invested moral reasoning process that engages in trade-offs between diverse elements. Lacunae in the reflection process can seriously jeopardise any hopes of achieving objective justification. Street raises such a worry claiming that the 'distortionary influence' that forces of evolution exert on considered moral judgments also impact our moral reasoning abilities. Street argues that all reflective equilibrium is capable of doing is testing

> [moral] judgements only by testing their consistency with our other [moral] judgements, combined of course with judgements about the (non-[moral]) facts. Thus, if the fund of [moral] judgements with which human reflection began was thoroughly contaminated with illegitimate influence… the tools of rational reflection were equally contaminated, for the latter are always just a subset of the former (Street 2006, 124).

The inescapability of assessing one evaluative judgment based on other evaluative judgments means that if evolution can significantly 'corrupt' the evaluative judgments with which the process begins, then the coherence seeking process too is equally compromised and unlikely to get us any closer to moral truths. Worries from evolutionary theory apart, empirical evidence

from cognitive science and moral psychology too have raised concerns over the effectiveness and credibility of reasoning processes and moral reasoning in particular. Haidt, Bjorklund and Murphy have coined the term moral dumbfounding to refer to "the stubborn and puzzled maintenance of a moral judgment without supporting reasons" (Haidt et al., 2000, 1). Haidt argues that moral reasoning appears as a self-justificatory apparatus rather than an objective, truth-finding enquiry, often leading to sub-optimal outcomes. As Haidt puts it, moral reasoning works more like a lawyer asked to defend a client than a scientist seeking the truth (2001, 820). Given the pivotal role reasoning plays in the coherence seeking operations, even if there is a slight possibility of cognitive or implicit biases being prevalent, we should be wary of the effect it will have on our chances of arriving at moral knowledge through RE.

In response to criticisms emerging from moral psychology literature, we could argue on behalf of CR that if psychological or social factors are found to undermine moral reasoning, similar factors must be applicable for scientific reasoning as well. When Haidt and others claim that ordinary moral reasoning is not reasoning proper and differs from scientific reasoning, we could ask for a contrastive solution through a control group. In effect, what is demanded is an experiment to show how subjects carrying out scientific reasoning do not suffer scientific 'dumbfounding'. In the absence of such experiments, Haidt's criticism lacks a sound ground and appears to be only driven by an illicit assumption that moral reasoning is instinctive and irrational, while scientific reasoning is rational and deliberate (Boyd Forthcoming, 40).

> Now suppose that an ordinary layperson with no sophisticated knowledge of physics and chemistry were asked what s/he believed that matter is made up of atoms. Suppose that, when pressed to explain, s/he got all confused and couldn't defend her/his view but continued to believe in the atomic theory of matter. Would s/he have thereby departed from "ideal scientific reasoning"?... I think, instead, that she would have done what any good scientists—ideal or not—would do: initially defer to the authority of others more expert than she. Perhaps not abandoning firmly held moral views when you first find yourself unable to meet challenges is equally compatible with ideal moral reasoning. (Boyd Forthcoming, 39)

CR could argue that whether it is moral or scientific reasoning, the success and failure of theories have similar causal factors. Two further arguments in support of CR could be made here. Firstly, considered moral judgments by their very definition are supposed to be stable and sensitive to defeaters. When critics advert to intuitions that are resistant to reasoning and contrary evidence (as in the cases where moral dumbfounding occurs), then such unresponsiveness to evidence counts as not being sensitive to defeaters and therefore gives us a reason to reject such intuitions as considered moral judgments.[24] Secondly, given that we have natural and cultural evolutionary explanations for our convictions, considered moral judgments must be revised once we realise that some of these convictions no longer serve their evolutionary function (Brink 2014, 687-88). Brink also raises worry over what he calls as the 'snapshot methodology' of experiments like the one referred to by Haidt *et al*. When participants fail to come up with reasons for their moral judgments, it should not be understood that.

> [R]espondents are incapable of reasoning further about their convictions and either find in an acceptable rationale for them or revising them for want of a suitable rationale. This would be further reason for questioning whether their initial reactions count as considered moral convictions in so far as they might prove unstable overtime. (Brink 2014, 688).

In the face of cognitive biases like framing effects, the notion of reflective equilibrium is expansive enough to account for it as one of the elements among which coherence is sought. Thus, it can be convincingly said that CR has credible resources to ward off recent challenges to objectivity.

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[24] While there might be some tension in suggesting that it is reasonable to hold on to intuitions and in the same vein arguing for their removal from the set of considered moral judgments, it is to be noted that steadfastness seems to be applicable to those cases where a sheer inability to provide moral reasons for one's judgment is called as dumbfounding, while conciliation is applicable in responding to recalcitrant intuitions.

3.2 Challenges to the Social Turn

We take up for discussion for two criticisms that might apply to social RE as conceived under our proposal. Firstly, critics might raise the worry of the method being too vague. The social interpretation of RE could be accused of making an already complex method unworkable with innumerable interpersonal inputs. Further, if the extent and scope of the dialectical process are not specified, it might amount to more hand waving than any concrete process of justification. Baderin raises such a worry:

> It is unclear exactly how [public reflective equilibrium] is supposed to work, with so many inputs in play. Without an answer to these questions, [public reflective equilibrium] stands for a broad intention to take public opinion more seriously…rather than a concrete method of justification. As well as being problematically vague, this approach is too ambitious (2017, 11). [25]

Baderin is also raising a second allied criticism here, namely that RE is too ambitious in terms of its epistemic goals. A scepticism regarding whether collectives can perform better as opposed to individuals could be the source of such a worry. This second criticism can be taken to be an extension of the worry that RE is an "unrealistic and hyper-intellectualised" method for moral justification (McGrath 2019, 20). The 'too ambitions' charge of critics like Baderin could emerge either from a general scepticism about the positive epistemic role of collective deliberations or a specific worry over whether moral truths can be arrived at by interpersonal dialogues.

In response to the first criticism, while it could be agreed that a social turn increases the justificatory burden, it needs to be kept in mind that RE is primarily a regulatory ideal that we apply in a piecemeal manner (Brink 2014, 680). Given the ideal character of RE, the participants seek only close approximations and not the attainment of such an ideal state. Further, the increased burden that the social turn brings does not paralyse but enriches the

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[25] While Baderin's criticism is against Wolff and De-Shalit's (2013) conception of public reflective equilibrium and not specifically against CR's reinterpretation of RE, the crux of her allegation can still apply to CR. We have not engaged with Baderin and Wolf & de-Shalit's conceptions of public reflective equilibrium because their framing of the question is vastly different from ours, with their concern being how to accommodate "public opinion" to the practice of moral philosophy.

process of RE. *Pace* Baderin, many scholars in medical ethics, have argued that social reflective equilibrium is widely used as a method of moral inquiry (Beauchamp and Childress, Arras 2009). For instance, April and April contend that in clinical bioethics, where stakes are often high and decisions have to be taken on patients' bedsides about life and death,

> The process of social reflective equilibrium enables all stakeholders…to voice their own moral concerns, probe each other's underlying assumptions, and ultimately decide upon a course of action together. When it works at its best, social reflective equilibrium explores all pertinent facts and contextual nuances of the case, applies moral principles appropriately, and aims to accommodate each stakeholder's legitimate moral convictions to reach consensus (2016, 26).

Buchanan, too on several occasions, has argued as to how reflective equilibrium must be interpreted socially (2002). The resulting social moral epistemology, according to him, has the potential to further the practical goals of bioethics and cast a critical light on issues like medical paternalism and the institution of bioethics itself (Buchanan 2007, 295). The very fact that applied ethicists find social RE to be tenable should make us doubt critics' pessimistic conclusions. While the process is not a quick fix solution, its plausibility should not be questioned beforehand.

Regarding the second criticism of RE being too ambitious, CR could respond by pointing towards research on collective epistemology to show how, given a conducive environment, groups perform better compared to individuals working in isolation (Mercier and Sperber 2011, 62). In various experiments involving mathematical or conceptual problems, it was found that groups showed a marked improvement in performance over when the problems were tackled individually. In many cases, the *assembly bonus effect* was observed, in which even when no single person had the correct answer, the group collectively was able to arrive at the solution through debate and discussion (Mercier and Sperber 2011, 63). For critics whose scepticism of group deliberations is specific to moral issues, CR could counter by claiming that it is the critic who would be begging the question against CR, for the epistemological parity thesis claims that there are no significant disanalogies between scientific and moral truths and

how their knowledge is acquired (Brink 1989, 12).[26] Therefore, such asymmetric scepticism would not be amenable to CR. Elizabeth Anderson offers another way to respond to such critics by pointing out that even when we do not have an accurate idea of what is moral goodness, we might have knowledge about moral errors and prejudice. Learnings from identifying what factors and conditions contribute to veritistic achievements and decreasing errors in the case of non-moral issues can also be deployed for moral problems with some confidence.

> While we do not already have on hand a final standard of moral rightness, we may have a fairly good idea of characteristic sources of moral error, ignorance, bias, and blindness, drawn from social and cognitive psychology and from historical investigation. (Anderson 2016, 93).

Anderson thus lays a clear possibility of a naturalised social moral epistemology, even if we were unsure of the ontology and metaphysics surrounding moral truths, validating CR's approach towards inquiries.[27] It also needs to be noted that CR does not claim that collectives do better than individuals in arriving at correct judgments under all conditions. There indeed could be sub-optimal settings for a group under which the results tend to be veritistically inferior. For instance, if all group members share the same opinion to begin with, then debates tend to stall. Homogeneity of the arguments from the interlocutors could also lead to a greater polarisation of beliefs. In this regard, Anderson hints at how the practice of a democratic social, moral epistemology is required to ensure that moral knowledge is acquired by groups (Anderson 2016, 78).[28]

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[26] Rawls himself held a view compatible with CR's stance in his (1951) article mentioned earlier. He held his method in ethics (RE) to be analogous to the study of inductive logic which is interested in formulating criteria to decide which empirical claims must be considered true.

[27] This is in clear contrast to some contemporary works, which might take reflective equilibrium to be a social enterprise but dispense with any naturalistic metaethical commitments. For instance, while Brandstedt & Brannmark (2020) do offer a practical ' bottom-up' interpretation of reflective equilibrium, their account is vastly different from ours. They explicitly give up the notion of moral truth, and the process of reflective equilibrium is employed "not in the search of moral truth, but rather to highlight what stands in the way of solutions to problems agents face in different domains of social life" (2020, 355). Our account attempts to reconcile the notion of moral truths to the social process of moral inquiry. We thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

[28] Anderson clarifies that by democratic, she intends equal and dignified participation of all stakeholders in a moral dispute (Anderson 2016, 94).

Moral knowledge is more likely to be achieved under participatory social arrangements that divest us of biases and prejudices and help in improved access to information. In its absence, an authoritarian social arrangement relying heavily on reflections of only a few privileged might remain mostly muddled. While reflection can fetch us moral learnings, it is unlikely to emanate solely from the expression of someone's wisdom.

> [D]iversity of moral opinion can be an aid, rather than a threat, to moral knowledge. Each of us operates under important limitations of information, experience, imagination, and perspective. For this reason, it is important that our methods of justification be dialectical— that they involve interpersonal discussion and argumentation (Brink 1999. 209-210).

As a society, whenever we lay claim to moral knowledge, it is more likely to emerge out of intense public argumentation as indicated in history by reformative policy decisions in societies, whether it is the abolition of slavery or decriminalisation of homosexuality.

4. Conclusion

We began with the question of what a plausible epistemology for Cornell realists could look like. A naturalistic social reflective equilibrium, we have argued, shifts the focus of moral enquiry from the individual domain of rationality to the social dimensions without ceding the claim for objectivity and appears to be a promising solution. While traditional interpretations of RE rely exclusively on the rationality of the individual, our proposal sees moral inquiry as a community-wide enterprise that can facilitate objective moral knowledge even in the face of biases that affect individual cognition (Levy 2006, 102). This inclusion of the social domain deviates from traditional accounts of metaethical realism that have perceived objectivity and the social as somehow antagonistic to one another. One individual thinking to herself might not be equipped to identify faulty reasoning or dodgy judgments, but there is greater hope when these claims are raised in a diverse group under the right conditions. Social reflective equilibrium calls for collective deliberations, and such a process has the potential to remove subconsciously biased judgments and produce a "more morally justified consensus judgment

than an individual could alone" (April and April 2016, 26). Our account can fruitfully show how social inquiries can facilitate veritistic goals in moral inquiries.

The naturalistic social reflective equilibrium we advocate can ward CR against the criticisms that question the reliability of considered moral judgments or the ability of coherence seeking operations to fetch moral knowledge. Many critics favour the parity CR claims between the scientific and the moral domains and their proposed social route to moral enquiry. McGrath herself advocates for a stance similar to social moral epistemology. She accepts that others around us are "potentially rich sources of knowledge", and therefore, moral knowledge can be obtained through social interactions and everyday practices that we as a community follow (2019, 8). She is also in agreement that moral knowledge can be obtained by any of the ways in which we acquire ordinary empirical knowledge (McGrath 2019,1-2).[29] We highlight the significant overlap between McGrath's conception of social moral epistemology and our reconceptualisation of RE that embodies a more social understanding of the process of moral inquiry. Our moral judgments are rarely arrived at by solitary reasoning, and the social task of asking for and producing reasons and arguments must inextricably be part of moral inquiries. Recognising that substantive moral progress can be achieved only through intense public deliberation and argumentation, we have tried to present how our proposal of naturalistic social RE as CR's moral epistemology can bring forth this much-needed dimension while dealing with questions of moral beliefs and facts.

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[29] For instance, with the parity thesis in mind, CR could grant that testimony plays an important role in the case of scientific beliefs also. CR's reinterpretation not only works as a feasible method in the moral domain, it is also a better characterization of how scientific inquiries proceed.

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