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Intuitions in 21st-Century Moral Philosophy: Why Ethical Intuitionism and Reflective Equilibrium Need Each Other

Abstract: *Intuitions in 21st-Century Moral Philosophy: Why Ethical Intuitionism and Reflective Equilibrium Need Each Other*

In this paper, I attempt to synthesize the two most influential contemporary ethical approaches that appeal to moral intuitions, viz., Rawlsian reflective equilibrium and Audi's moderate intuitionism. This paper has two parts. First, I build on the work of Audi, and Gaut, I provide a more detailed and nuanced account of how these two approaches are compatible. Second, I show how this novel synthesis can both (1) fully address the main objections to reflective equilibrium, viz., that it provides neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for the justification of our moral beliefs and (2) help ethical intuitionism to deal with the fundamental problem of peer disagreement over our basic moral intuitions. In doing so, I sketch out a novel and attractive diachronic way of thinking about peer disagreement more generally.

Keywords: Audi, Rawls, Ethical Intuitionism, Reflective Equilibrium, Peer Disagreement.

1. *Introduction*

Moral intuitions are central to two major ethical approaches: reflective equilibrium and ethical intuitionism. Despite this fact, these views seem far apart. For defenders of ethical intuitionism – including Henry Sidgwick, G.E. Moore, H.A. Prichard, C.D. Broad, W.D. Ross, and more recently, Robert Audi and others – intuitions involve non-inferential cognitions of self-evident moral truths situated in a foundationalist framework. By contrast, for defenders of reflective equilibrium – proposed by John Rawls and elaborated upon by Norman Daniels – intuitions as considered moral judgments are in no way epistemically privileged. Rather, *via* a process of mutual adjustment between our moral intuitions, moral principles, and relevant background theories, our intuitions can be confirmed, revised, or even rejected within a broadly coherentist approach. Seen this way, talk of 'intuition' in these two different ethical approaches seems merely equivocal, like using the term 'bank' to refer both to a place where money is kept and the land along the edge of a river.

In this article, I aim to show not only that ethical intuitionism and reflective equilibrium are fully compatible.[1] Further, I defend the controversial claim that these two views in some sense *need each other*. That is, if we combine ethical intuitionism and reflective equilibrium in the right kind of way, we can draw upon the main virtues of each respective view to address some of the central weaknesses of the other view. In this way, this hybrid approach yields a much stronger philosophical position than either view by itself.

My plan is as follows. In § 2, I offer a historical sketch of the role of intuitions in contemporary ethics. In § 3, I examine the alleged conflict between ethical intuitionism and reflective equilibrium. I show how, despite appearances, they can be made compatible with one another. In § 4, I discuss a central objection to reflective equilibrium: viz., that it provides neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for justification of our moral beliefs. I show how, if combined with ethical intuitionism, reflective equilibrium can address such worries. In § 5, I discuss a deep problem for ethical intuitionism: viz, how to deal with peer disagreement over our basic moral intuitions. I show how, if combined with reflective equilibrium, ethical intuitionism can offer a novel and attractive strategy for thinking about this issue. Lastly, in § 6, I offer brief concluding remarks.

2. *A Brief Historical Survey of Intuitions in Recent Ethics*

One major strand in the history of ethics during the last two hundred years involves the rise, fall, and rise again – twice! – of intuitions in moral theory. At the start of the 20th-century, ethical intuitionism dominated the field. Confusingly, intuitionism was – and to our present day still is – associated with two different theses. On the one hand, thinkers like Sidgwick, Moore, Prichard, Broad, and Ross embraced what I'll call 'epistemological ethical intuitionism'. On this view, we grasp basic moral truths – about both moral principles ('the right') and moral values ('the good') – *via* intuition. By contrast, many of these same philosophers also endorsed what I'll call 'normative ethical intuitionism'. This amounts to a defense of pluralism, that is, the view that there exists an irreducible plurality of fundamental moral principles. As Jonathan Dancy (1993) points out, these two senses of 'intuitionism' were brought together in the work of later intuitionists such as Prichard and Ross in the 1930's.

By the mid 20th-century, however, ethical intuitionism fell largely out of favor. Critics charged that it involves both (1) a suspect metaphysics – re-

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[1] Audi 1997, 2004 and Gaut 1996 have laid the essential groundwork for this claim. In § 3, I clarify and expand upon their claims.

lated in particular to Moore's defense of *sui generis* non-naturalistic moral properties – and (2) a suspect epistemology – insofar as it seems to defend the existence of some mysterious or occult 'faculty of intuition' that somehow enables us to cognize indubitable, self-evident moral truths. This decline of ethical intuitionism went hand in hand with the emergence of naturalistically inclined non-cognitivist ethical theories such as emotivism and prescriptivism.

It was in this more skeptical context that intuitions once again rose to prominence with the publication of Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*. Notably, Rawls distances himself from traditional ethical intuitionism. In *A Theory of Justice*, he identifies utilitarianism and pluralism – that is, 'normative ethical intuitionism' – as the two major rivals to his own preferred theory of 'justice as fairness'. And in his later writings, he sees what he calls 'rational intuitionism' – that is, 'epistemological ethical intuitionism' – as a key opponent to his own constructivist methodology. For our purposes, however, the main difference between Rawls and traditional ethical intuitionism lies in his defense of reflective equilibrium. Rawlsian reflective equilibrium amounts to a type of 'chastened' ethical intuitionism, shorn of all metaphysical and epistemological pretense. For Rawls, moral intuitions simply consist in our 'considered judgments' about morality: that is, what we would reflectively endorse in a non-distracted state free from distorting biases (Rawls 1999b, 42). Rawls sees these moral intuitions as merely 'provisional fixed points' which are liable to further revision or even rejection (Rawls 1999b, 18). In narrow reflective equilibrium, we go back and forth between our moral intuitions about specific cases and general moral principles, trying to achieve the 'best fit' between them. In wide reflective equilibrium, we move beyond this individualistic framework and seek to bring our moral views into coherence with any relevant moral and non-moral background theories and beliefs (Rawls 1999a, 289).

The end of the 20th-century saw a second rise of intuitions, this time associated with the unexpected revival of ethical intuitionism or the so-called 'new intuitionism'. In *The Right in the Good*, Audi offers arguably the most systematic and convincing statement of ethical intuitionism to date. He undertakes a full-scale reexamination of ethical intuitionism – especially of a Rossian sort – so as to avoid all its major pitfalls. Audi adopts three basic strategies. First, he shows how certain intuitionist doctrines have been misunderstood or caricatured. One of his main targets is what Roger Crisp calls 'the radar view' of intuition (Crisp 2002). On this view, ethical intuitionists affirm, as Mackie famously puts it, the existence of "some special faculty of moral perception […] utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else" (Mackie 1977, 38). Against this reading, Audi shows how traditional intuitionists defend a relatively modest epistemological thesis.

They claim that just as reflection as a reliable source of knowledge helps us to know mathematical, logical, and conceptual truths, it can arguably also aid us in knowing moral truths (Audi 1996, 118-124). Second, Audi refines or precisifies certain intuitionist doctrines. For example, he explains how the notion of 'self-evidence' is open to two different readings: viz., "between apprehending *the truth of a proposition that is self-evident*, and on the other hand, apprehending *its self-evidence*" (Audi 1996, 106). He argues that ethical intuitionists need only be committed to the former view. On this reading, a proposition is 'self-evident' when understanding it suffices for our being justified in believing it, and our believing this proposition on the basis of such understanding results in our knowing it (Audi 2004, 49). However, ethical intuitionists need not defend the latter reading. This embraces the much more controversial second-order thesis that we must also know *that* this proposition is self-evident (Audi 2004, 48). Third, Audi shows how some views traditionally associated with ethical intuitionism are, strictly speaking, unnecessary. For example, he argues that despite historical precedents, ethical intuitionism can remain neutral, say, between rationalist versus empiricist epistemologies or between naturalistic versus non-naturalistic metaphysics (Audi 2004, 58, 65-68).

In the end, akin to Rawls, Audi also defends a more 'chastened' – or what he himself calls a 'moderate' – version of ethical intuitionism. However, Audi's approach dramatically differs from Rawls' in one important respect. It remains truer to the more substantive ambitions of traditional ethical intuitionism while nonetheless trying to separate the doctrine from any implausible and/or unnecessary metaphysical and epistemological baggage.

3. *The Relationship between Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Moderate Intuitionism*

What this brief historical survey shows us is that the most likely prospects for an appeal to intuitions in contemporary ethics lie with a more 'chastened' version of ethical intuitionism. We have two main options: (1) Rawls' highly influential defense of 'wide reflective equilibrium' and (2) Audi's 'moderate intuitionism', which is generally recognized as the most plausible formulation of ethical intuitionism on offer.[2] This raises many questions: What's the overall relationship between these two approaches? Are they compatible or incompatible? What, if anything, do they have in common?

It's tempting to reply to the third question with: 'almost nothing'. Indeed, Rawls and his followers were eager to highlight the differences be-

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[2] See, for example, Sinnott-Armstrong 2007, Crisp 2007, and Hernandez 2011.

tween reflective equilibrium and ethical intuitionism.[3] Rawls writes that "rational intuitionism, as illustrated by Sidgwick, Moore, and Ross, *is sharply opposed* to a constructivist conception along Kantian lines" – where the latter constructivist view presupposes reflective equilibrium (Rawls 1980, 558, emphasis added). And Daniels contrasts what he calls (1) the 'traditional intuitionist', such as Sidgwick, Moore, and Ross, with (2) the 'modern intuitionist', whom he identifies with proponents of reflective equilibrium like Rawls and himself (Daniels 1996, 29). Daniels sees a wide divide between these two approaches insofar as traditional "[i]ntuionist theories have generally been foundationalist" whereas "[n]o such foundationalism is part of wide reflective equilibrium" (Daniels 1996, 26-27).

However, recent discussions by Berys Gaut and Audi call such claims into question. Gaut emphasizes the fact that reflective equilibrium is meant to be a 'methodology': that is, not a *theory* but instead merely a *method* or *procedure* of justification. Reflective equilibrium offers us a procedure for enhancing the justification of our considered moral judgments *via* rendering them consistent with our moral principles and any relevant background theories. Gaut points out, however, that adopting this method of justification "does not entail the theoretical claim that coherence with other beliefs is the *only* source of justification of a belief" (Gaut 2002, 140).

While raising similar concerns (cf. Audi 1996, 107-8 and 2004, 73-74), Audi goes a step further. He claims that the most plausible version of ethical intuitionism incorporates what he calls 'moderate foundationalism' (Audi 2004, 74-76).[4] In doing so, he tries to steer a middle path between (1) 'strong coherentism', according to which "*any* kind of justification is a holistic matter" (Audi 2004, 73) and (2) 'strong foundationalism', according to which our moral beliefs are justified only if they're either immediately justified or else mediately justified based on appropriate inferential relations to an immediately justified belief (Audi 2004, 73-74; cf. Gaut 2002, 140).

Against (1), Audi's moderate foundationalism affirms the existence of immediately justified moral beliefs, that is, our moral intuitions. And against (2), Audi has two replies. First, he insists that concerns about coherence related to reflective equilibrium play an essential role in justifying our beliefs. Second, he argues that ethical intuitionists can allow that justification of our intuitions is ultimately defeasible. For Audi, intuitions, which

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[3] In the rest of this paper, unless otherwise specified, I'll use 'reflective equilibrium' as shorthand to refer to Rawlsian 'wide reflective equilibrium'.

[4] For another important discussion which tries to unite a modest version of foundationalism with reflective equilibrium, see McMahan 2000.

are a kind of belief,[5] must meet four requirements: (i) they must be *non-inferential*, not based on inferences from any premise or set of premises; (ii) they must be *firm*, that is, accompanied with a conviction that the proposition holds; (iii) they must involve *comprehension*, that is, a minimally adequate understanding of the content of the proposition in question; and (iv) they must be *pretheoretical*, that is, neither evidentially dependent on theories nor themselves theoretical hypotheses (Audi 2004, 33-36). Notice, however, that a moral intuition can satisfy all of criteria (i)-(iv) and yet still turn out to be false.

In an important passage from *The Right and the Good*, W.D. Ross similarly defends both of these points, writing:

> […] the moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people are the data of ethics, just as sense perceptions are the date of a natural science. *Just as some of the latter have to be rejected as illusory, so have some of the former; but as the latter are rejected only when they conflict with other more accurate sense-perceptions, the former are rejected only when they conflict with convictions which stand better the test of reflection* (Ross 2002, 41, emphasis added).[6]

Ross allows that some of our 'moral convictions' or intuitions might turn out to be 'illusory' and thus ultimately 'rejected', and that one important way of discovering this fact is by showing how they fail to cohere with other more secure convictions. In the end, Audi's 'moderate intuitionism' explicitly recognizes that "reflective equilibrium can enhance – or its unobtainability can undermine – our justification for an 'intuitive' moral judgment and for at least some moral principles" (Audi 2004, 47).

Gaut and Audi provide strong reasons for thinking that ethical intuitionism and reflective equilibrium are compatible. The main worry, however, is that this seems to directly contradict how many influential proponents of reflective equilibrium conceive of the view, including Rawls himself. For example, although Rawls does usually talk about reflective equilibrium as a 'method' or 'procedure', he also seems to regard it as playing a quite ambitious role in our moral epistemology. As he writes in "The Independence of Moral Theory":

> I first discussed the method of reflective equilibrium and suggested that the question as to *the existence of objective moral truths* seems to depend on the kind and extent of the agreement that would obtain among rational persons who have

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[5] But cf. Audi 2011, 175-177, where he allows for the possibility of non-doxastic intuitions, or what he labels 'intuitive seemings'.

[6] For another traditional intuitionist who defends the fallibility of our moral intuitions, see Moore 1903, x.

achieved, or sufficiently approached, wide reflective equilibrium (Rawls 1999a, 301, emphasis added).

In this passage, Rawls claims that the very existence of 'objective moral truths' in some sense depends upon the intersubjective agreement of rational persons in wide reflective equilibrium. For another example, T.M. Scanlon has argued that "the *only* way we have of establishing the truth of normative judgments is through direct, piecemeal application of the method of reflective equilibrium" (Scanlon 2004, 122-123, emphasis added).

We are left with two very different accounts of reflective equilibrium. On what we can call (i) the 'modest interpretation' as defended by Gaut and Audi, reflective equilibrium is merely a 'method' or 'procedure' for increasing the justification of our moral beliefs.[7] On (ii) the more 'ambitious interpretation', reflective equilibrium plays a much more substantive role in moral justification, either in terms of grounding the very possibility of moral objectivity (Rawls) or for establishing the truth of any of our normative judgments (Scanlon).

We're now in a position to answer the various questions raised earlier in this section. Rawlsian wide reflective equilibrium and Audi's moderate intuitionism are indeed compatible, but only when properly qualified. In particular, they're compatible *only if* we adopt (1a) a 'moderate foundationalist' as opposed to either (1b) a 'strong coherentist' or (1c) a 'strong foundationalist' version of ethical intuitionism and (2a) a 'modest' as opposed to (2b) an 'ambitious' version of reflective equilibrium. What emerges is a unified picture. We start off with moral intuitions. Given moderate foundationalism, these are defeasible. At the same time, however, as Rawls himself admits, they also "may turn out to be based on self-evident first principles" (Rawls 1999a, 289). In this moderate foundationalist framework, the method of reflective equilibrium operates at two different levels. At the foundational level, it can lead us to revise or even reject some of our defeasible basic moral intuitions insofar as they fail to cohere with other more secure moral intuitions. And in terms of the superstructure, the justification of our other moral beliefs can be enhanced or undermined insofar as they respectively enable or thwart us from achieving wide reflective equilibrium in our overall moral outlook. Call the view that results from combining (1a) and (2a) in this way *thoroughgoing moral intuitionism* or TMI. It's so named because it defends the union of these two most influential contemporary views in which moral intuitions play a central role – viz., Rawlsian wide reflective equilibrium and Audi's moderate intuitionism – in such a way that,

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[7] These labels are borrowed from McGrath 2019, 12-17. McGrath defends a similar approach to the one explicated here, although she does not discuss either Audi's or Gaut's views.

as we'll see below, their overall relationship is mutually beneficial. In the remainder of this paper, I explore and expand upon TMI in more detail.

4. *Why Reflective Equilibrium Needs Ethical Intuitionism*

Reflective equilibrium is often regarded as the default view in moral theory. Jeff McMahan writes: "The most commonly endorsed method of moral inquiry among contemporary moral philosophers is the method described by John Rawls under the label 'reflective equilibrium'" (McMahan 2000, 100). Tristram McPherson states: "John Rawls' method of reflective equilibrium is the most influential methodology in contemporary ethics" (McPherson 2015, 652). Shelly Kagan contends: "Now in point of fact, I think that in practice everyone does accept an approach pretty much like this [i.e., reflective equilibrium] – whether or not they realize it" (Kagan 1998, 16). And Scanlon defends the striking claim that: "Indeed, it [i.e., reflective equilibrium] is the only defensible method; apparent alternatives to it are illusory" (Scanlon 2002, 149).

Notwithstanding, there are many critics of the view.[8] The most fundamental objection is that reflective equilibrium provides neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for the justification of our moral beliefs. On the one hand, reflective equilibrium does not seem *necessary* for moral justification. Some critics claim that reflective equilibrium is too strong. Sarah McGrath argues that making the justification of moral beliefs depend on reflective equilibrium is both hyper-intellectualized and over-demanding. The average person arguably knows simple self-evident moral truths such as that "slavery is wrong" or "it is immoral to torture babies for fun" without ever engaging in the type of demanding reasoning involved with reflective equilibrium (McGrath 2019, 20-25). Other critics charge that reflective equilibrium is too weak. Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa maintains that appeals to intuitions, like those related to reflective equilibrium, play no essential role in justification. That is, intuitions are explanatory idle wheels. As Ichikawa argues, for justification of philosophical claims (as well as other *a priori* claims such as in mathematics and logic), "the *a priori* contents are by their nature such that there is conclusive reason to accept them, irrespective of the presence or absence of intuitions" (Ichikawa 2014, 204).

On the other hand, reflective equilibrium does not seem *sufficient* for moral justification either. This concern is based on a familiar objection to coherentist approaches more generally, what Michael DePaul calls the 'no

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[8] See, for example, Cummins 1998, DePaul 1993, Gaus 1996, Kornblith 1998, McGrath 2019, McMahan 2000, and Stich 1998.

contact with reality objection' (DePaul 1993, 23 ff.).[9] The basic problem is that having an internally consistent set of beliefs is fully compatible with these beliefs being wildly implausible or patently false, such that achieving coherence is no guarantee that these beliefs are justified, much less true. Applied to reflective equilibrium, the worry is that reflective equilibrium may amount to no more than a sheer systematization of our unjustified moral prejudices masquerading as 'considered moral judgments'.[10] Richard Brandt offers a classic formulation of this objection, writing:

> There is a problem here quite similar to that which faces the traditional coherence theory of justification of belief: that the theory claims that a more coherent system of beliefs is better justified than a less coherent one, *but there is no reason to think that this claim is true unless some of the beliefs are initially credible – and not merely believed – for some reason other than their coherence…* The fact that a person has a firm normative conviction gives that belief a status no better than fiction. Is one coherent set of fictions supposed to be better than another? (Brandt 1979, 20, emphasis added).

In short, achieving reflective equilibrium confers justification upon our moral beliefs only if the considered moral judgments we start with *already* have some initial degree of credibility, independent of their coherence with the rest of our moral views.

How should a defender of reflective equilibrium answer these objections? There are many responses in the literature.[11] In what follows, I'll show how TMI – that is, the synthesis of reflective equilibrium and ethical intuitionism as described in § 3 – can deal with these worries in a way that reflective equilibrium alone cannot. Upon consideration, it seems that TMI is almost tailor-made to address both objections. On the one hand, concerning the worry that reflective equilibrium is not a necessary condition for moral justification, TMI has two replies. First, TMI fully agrees with McGrath's claim that not every moral belief depends for its justification on being in reflective equilibrium with our other beliefs. Indeed, a central feature of all versions of 'epistemological ethical intuitionism' – including TMI – is the idea that we can possess non-inferential knowledge of self-evident moral propositions *via* intuition, which would obtain regardless of whether or not we achieve Rawlsian reflective equilibrium. Second, Ichikawa's worry seems to overlook a standard distinction between propositional justi-

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[9] DePaul in fact distinguishes between two distinct worries under this rubric: viz., what he calls the more general 'no contact objection' and the 'no credibility objection' (DePaul 1993, 25). For ease of presentation, I discuss them together in what follows.

[10] For related worries, see Cummins 1998, Stich 1998, Kornblith 1998, and McPherson 2015.

[11] See, for example, Daniels 1996 and 2016, Scanlon 2002, and Walden 2013.

fication, that is, *having justification to believe that p*, and doxastic justification, that is, *justifiedly believing that p*. Ichikawa rightly points out that intuitions are wholly unnecessary for the *propositional justification* of *a priori* claims, including those self-evident moral propositions defended by ethical intuitionism. However, the fact that intuitions arise from our faculty of intuition – understood *à la* Audi as 'non-inferential cognitive capacity' that reliably enables us to grasp basic self-evident propositions such as mathematical or logical truths (Audi 2004, 48) – can confer *doxastic justification* on our moral beliefs if this same faculty reliably enables us to grasp self-evident moral truths. This is exactly parallel to the way that being a deliverance of a reliable faculty of perception can confer doxastic justification on our sensory beliefs.

On the other hand, concerning the worry that reflective equilibrium is not a sufficient condition for moral justification, TMI can clearly deflect this charge in a way that reflective equilibrium by itself cannot. While TMI's moderate foundationalism entails that justification of our moral intuitions is in principle defeasible, it still allows for the possibility that many of our intuitions involve the grasping of self-evident moral propositions. If so, then among the moral intuitions involved in reflective equilibrium will be ones that, upon adequately understanding them, we're *justified* in believing them and, if we believe them on the basis of such understanding, we count as having genuine *knowledge* of them. Seen this way, this second objection has no traction at all against TMI. Far from merely systematizing unjustified moral prejudices, TMI recognizes that some of our moral beliefs will not only be justified but even count as full-fledged moral knowledge. Perhaps surprisingly, Rawls himself explicitly admits this possibility, writing

> *I note in passing that one's moral conception may turn out to be based on self-evident first principles. The procedure of reflective equilibrium does not, by itself, exclude this possibility, however unlikely it may be.* For in the course of achieving this state, it is possible that first principles should be formulated that seem so compelling that they lead us to revise all previous and subsequent judgments inconsistent with them. Reflective equilibrium requires only that the agent makes these revisions with conviction and confidence, and continues to affirm these principles when it comes to accepting their consequences in practice (Rawls 1999a, 289, emphasis added).

Rawls concedes that among our considered moral judgments might be some 'self-evident first principles'. For some unstated reason, he considers it highly unlikely that they'll survive the entire process of wide reflective equilibrium. But if TMI is correct, then Rawls' worry seems unduly pessimistic.

To conclude, TMI allows us to fully address both standard objections to reflective equilibrium. On the one hand, TMI does not maintain that reflective equilibrium is a necessary condition for justification. Instead, it affirms

the possibility that justification for our moral beliefs can be grounded on immediate self-evident intuitions that hold regardless of whether we ever achieve reflective equilibrium. On the other hand, unlike traditional reflective equilibrium, TMI identifies conditions that would be sufficient not only for the justification of our moral beliefs, but even for the prospect that some of them count as full-fledged moral knowledge.

5. *Why Ethical Intuitionism Needs Reflective Equilibrium*

We've seen how Audi's moderate intuitionism relies upon reflective equilibrium in two ways. He argues that both our foundational basic moral intuitions as well as our non-foundational moral beliefs are subject to considerations of reflective equilibrium. This holds insofar as our moral intuitions "can at least normally be defeated by other intuitions that reflection might generate or *by other elements in the reflective equilibrium that a reasonable intuitionist would seek*" (Audi 2004, 67, emphasis added). This enables us to achieve what Rawls would call 'narrow reflective equilibrium' with respect to our overall moral outlook.

In addition, Audi follows Rawls' lead by also seeking to bring our views into what Rawls would call 'wide reflective equilibrium'. However, while Rawls emphasizes calibrating our particular moral judgments and general moral principles with any relevant moral or non-moral background theories, Audi instead focuses on the need to test our moral beliefs against those of other people. As he writes:

> Moreover, given how intuitions are understood – as deriving from the exercise of reason and as having evidential weight – conscientious intuitionists will try to factor into their moral thinking, especially on controversial issues, the apparent intuitions of *others* (Audi 2004, 47, emphasis in original; see also 2004, 37 and 66-67).

Taking this further step, however, leads to one of the most fundamental challenges for ethical intuitionism: viz., how to deal with the problem of disagreement between epistemic peers over our basic moral intuitions.

In various discussions, Crisp and Audi have engaged in a lengthy and instructive debate about this topic (see Audi 2004, Crisp 2007, Audi 2007b, Audi 2008, Crisp 2011, and Audi 2011b). Audi's initial thoughts about the problem of disagreement – or what he calls the 'dissensus objection' – focus on defending the plausibility of ethical intuitionism even in the face of widespread disagreement about allegedly self-evident ethical principles. Audi offers a two-pronged reply. First, he addresses concerns about self-evidence. He distinguishes between two different types of self-evidence. 'Hard self-evidence' is the type of self-evidence that belongs to self-evident principles like, say, basic mathematical and logical truths insofar as they're

(1a) *strongly axiomatic* in the sense that there is nothing epistemically prior to them, (1b) *immediate* in terms of being readily understood by normal adults, (1c) *indefeasibly justified*, and (1d) *compelling*, that is, cognitively irresistible upon consideration of them. By contrast, 'soft self-evidence' is the type of evidence which belongs to many self-evident ethical principles, including Rossian *prima facie* duties. Such self-evident propositions are (2a) *not strongly axiomatic*, (2b) typically only *mediately self-evident* insofar as their truth can be grasped only *via* reflection as opposed to readily understood, (2c) *defeasibly justified*, and (2d) such that, even upon understanding them, rational persons can still *withhold belief or even disbelieve them*. In keeping with our discussion in § 2, Audi explains that "the second order claim that [ethical propositions] are self-evident *need not also be [itself] self-evident* in order for them to have this status" (Audi 2004, 60, emphasis added).

Second, Audi addresses concerns about disagreement. He argues that while there might be *disagreement on reasons* – that is, on the specific moral obligation we have in any given case – especially given the typical complexities of moral dilemmas, there still exists a great deal of *agreement in reasons* – that is, what normative considerations we act upon in practice and consider as relevant in our moral deliberations. Taken together, Audi's arguments about self-evident ethical propositions only possessing 'soft self-evidence' and the existence of frequent 'agreement in reasons' aim to blunt the dialectical force of the dissensus objection.

Crisp shifts attention from (1) the traditional skeptical worry about whether widespread disagreement over alleged self-evident ethical principles should undermine our confidence in their existence to (2) the more contemporary worry about whether defenders of ethical intuitionism can offer a plausible account of epistemic peer disagreement. In *The Methods of Ethics*, Henry Sidgwick identifies four "conditions, the complete fulfillment of which would establish a significant proposition, apparently self-evident, of the highest degree of certainty available" (Sidgwick 1907, 338). Crisp labels Sidgwick's fourth condition the 'consensus condition'. It claims that "absence of […] disagreement must remain an indispensable negative condition of the certainty of our beliefs" (Sidgwick 1907, 342). Following Sidgwick's lead, Crisp defends what he calls 'Sidgwick's Principle', which states that:

A person who judges that *p*, if she finds that some other person judges that *not-p*, and if she has no reason to believe that other person to be in a worse epistemic situation than her, should suspend judgment on *p* (Crisp 2011, 152).

He illustrates this with a familiar philosophical example he calls *Categorical Imperative*. Imagine I have the moral intuition that we should "always act in such a way that we treat humanity, whether in our own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the

same time as an end." But consider my colleague, who has similar intellectual credentials and is as equally conscientious and reflective as myself. She instead has the moral intuition that we should always act so as to produce the greatest overall good, where this implies that it's sometimes perfectly morally permissible to treat somebody as a mere means.

How should I respond to this situation? Crisp thinks it's clearly acceptable for me to continue affirming that my Kantian intuition *seems* right to me. However, since I and my consequentialist colleague are in exactly symmetrical epistemic circumstances, it follows that "suspension of judgment [on the truth of this matter] is the only rational response" since "[I] have no more reason to suspect that [my] colleague is making a mistake than that [I am], and of course she is in the same position regarding [me]" (Crisp 2011, 152-154).

Audi's views are complex and evolving. In what follows, I'll just focus on some of the more salient points. In his initial response to Crisp, he discusses the issue of whether or not we can ever justifiedly believe that another person is indeed our epistemic peer. As he writes in his first reply to Crisp:

> From Crisp's example concerning disagreement about what kind of bird is before us, it is clear that he takes the notion of an epistemically good "state" to include things like visual acuity and favorableness of the light. This notion encompasses a huge number of variables. Background beliefs are included, as are inferential capacities, reliability of memory, and conceptual sophistication. *He might grant, then, that we are commonly not justified in believing that someone else is in as good an epistemic position as we* (Audi 2007b, 205, emphasis added).

This is similar to a later article where he argues:

> What if I believe (a) the colleague is as rational and as thoughtful as I (in the relevant matter) and (b) has considered the same relevant evidence equally conscientiously? […] *Reflection shows […] that it is very hard to be justified in believing (a) or even (b).* The breadth, complexity, and quantity of evidence needed about the other person are great, and error in assessing it is difficult to avoid (Audi 2008, 489, emphasis added).

Contrary to Crisp's claim that, rationally speaking, I should give *equal weight* to both positions, Audi argues that it's more rational for me to remain *steadfast* in my belief.[12] Audi's explanation is that given the difficulties involved in determining whether my colleague is indeed an epistemic peer, I have many more reasons to doubt that I've made a correct judgment of

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[12] The italicized terms obviously refer to two standard positions in the contemporary debate over peer disagreement. For helpful overviews, see Feldman and Warfield 2010 and Christinsen and Lackey 2013.

epistemic peerhood than I do to doubt my own intuition. As he elaborates later on:

> Examination of apparent peer disagreement shows, however, that it takes much information, and may require extensive reflection, to be justified in believing (a), (b), and (c), i.e., that the disputant is as rational and as thoughtful as oneself in the relevant matter and has considered the same relevant evidence equally conscientiously. *The breadth, complexity, and quantity of evidence needed about the other person are great, and error in assessing it is difficult to avoid.* (Audi 2011, 18).

Audi's line of reasoning here, however, is not entirely satisfactory. Even if his claims are true, all he's established is that, in practice, it's very difficult for us to justifiedly believe that any two persons are true epistemic peers. Nothing he says shows that, in principle, it's impossible for us to ever do so, nor that the justification we have for believing in our own moral intuitions will necessarily outweigh and defeat any justification we have for our judgments of epistemic peerhood.

For the sake of argument, let's assume that it is indeed possible for me to justifiedly believe that, say, I and my consequentialist colleague are epistemic peers. How else might we respond to Crisp's challenge? I suggest that ethical intuitionists can find a more attractive reply by drawing upon some ideas implicit in reflective equilibrium itself. In an insightful discussion, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord explains what makes reflective equilibrium such an attractive view in general. He writes:

> […] what recommends the method [of wide reflective equilibrium] is that using it *is one and the same with trying to proportion one's beliefs to the available evidence* (Sayre-McCord 1996, 143, emphasis added).

What wide reflective equilibrium tells us to do is to seek to achieve the "best fit" between our overall moral outlook and all our available evidence.

Notice, however, that not all evidence should be weighted *equally*. It's true that reflective equilibrium insists that we shouldn't necessarily privilege any particular element in our overall moral reflective equilibrium based solely, say, in virtue of its level of generality. As Rawls put it, "there are no judgments on any level of generality that are in principle immune to revision" (Rawls 1999a, 289). However, this is consistent with the view that certain types of evidence should be given more weight than others in deciding how to arrive at the "best fit" between all of our beliefs. This leads to the question: Which elements, if any, should be assigned greater (or lesser) evidential value than others – and why?

To answer this question, we need to delve more deeply into the details of Rawlsian reflective equilibrium. Recall that for reflective equilibrium, we're dealing with three main sets of beliefs: (1) a set of considered moral

judgments, (2) a set of moral principles, and (3) a set of relevant background theories. First, 'considered moral judgments' are the moral judgments "in which we have the greatest confidence" (Rawls 1999b, 17). Examples might include beliefs about particular actions and practices such as, for example, that religious intolerance and racial discrimination are unjust. Second, general moral principles – such as "harming an innocent person is wrong", "killing someone is morally worse than merely letting them die", or "we should never treat another person merely as a means" – are attempts to systematize and explain such moral intuitions. As Daniels (2016) explains, we use our intuitive judgments about specific cases to test our moral principles. And alternatively, we revise our intuitions about certain judgments when they don't fit with principles we're inclined to accept. Arriving at what we take to be the "best fit" between our considered moral judgments and our moral principles – one that captures our overall individual moral outlook – constitutes 'narrow reflective equilibrium'.

Third and lastly, we must seek coherence between the results of narrow reflective equilibrium and any relevant background moral and non-moral theories – which can include "a theory of the person, a theory of procedural justice, general social theory, and a theory of the role of morality in society" (Daniels 1996, 23). Examples include identifying 'feasibility constraints' for our moral views based on results from economics or social theory or engaging in pair-wise comparisons between our moral outlook and leading alternative moral theories, like when Rawls compares his own theory of 'justice as fairness' with utilitarianism. Successfully doing this helps us to achieve 'wide reflective equilibrium'.

Given this detailed account of reflective equilibrium, we're now in a position to answer our earlier question. Some cases where we should assign greater (or lesser) evidential weight to different elements in our wide reflective equilibrium seem clear-cut. For example, if well-established scientific findings contradict certain empirical assumptions made by our moral or political theories, then we should give up or revise the latter. With respect to the present issue of peer disagreement, the interesting quandary is: How should we compare the evidential value of (1) the outcome of our achieving narrow reflective equilibrium, that is, the stable coherence between (a) our considered moral judgements in which, as Rawls puts it, "we have the highest degree of confidence" and (b) the general moral principles that seek to explain and systematize such moral judgments versus (2) the testimony of an epistemic peer that they possess different moral intuitions than us?

Let's return to Crisp's example. Suppose that I, a Kantian ethicist, have successfully achieved narrow reflective equilibrium with regard to my overall individual moral outlook in such a way that I conclude that we should never treat another person merely as a means. However, when I seek wide

reflective equilibrium and engage in pair-wise comparisons with leading rival moral theories, I encounter my consequentialist colleague, an epistemic peer, who insists that she's arrived at the exactly contrary judgment, viz., that it's at times permissible to treat somebody as a mere means if doing so brings about the greatest overall good.

What should a defender of TMI – that is, the synthesis of ethical intuitionism with reflective equilibrium as described in § 3 – say about this case? There are two main responses, which draw upon the resources of both ethical intuitionism and reflective equilibrium. First, from the perspective of ethical intuitionism, there exists at least one fundamental epistemic difference between relying upon (1) my narrow reflective equilibrium as opposed to (2) the testimony of my epistemic peer. From an *external standpoint*, I and my colleague are in epistemically symmetrical circumstances. However, from an *internal standpoint*, there's a crucial difference between my colleague and myself. My narrow reflective equilibrium is based on my own self-evident moral intuitions, which I've carefully reflected upon, fully understood, and found to be compelling such that I've achieved a stable coherence in my overall moral outlook. However, I lack my colleague's moral intuitions as well as her own careful reflections which lead her to affirm this view. Assume further that no matter how hard I try, such intuitions remain inaccessible to me. From an internal standpoint, I must weigh the evidential value of (1) what my narrow reflective equilibrium – which involves my having successfully achieved a systematic coherence between all of my moral beliefs within my overall moral outlook – leads me to believe over against (2) my colleague's testimony and nothing more.

Understood this way, while our standing as epistemic peers is perfectly symmetrical, our standing with respect to the different bodies of alleged evidence available to each of us is fundamentally asymmetrical. Given this, defenders of TMI should allow for a weak presumption in favor of my being justified in maintaining my own view. This is because, at least from an internal standpoint, the evidence available to me strongly favors affirming the outcome of my successfully achieved narrow reflective equilibrium as opposed to my colleague's testimony. Notably, Audi defends a very similar claim, writing that:

> […] we are better positioned to make a critical appraisal of our own evidence – at least where it is experiential, as with memory impressions and intuitions – and of our responses to it, for instance, in assessing whether our belief that p is based on the evidence rather than on, say, wishful thinking, than of anyone else's evidence or responses to that evidence (Audi 2011, 18).

Audi claims that this fact "provide[s] some support for the modest conclusion that the very exercise of critically seeking to establish the epistemic

parity of a disputant *may give a rational person a justificatory advantage in the dispute*" (Audi 2011, 20, emphasis added). I think, however, we should draw a different conclusion from Audi's. Such considerations don't seem to give us any justificatory advantage over our epistemic peer. Rather, *contra* Audi, they merely seem to highlight the fact that, at least from an internal standpoint, we have more evidence available to us for believing the results of our successful narrow reflective equilibrium than for believing the contrary intuition based on the testimony of our epistemic peer.

Second, from the perspective of reflective equilibrium, I think we can offer an even stronger response. Understood within the context of wide reflective equilibrium, neither Crisp's nor Audi's approach is satisfactory. *Contra* Crisp, it seems too extreme to simply suspend judgment about our narrow reflective equilibrium – that is, the stable coherence between all of our considered moral judgments and general moral principles – the moment we move from narrow to wide reflective equilibrium and compare our views against equally respectable rival moral theories. But *contra* Audi, it seems we should not just simply remain steadfast in our own moral views either. This would undermine the entire point of engaging in wide reflective equilibrium in the first place.

The correct response, I contend, is to regard the fact of epistemic peer disagreement as an indication that *we're merely at a provisional stage in our overall attempt to achieve wide reflective equilibrium*. This should lead us to refrain from making *any* final judgments about this case in general. This means neither claiming, *à la* Crisp, that it's all-things-considered rational to simply suspend judgment, nor claiming, *à la* Audi, that we should regard ourselves as all-things-considered rationally justified in just remaining steadfast in our beliefs. That is, we shouldn't simply give up on or suspend judgment about our successfully achieved narrow reflective equilibrium, which is no mean feat. Nor should we just adhere to the results of narrow reflective equilibrium, ignoring the challenge of peer disagreement. Instead, we should provisionally hold onto what we achieved in narrow reflective equilibrium while continuing to rigorously scrutinize it in line with our ongoing efforts to achieve wide reflective equilibrium. This can lead to any number of unforeseen outcomes, such as giving up our own moral outlook; rejecting the rival view; revising one or the other view; achieving some synthesis between the two views; or abandoning both views for yet another view, etc.

Put differently, most accounts of peer disagreement regard it *synchronically* in terms of what the most rational all-things-considered response should be to this present fixed state of affairs – whether to suspend judg-

ment, remain steadfast, split the difference, etc.[13] By contrast, TMI regards instances of peer disagreement *diachronically*. Peer disagreement just marks one stage along the way of achieving wide reflective equilibrium. Thus, any attitudes we have about either view in question should be merely provisionally held – as opposed to being all-things-considered judgments – insofar as we recognize that engaging in wide reflective equilibrium entails that nearly all of our current beliefs are in some sense always "up for grabs".

In this way, TMI is much more thoroughgoing in its reliance on reflective equilibrium than Audi's moderate intuitionism. Audi focuses only upon the role that reflective equilibrium plays with respect to two levels, viz., our foundational and non-foundational moral beliefs. In this way, his view applies considerations of reflective equilibrium only to narrow reflective equilibrium. Notably, he never discusses reflective equilibrium when dealing with cases of peer disagreement.

By contrast, TMI applies considerations of reflective equilibrium to a third level, viz., when we move from narrow to wide reflective equilibrium and engage with the rival views of our epistemic peers. As I've sketched above, this leads us to rethink the nature of peer disagreement itself. We should shift from a synchronic to a diachronic mindset. In doing so, we're not concerned with simply making all-things-considered judgments about what attitude is most rational to adopt in the present circumstances. Rather, epistemic peer disagreement amounts to a kind of call for action. It highlights our need to continue striving for wide reflective equilibrium, where all judgments we make about any of the views in question at this stage are always merely provisional ones that are themselves open to future revision.

6. *Conclusion*

For a defender of moral intuitions, it makes sense to wonder whether the two most influential contemporary ethical views that appeal to intuitions – viz., Rawlsian wide reflective equilibrium and Audi's moderate intuitionism – can be united in a way that not only preserves each views' respective strengths but somehow results in a more attractive philosophical position than either view by itself. Audi and Gaut have already laid the initial groundwork. They show not only how these two views can be compatible. Further, Audi explicitly incorporates reflective equilibrium in at least two essential respects within his own moderate intuitionism as discussed above.

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[13] For example, Audi explicitly claims that his focus is on synchronic disagreement (Audi 2011, 18). Due to space limitations, I unfortunately cannot consider his rationale for this approach in more detail here.

In this paper, I've built upon such efforts in two ways. First, I've tried to provide a more detailed and nuanced account of how these two approaches are compatible than Audi's and Gaut's analyses. Second and more important, I've shown that when we synthesize Rawls' wide reflective equilibrium and Audi's moderate intuitionism into so-called thoroughgoing moral intuitionism or TMI, we arrive at various highly welcome results. TMI provides us not only with the resources to fully address both of the main objections to reflective equilibrium. It also helps us to make Audi's appeal to reflective equilibrium more thoroughgoing by applying it not just to achieving narrow reflective equilibrium but wide reflective equilibrium as well. In doing so, TMI arguably defends a more attractive response to peer disagreement than Audi's 'steadfast' strategy. Lastly, it offers a novel and potentially more productive diachronic way of thinking about the problem of peer disagreement.

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