AN ANALYSIS OF RAWLS’ REFLECTIVE EQUILIBRIUM AS A METHOD OF JUSTIFICATION IN ETHICS

BY

PAA KWEKU QUANSAH

(10187652)

THIS THESIS IS SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF GHANA, LEGON, IN PARTIAL FUFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE AWARD OF MPHIL PHILOSOPHY DEGREE

JULY, 2018
It is undeniable that people have beliefs about what actions are morally right. These beliefs play an important role in guiding moral action. Can beliefs about what actions are morally right be justified? How can they be justified? Sinnott-Armstrong has advanced an epistemic regress argument against the justification of moral beliefs with the consequence that moral beliefs cannot be justified.

This research looks at the subject of the justification of moral beliefs with the view of answering the question about how moral beliefs can be justified in response to Sinnott-Armstrong’s epistemic regress argument. It argues for the plausibility of Rawls’ reflective equilibrium as an adequate method of justification of moral beliefs while showing the inadequacies of the intuitionist method and naturalistic epistemology as alternative methods of justification of moral beliefs.

The arguments and ideas of philosophers such as W. D Ross, Richard Boyd, John Rawls, Robert Audi and others who have reflected on the subject of the justification of moral beliefs will be extensively and critically examined.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my niece, Janelle Lamptey
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I express my gratitude and appreciation to the lecturers at the Department of Philosophy and Classics who assisted me greatly during the early stages of formulating the thesis topic and the proposal. They include Prof. Kofi Ackah, former head of Department, Rev. Dr. Joseph Apea Assamoah, Dr. Caeser Atuire and Dr. Richmond Kwesi. It is with great pleasure that I express my profound gratitude to Rev. Dr. Joseph Apea Assamoah and Dr. Husein Inusah, who agreed to supervise this thesis. I am very grateful for the patience and enthusiasm with which they read the drafts of this thesis and also for the insightful and critical comments they offered. My special thanks goes to Rev. Dr. Joseph Apea Assamoah, my main supervisor, whose strenuous and critical comments have kept me working persistently and diligently to the completion of this thesis. I want to express my gratitude to all members of the Department of Philosophy and Classics, especially my senior colleagues, Mr. Seth Don Arthur and Miss Grace Addison, for their encouragement and helpful counsel. I cannot forget to render a debt of gratitude to my family, especially my father, who have stood by me with support and prayer throughout the period of writing this thesis.
# TABLE OF CONTENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents Page</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.1. Background of Study</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.2. Problem Statement</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.3. Significance of Study</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.4. Objectives of Study</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.5. Scope of Study</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.6. Methodology</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.7. Chapterization</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION OF MORAL BELIEFS</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Introduction</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2. Epistemic Justification in general</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.1. Epistemic Justification and Knowledge</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.2. The epistemic regress argument</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3. Epistemic justification and Moral beliefs</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.1 Sinnott-Armstrong’ regress argument against justified moral beliefs</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................52
4.2. Rawls’ method of reflective equilibrium ..................................................................52
4.3. Is reflective equilibrium viciously circular ?...............................................................57
4.4. Reflective equilibrium and the problem of arbitrariness............................................60
4.5. Wide reflective equilibrium and moral disagreement between epistemic peers ........66

CHAPTER FIVE ..................................................................................................................72
CONCLUSION ..................................................................................................................72
BIBLIOGRAPHY .............................................................................................................76
INTRODUCTION

0.1. Background to the Study

How can moral beliefs be justified? This is a question that has occupied a central place in the history of moral epistemology. It is not very clear how an individual’s actions can be described as morally right if his action is not based on justified beliefs about what actions are morally right. Is it possible however to justify beliefs about what actions are morally right?

In his article “Moral Skepticisms and Justification”, Sinnott-Armstrong advances an epistemic regress argument against the justification of moral beliefs, leading to skepticism about the possibility of justifying moral beliefs (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1995, p. 9). The regress argument in general raises the question of how a belief can be justified without being inferred from another belief that is also not justified. The problem here is that an attempt to justify any one belief would seem to require an infinite regress of reasons and if the regress cannot be completed then it follows that no belief can be justified. When applied to moral beliefs, the epistemic regress argument leads to the disturbing conclusion that moral beliefs cannot be justified. Can this problem be remedied?

In this thesis, I argue for Rawls’ reflective equilibrium as a method of justification of moral beliefs that adequately answers Sinnott-Armstrong’s epistemic regress argument. In A Theory of Justice, Rawls deploys the method of reflective equilibrium to justify his principles of justice. The method consists generally in the identification of considered moral judgments, the formulation of moral principles that explicate these judgments and the elimination of conflicts that arise among them (Rawls, 1971, p. 12). In applying the method of reflective equilibrium, Rawls maintains that “a conception of justice cannot be deduced from self-evident premises or conditions or
principles; instead its justification is a matter of the mutual support of many considerations, of everything together into one coherent view (Rawls, 1971, p. 21). Reflective equilibrium can therefore be construed as a coherentist method of justification of moral beliefs. In arguing for the plausibility of Rawls’ method of reflective equilibrium as an adequate response to Sinnott-Armstrong’s epistemic regress argument, this research also points out the inadequacies of two alternative methods, namely, the intuitionist method and naturalistic epistemology. I have chosen to specifically examine these three methods of justification because they provide the broad basis from which subsequent methods of justification are developed.

The whole project falls within the area of ethics called meta-ethics. This is the area of ethics that is concerned with the nature of moral claims and moral theories. According to Sinnott-Armstrong, meta-ethics can be divided into three main parts: moral linguistics, moral ontology and moral epistemology (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1995, p.4). Moral linguistics is concerned with the meaning of moral terms and whether these terms refer to any objective moral property at all. Moral ontology enquires into the nature of moral facts, if there are any. Moral epistemology is the philosophical inquiry into whether and how we can acquire knowledge of what actions are morally right. One can also interpret it as epistemology applied to moral beliefs. Epistemology is the study of knowledge and justification. Moral Epistemology deals with questions such as what are the sources of moral knowledge, when is a person justified in believing a moral claim and how moral beliefs can be justified. I will focus in this thesis on the question of how moral beliefs

---

The term justification here may be construed either in a pragmatic or an epistemic sense. Rawls himself is silent on how exactly the term justification is to be construed. Thus some scholar’s interpret reflective equilibrium as a method for selecting moral principles that are simply to guide political action with no regard for meta-ethical questions of whether the principles in question are true and how they can be known to be true. Nevertheless Rawls’ Reflective equilibrium has been discussed widely in the literature as a method of epistemic justification. This thesis is concerned with reflective equilibrium as a method of justification in the epistemic sense.
can be justified. As pointed out earlier, I will consider the following three prominent methods of justification in moral epistemology: the intuionist method of justification, naturalistic epistemology and Rawls’ reflective equilibrium.

The intuionist method of justification is the application of foundationalism in the field of epistemology to the justification of moral beliefs (Brink, 1989, p. 102). Foundationalists hold the view that there are basic beliefs that are justified in themselves, or self-justified beliefs, upon which the justification for all other beliefs rests (Lehrer, 1990, p. 39). Foundationalism is one of the several responses to the regress argument. In response to the regress argument as applied to moral beliefs, moral intuitionists posit moral beliefs that are non-inferentially justified or grounded on non-inferentially justified moral beliefs in order to terminate the regress. Non-inferential beliefs can also be characterized as self-evident beliefs since their justification lies nowhere than in themselves. The basic presupposition of the intuitionist method is that there are moral beliefs which are justified in themselves and can be used to justify other moral beliefs. For instance, according to Moore, it is self-evident that actions that bring about the best consequences are right (Moore, 1903). Prichard also maintains that it is self-evident that we have certain moral obligations such as keeping of promises (Prichard, 1912). Two contemporay exponents of the intuitionist method of justification are W. D Ross and Robert Audi. Ross, for instance, advances the view that there are principles of prima facie duty - fidelity, reparation, justice, gratitude, beneficence, non-maleficence and self-improvement - which are self-evident and reflection is required to know them (Ross, 2002, p. 15). Ross’ principles of prima facie duty can be understood as general self-evident beliefs about what actions are morally right. Audi also maintains that Ross’ principles of prima facie duty are self-evident (Audi, 2004, p. 22).
Using the works of Audi and Ross, I argue in this thesis that the intuitionist method of justification, in answering the regress argument against the justification of moral beliefs, faces two problems. Firstly, it has to contend with the problem of arbitrariness. The problem of arbitrariness is the problem of how to distinguish between moral beliefs that are justified from moral beliefs that have no rational grounds. As DePaul observes, we often do find that our moral beliefs are terribly not in good order and there are tensions and conflicts among them (DePaul, 1993, p. 2). Secondly, it also has to address the issue of epistemic peer disagreement about the justification status of moral beliefs. According to Fanselow, epistemic peers are “those who are roughly equivalent to us in terms of cognitive abilities, motivation to arrive at the truth and available evidence” (Fanselow, 2011, p. 4). Fanselow defends the following principle of epistemic peer disagreement:

\[ D: \text{If an agent } S \text{ is aware of peer disagreement regarding some proposition } P, \text{ then} \]

in order for \( S \) to be justified in believing \( P \), \( S \) must have a further belief (a belief other than \( P \) itself) that serves as a reason to believe \( P \) (Fanselow, 2011, p. 12).

Fanselow’s principle seems plausible because given that one is dealing with an epistemic peer, an individual can no longer take himself to be \textit{prima facie} justified when challenged by his epistemic peer. An individual may have considered himself to be justified prior to the awareness of a challenge to his moral belief from an epistemic peer. However, once he becomes aware of such a challenge then the \textit{prima facie} justification is lost. Extending his principle to moral beliefs, Fanselow maintains that epistemic peer disagreement regarding a moral belief \( B \) serves as a \textit{prima facie} defeater for the moral belief in question. I argue that it is not clear how the intuitionist method of positing self-evident moral beliefs can answer this challenge.
Another possible response to the regress argument against the justification of moral beliefs is naturalistic epistemology. Naturalistic epistemology is a possible response because if moral beliefs can be inferred from justified non-moral beliefs then the regress can be brought to a halt.\(^2\)

Consequently, naturalistic epistemology appeals to empirical observation as a way of justifying moral beliefs. According to Brandt, philosophers who apply naturalistic epistemology to justify moral beliefs ‘“think that if we make proper adjustment in our theories of knowledge and language, we can justify moral conclusions by an argument that is compelling in the same way as are argument for theories in the empirical sciences’” (Brandt, 1996, p. 164). In his work, *How to be a moral realist*, Richard Boyd applies naturalistic epistemology to justify moral beliefs. According to him, beliefs about what actions are good are to be justified by observation. This observation involves ascertaining whether the action in question will promote human goodness (Boyd, 1988, p. 203). By *human goodness*, Boyd means a cluster of empirically accessible natural properties such as: being physically healthy, sharing friendship, sharing love, engaging in physical recreation, being educated, engaging in cooperative efforts, creating and appreciating art, enjoying leisure and being autonomous (Boyd, 1988, p. 203).

In order to escape the naturalistic fallacy, Boyd holds that the relationship between the term *goodness* and the natural properties it identifies is not analytic, i.e., not a question of the definition of terms. Rather the relationship between the term *goodness* and the natural properties the term identifies is to be construed like the relationship between *water* and the property \(H_2O\). The latter relationship is synthetic and *a posteriori*. Boyd invokes the causal theory of reference to support his identification of the term *goodness* with natural properties. According to the causal theory of reference as developed by Kripke, features of the world causally regulate our use of a

\[^2\]An epistemic regress argument against the justification of moral beliefs does not entail scepticism about the justification of other beliefs.
term and these features fix the referent of the term in question (Kripke, 1972, p. 20). For instance, one can say that the scientist’s use of the term water to refer to H$_2$O is causally regulated by the property H$_2$O in the natural world and for that reason their usage of the term is justified. I argue that the application of the causal theory of reference in the case of moral terms such as goodness and rightness is not feasible in view of the normative nature of these terms. Consequently, I argue that inference from empirical observation cannot justify moral beliefs.

Rawls aims in *A Theory of Justice* to arrive at a justified conception of justice and describes the method by which he accomplishes his aim as *Reflective Equilibrium* (Rawls, 1971, p. 20). He deploys the method of reflective equilibrium to achieve coherence between the principles derived from his description of the *original situation* and considered judgments about justice. It would be recalled that in *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls develops his account of the original situation to cohere with beliefs about justice that Western liberal democracies already accept. Thus Scanlon rightly states that Rawls’ original situation itself is justified by the method of reflective equilibrium (Scanlon, 2002, p. 153). Given Rawls’ claim that the justification for a conception of justice ‘is a matter of mutual support of many considerations, of everything fitting together into one coherent view’, one may safely infer that reflective equilibrium is a coherentist method of justification for moral beliefs (Rawls, 1971, p. 21). Reflective Equilibrium is the process by which an individual justifies his moral beliefs by achieving coherence among his moral and non-moral beliefs through a process of reflection (Rawls, 1971, p. 20). When an individual brings his considered moral judgment into coherence with the moral principles that he holds, he has achieved what Rawls calls narrow reflective equilibrium. Rawls maintains however that one ought to aim for wide reflective equilibrium where an individual expands his coherent beliefs by considering

---

3 The hypothetical scenario constructed by means of Rawls’ famous *veil of ignorance* is what Rawls characterizes as the *original situation*.
alternative moral principles and the philosophical arguments that support them (Rawls, 1971, p. 49).

According to Brandt, Rawls’ method is problematic because it appeals fundamentally to coherence in order to justify moral beliefs. In Brandt’s view, a person might hold a coherent set of beliefs which may nevertheless be fictitious. Thus the criterion of coherence does not constitute a good standard of justification (Brandt, 1979, p.20). Singer also objects to Rawls’ method because of its inclusion of considered moral judgments which according to Rawls are “those judgments in which our moral capacities are most likely to be displayed without distortion” (Rawls, 1971, p. 22). According to Singer, this is a form of appeal to moral intuitions that are likely to have stemmed from our evolutionary past as social mammals and primate (Singer, 2005, p.348). This thesis will also address the above objections to Rawls’ method of reflective equilibrium.

0.2. Problem Statement

Sinnott-Armstrong’s epistemic regress argument applied to moral beliefs casts doubt on the possibility of justifying moral beliefs. I argue that the intuitionist and naturalistic approaches mentioned above are inadequate responses to Sinnott-Armstrong’s epistemic regress argument. While a coherentist approach looks promising, it nevertheless has to deal with the problems of circularity, arbitrariness and moral disagreements. I argue in this thesis for Rawls’ reflective equilibrium as a plausible coherentist method for the justification of moral beliefs.

0.3. Significance of Study

This study has significance for our practice of moral deliberation. Suppose we have no rational method or have an inadequate method for justifying our moral beliefs, then deliberation on moral issues will be haphazard and arbitrary. From this point of view, any one method for arriving at beliefs about moral issues will seem to be as good as any other. The upshot of this is that we
simply ought to abandon the practice of moral deliberation where we seek to find rational grounds for our views on moral issues. While an individual may choose not to seek rational justification for his moral beliefs, such a choice cannot be regarded as the optimum. It is inadequate to view moral deliberation as an exercise in the mere expression of feelings. On contrary, arguments must be set forth for and against moral claims, recognizing some lines of argument as valid and others fallacious. This study contributes further to our practice of moral deliberation by proposing and defending a plausible method for justifying our moral beliefs.

0.4. Objectives of Study

This study is specifically aimed at defending Rawls’ method of reflective equilibrium as a plausible answer to Sinnot-Armstrong’s epistemic regress argument against the justification of moral beliefs. It also seeks to show that naturalistic epistemology and the intuitionist method of justifying moral beliefs are inadequate responses to Sinnot-Armstrong’s epistemic regress argument.

0.5. Scope of Study

This study looks at the epistemic justification of moral beliefs. It considers matters of epistemic justification in general so far as they have relevance in the context of moral beliefs. Issues regarding the pragmatic justification of moral beliefs will not be the concern of this project. Furthermore, discussion of the justification of moral beliefs will extend into the domain of moral knowledge so far as justification is deemed a necessary condition of knowledge. In addition, although there are several extant methods of justification of moral beliefs, I limit myself in thesis to only three: intuitionist method, naturalistic epistemology and Rawls’ reflective equilibrium. This thesis also steers off issues of moral motivation, i.e., whether and how moral beliefs issue in moral action.
0.6. Methodology of Study

The methodology employed here will be a critical analysis of both primary and secondary literature. The primary sources to be used are: W. D Ross’ *The Right and the Good*, Robert Audi’s *The Good in the Right*, Richard Boyd’s *How to be a moral realist* and John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*. The secondary sources will be the scholarly commentaries on these primary sources.

0.7. Chapterization

This thesis is divided into five chapters. In Chapter one, I analyze the general concept of epistemic justification and how it specifically applies to the moral beliefs. I also outline Sinnott-Armstrong’s regress argument against moral beliefs and the problems it generates which motivate the search for the justification of moral beliefs.

Chapter two looks at the intuitionist method of justification of moral beliefs. This chapter is intended to indicate that the intuitionist method is problematic due to the lack of any clear account of how arbitrary moral beliefs can be distinguished from rationally grounded moral beliefs. Furthermore, this chapter points out the difficulties epistemic moral disagreement poses for the claim that there are self-evident moral beliefs. According to Ross, we know what the self-evident principles of *prima facie* duty are by reflection while Audi maintains that Ross’ self-evident principles of *prima facie* duty are known by adequate understanding. I show that both accounts are not convincing.

In chapter three, I turn my attention to Boyd’s application of naturalistic epistemology to the justification of moral beliefs. Here I seek to show that Boyd’s attempt to justify moral beliefs by appeal to empirical observation is problematic. I contend that the normative nature of moral terms makes it impossible to reduce them to descriptive terms capable of verification by empirical observation.
Chapter four examines what Rawls’ method of reflective equilibrium entails. This will include whether coherence can serve as a criterion of justification of moral beliefs and the role of reflection in Rawls’ method. I respond to the problems of circularity, arbitrariness and epistemic moral disagreement that reflective equilibrium encounters in the attempt to answer Sinnott-Armstrong’s regress argument.

In chapter five, I affirm the conclusion of this thesis based on the analysis carried out in the preceding chapters.
CHAPTER ONE

EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION OF MORAL BELIEFS

1.1. Introduction

In view of the fact that this thesis deals with the epistemic justification of moral beliefs, it is important to first clarify the concept of epistemic justification and its relationship to the concept of knowledge. The epistemic regress argument in general will also be espoused. I then proceed to examine the concept of epistemic justification as it specifically applies to moral beliefs. Finally, I will discuss Sinnott-Armstrong’s application of the epistemic regress argument to moral beliefs which motivates the search for the justification of moral beliefs.

1.2. Epistemic justification in general

Epistemic justification is concerned with the search for adequate reasons for accepting that a belief \( B \) is true. The concept of epistemic justification is captured by Bonjour in the following:

Knowledge requires epistemic justification and the distinguishing characteristic of this species of justification is, I submit, its essential or internal relationship to the cognitive goal of truth. Cognitive doings are epistemically justified on this conception only if and to the extent that they are aimed at this goal – which means roughly that one accepts all and only beliefs which one has good reason to think are true (Bonjour, 1978, p. 23)

The significant fact about epistemic justification as Bonjour points out, is “its internal relationship to the cognitive goal of truth”. The point here is that justification must have a connection to truth, i.e., one must form beliefs with the aim of arriving at truth. There is however no guarantee that if a belief is epistemically justified then it is necessarily true. It is quite possible to have a belief that is epistemically justified but yet false. Assuming Frank leaves his car locked in a garage equipped with CCTV cameras and goes on a three-day journey. Unknown to him, thieves have broken into the garage and swapped his car with one that looks like it. Now upon remotely
accessing his CCTV camera, Frank sees the pseudo-car and believes that his car is still in the
garage. One can say that Frank is justified in believing his car is still in the garage but this belief
is nevertheless false. Bonjour also maintains that justification in the epistemic sense must be
clearly delineated from justification in the non-epistemic sense. The latter is marked by the ab-
sence of the cognitive goal of attaining truth. He asserts:

A different sort of justification for believing, still non-epistemic in character, is illustrated
by Pascal’s Famous wager …..Pascal argues, roughly that it is rational to believe that
God exists because, on the one hand, if God exists, belief will be enormously rewarded
and failure to believe horribly punished; and on the other hand, If God does not exist, the
consequences of either believing or not believing will be very minor by compari-
son….The point is that even if this argument is otherwise acceptable, the kind of justifi-
cation which it provides for the belief in question is not the right kind to satisfy the re-
quirement for knowledge - no matter whether the belief in question happens in fact to be
true. It is what might be called prudential or pragmatic justification, not epistemic justifi-
cation (Bonjour, 1985, p.5).

To further illustrate the concept of prudential or pragmatic justification, one may think for in-
stance, of a poor person who believes that he is rich in order to boost his self-esteem. So far as
the goal of boosting his self-esteem is attained by holding on to the belief that he is rich, the be-
lief can be said to be pragmatically justified. From an epistemic point of view however, the belief
will not be justified since it is not aimed at truth. It is important to point out that a person may
also have a pragmatically justified belief that is in fact true but which nevertheless lacks epistem-
ic justification. Consider the case of a medical practitioner who believes that a certain placebo
drug is capable of curing his patient. Now suppose the patient is indeed cured after taking in the
placebo drug, the doctor’s belief has turned out to be true though not epistemically justified since it was not formed in relation to the aim of truth.

Another form of non-epistemic justification identified by Sayre-McCord is the notion of the *moral justification* for holding a belief. The question of interest here is whether a person’s holding of a belief ‘‘satisfies the relevant moral standards’’ (Sayre-McCord, 1995, p.145). Thus a member of some community of people who believe that homosexuality is immoral will be *morally* justified in believing same so far as her holding that belief satisfies the moral standards of her community. As in the case of pragmatic justification, the reason for the holding the belief (that homosexuality is immoral) has nothing to do with truth.

Having elaborated what is distinct about epistemic justification, I want to further elaborate on the distinction between *propositional epistemic justification* and *Doxastic epistemic justification*. Feldman remarks:

> Propositional justification should be distinguished from what is sometimes called ‘‘doxastic justification.’’ This is most clearly brought out by noting that a person can believe a proposition for which she has propositional justification, but fails to believe the proposition on the basis of the supporting evidence. In other words, she believes the right thing for the wrong reasons. When a person does believe on the basis of supporting evidence, then the belief has doxastic justification’’ (Feldman, 2004, p. 133).

What Feldman seems to be saying is that propositional justification involves having good reasons for holding some belief $B$ though one may not actually base her belief on the appropriate reason(s) in question. Justification here turns on the content of what is believed rather than on the state or act of believing. Doxastic justification on the other hand, has to do with the subject actually basing her belief on the adequate reasons available to her. *Adequate reason* may be explicat-
ed in terms of grounding in experience, self-evidence, coherence, etc. However *adequate reason* may be construed, it seems a prerequisite that for a belief to be regarded as doxastically justified, it must be held on the *basis* of that reason. Suppose that in spite of receiving ample information about an impending rain storm from the meteorologists in her country, Anna nevertheless forms her belief about the weather on the basis of mere guesswork. In this instance she can be said to lack doxastic justification for her belief though she has propositional justification for it.

By *epistemic justification* in this thesis, I shall mean both propositional and doxastic justification as explained above.

### 1.2.1. Epistemic Justification and Knowledge

Plato conceived of knowledge as justified true belief and this concept of knowledge became the standard concept in the field of epistemology. On Plato’s account, if a person claims to know something he or she must: a) believe it b) have justification for it and c) one’s belief must be true. What is the relationship between epistemic justification and knowledge? Epistemic justification as I have pointed out above is what is required to meet the cognitive goal of having true beliefs. On the traditional conception of knowledge as Justified True Belief (JTB), justification is held to be that which transforms mere true belief into knowledge. Gettier however questioned the plausibility of this position. He put forth some counter-examples to the widely held view that JTB constituted necessary and sufficient conditions for ascribing knowledge to a person (Gettier, 1963, p. 22). Since both of the counterexamples Gettier brought forth bother on the same point, I shall speak of only the first. Here is the first of the cases Gettier presented:

Smith and Jones have applied for a certain job. Smith possesses strong evidence for following conjunctive proposition:

(a) Jones is the man who will get the job and Jones has ten coins in his pocket
Smith believes the above proposition because the President of the company has assured him that Jones would be selected for the job and he has also counted the coins in Jones’s pocket ten minutes ago. Furthermore Smith also sees that (a) entails:

(b) The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket

Granted that Smith accepts (b) on the basis of (a), then Smith is justified in believing that (b) is true on the basis of (a). However, unknown to Smith, he himself ends up being selected for the job and he happens to also have ten coins in his pocket.

According to Gettier, Smith cannot be said to know (b) though (b) is true, Smith believes that (b) is true and Smith is justified in believing that (b). Thus although the JTB condition has been met, knowledge cannot be ascribed to Smith. Gettier’s counterexamples sparked a number of responses from epistemologists. One form of response was an attempt to rehabilitate JTB by providing the required fourth condition in the Gettier cases. It is pertinent to point out that Gettier only established that JTB did not constitute necessary and sufficient condition for ascribing knowledge. I wish to maintain here, that JTB constitutes a necessary though not sufficient condition for ascribing knowledge. Thus knowledge as I will construe it in this project comprises of JTB + Gettier requirement for Gettier cases.

1.2.2. The epistemic regress argument

The regress argument poses the central problem for the justification of beliefs. Suppose I believe that there is a black table in front of me now. If I am asked to provide a justification for this belief, I might cite the fact that I can see it as my justification. This answer can still be questioned and I may be asked to provide further justification for believing that I do in fact see a black table in front of me now. The point here is that any attempt to justify a belief involves giving an infinite chain of reasons. Since completing such an infinite chain of reasons seems impossible, the
conclusion follows that no belief is ever justified. Regarding the regress argument, Empiricus asserts:

……what is offered as support for believing a given proposition is itself in need of such support and that support is in need of other support and so on ad infinitum so that since we have no place from which to begin to establish anything, suspension of judgment follows (Empiricus, 1996,p. 30)

One possible response to the regress argument is to postulate the existence of basic beliefs that terminate the regress. Basic beliefs are those beliefs for which no further justification is required. This response is known as foundationalism (Sayre-McCord, 1995, p.147). Justification is here conceived on the model of a pyramid with the basic beliefs forming the base and other beliefs inferred from it forming the superstructure. Another response to the regress argument is to deny the linear structure of justification it presupposes. On this account a belief can fall back on itself for justification as member of a coherent body of beliefs. This is known as Coherentism (Sayre-McCord, 1995, p.149). The model of justification here is that of a web where each belief is justified by its coherence with all other beliefs in the set.

1.3. Epistemic justification and moral beliefs.

In the previous sections, I rehearsed the concept of epistemic justification. In this section, I will espouse how the concept of epistemic justification applies to moral beliefs.

The distinctive mark of moral beliefs as distinguished from say, mathematical beliefs is that they have a practical content, i.e., they are beliefs about what we ought or ought not to do. This feature of moral beliefs is what accounts for their normative character. Consider what Scanlon says:
in contrast to everyday empirical judgments, scientific claims and religious beliefs that involve claims about what the origin and control of the universe, the point of judgments of right and wrong is not to make claims about what the spatiotemporal world is like. The point of such judgments is rather a practical one: they make claims about what we have reason to do (Scanlon, 1998, p. 2).

When a person therefore believes that some action is morally right, the content of such a belief is practical, i.e., it is a belief that there is reason to perform the action in question. The conviction that there is reason to perform the action in question need not issue in the actual performance of the action. I regard the practical content of moral beliefs as propositional in the sense that the belief that there is reason to perform some particular action can be a true or false one. However, moral cognitivism, the view that moral beliefs are truth-apt, is not shared by all philosophers. Moral non-cognitivists maintain that moral beliefs lack propositional content and primarily give expression to feelings. Ayer, in his early writings espoused this point of view. According to him ‘ethical judgments are expressions of feeling, there can be no way of determining the validity of any ethical system and indeed no sense in asking whether any such system is true’ (Ayer, 1936, p. 12). The logical positivists ruled out ethical utterances as truth-apt expressions on the basis of their verification principle. Most contemporary moral non-cognitivists do not hold such a robust view about moral beliefs. Blackburn, for example advocates that moral beliefs can be true in some minimal sense (Blackburn, 1993). Moral non-cognitivism has not been convincingly shown to be the right position and since a defense of moral cognitivism will take me beyond the scope of this thesis, I shall assume in this thesis that it is a tenable position.

Epistemic justification as applied to moral beliefs can be construed as the search for adequate reasons for accepting that a moral belief B is true. Epistemic justification when applied to moral
beliefs can also be propositional or doxastic. Thus a Subject $S$ is doxastically justified in accepting a moral belief $B$ iff (i) $S$ has adequate reason for accepting that $B$ (ii) $S$ accepts $B$ on the basis of *that* adequate reason. On the other hand, a Subject $S$ is propositionally justified in accepting a moral belief $B$ iff $S$ has adequate reasons for accepting $B$ regardless of whether $S$ actually accepts $B$ or not. In this thesis I construe the epistemic justification of moral beliefs in both the propositional and doxastic senses.

1.3.1. Sinnott-Armstrong’s regress argument against justified moral beliefs.

The regress argument gives rise to the problem of the justification of beliefs in general. It is a skeptical argument to the effect that no belief is ever justified. According to Sinnott–Armstrong, the goal of the regress argument ‘‘is to lay out all the ways which a person might be justified in believing something and then to argue that none of them works’’ (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1995,p.9) Applied to moral beliefs, the regress argument leads to the skeptical view that moral beliefs cannot be justified.

Moral beliefs, according to Sinnott-Armstrong, can be justified either inferentially or non-inferentially (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1995, p. 9). He argues that positing non-inferentially justified moral beliefs leads to the problem of moral disagreement which in turn leads to dogmatism, since no further reason can be given to support the moral beliefs held to be non-inferentially justified (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1995,p.10). The attempt to justify moral beliefs inferentially, in Sinnott-Armstrong’s view, is equally problematic. It is problematic because, either moral beliefs are justified by being inferred from other moral beliefs or by being inferred from non-moral beliefs (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1995, p.11). If moral beliefs are justified by being inferred from other moral beliefs then the problem of vicious circularity arises since the chain of inferences always circles back to the moral belief(s) that one began with (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1995, p13). Sinnott-
Armstrong further claims that such a coherentist approach to the justification of moral beliefs leads to arbitrariness since such beliefs lack connection to anything outside them. Alternatively, it might seem plausible to justify moral beliefs by inferring them from non-moral beliefs. Armstrong indicates that the difficulty with justifying moral beliefs by inferring them from non-moral beliefs is how to move from a non-moral belief to a moral belief without introducing some kind of bridge moral principle. Without any bridge moral principle it would seem one has to draw conclusions about what ought to be the case morally speaking, from premises about what is the case, committing the is-ought fallacy (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1995,p.12). According to Sinnott-Armstrong, If moral beliefs cannot be justified by positing self-justified moral beliefs and if they cannot be justified by being inferred from either moral or non-moral beliefs then to justify moral beliefs would require being able to supply an infinite chain of reasons. (Sinnott-Armstrong 1995, p.13). Since providing an infinite chain of reasons is impossible, Sinnott-Armstrong concludes that moral beliefs cannot be justified (Sinnott-Armstrong 1995, p15).

What responses can the intuitionist method of justification, naturalistic epistemology and reflective equilibrium give to Sinnott-Armstrong’s regress argument? As pointed out earlier the intuitionist method of justification posits moral beliefs that are non-inferentially justified to terminate the infinite regress. Naturalistic epistemology when applied to moral beliefs aims to justify moral beliefs by deducing them from justified non-moral premises without introducing a bridge moral principle. Finally, reflective equilibrium as a coherentist method of justification seeks to show how a moral belief can be part of the set of beliefs that justify it without falling to the charge of vicious circularity.

The rest of this thesis will be an evaluation of these responses to the regress argument and the problems that are engendered in the process. I will examine the intuitionist method of justifica-
tion as presented in the works of Robert Audi and W.D Ross. This will be followed by an investigation of naturalistic epistemology as seen in the work of Richard Boyd. Finally I will consider the coherentist method as represented by Rawls’ method of reflective equilibrium.

It is worth pointing out that given that justified moral belief is a necessary condition for moral knowledge, it follows that scepticism about the justification of moral beliefs implies scepticism about the possibility of moral knowledge although the converse does not hold since one can have justified moral belief even though one lacks moral knowledge.
CHAPTER TWO
THE INTUITIONIST METHOD OF JUSTIFICATION

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the intuitionist method of justification of moral beliefs, particularly, the postulation of self-evident moral beliefs that can be used to justify other moral beliefs. If such self-evident moral beliefs exist then the intuitionist method can terminate the infinite regress that undermines the justification of moral beliefs as spelt out by Sinnott-Armstrong. W.D. Ross, a contemporary intuitionist, has claimed that there are self-evident beliefs about our basic moral duties such as the duty of veracity or benevolence. Furthermore, Ross claims that these self-evident beliefs are known by reflection. In support of Ross’ position, Robert Audi has also argued that there are indeed self-evident beliefs about our basic duties that are known by adequate understanding. I criticize these views and argue that positing self-evident moral beliefs as Ross and Audi do, fail to make a convincing case for a foundationalist moral epistemology that adequately answers Sinnott-Armstrong’s epistemic regress argument.

2.2. A general conception of intuitions

The term *intuition* has varied uses. In common everyday parlance, it is usually deployed to designate immediate instinctive emotional reactions. A person can for instance say that he has an intuition that some particular friend of his is going to have an accident. This usage of the term is what often goes by the name *gut feeling*. Intuition in this sense also features in moral discourse. It manifests itself in moral discourse as an instinctive emotional repulsion towards some particular act. In many African cultures for instance, the act of homosexuality is immediately felt by many to be *disgusting* and *repulsive* (Reddy, 2002, p. 164). However, this everyday connotation of the term is not what philosophers mean when they talk of *intuition*. The 16th century philoso-
pher, Rene Descartes gave one of the earliest philosophical elucidations of the term *intuition*. He writes as follows:

By ‘intuition’ I do not mean the fluctuating testimony of the senses or the deceptive judgment of the imagination as it botches things together, but the conception of a clear and attentive mind, which is so easy and distinct that there can be no room for doubt about what we are understanding. Alternatively, and this comes to the same thing, intu-ition is the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind which proceeds solely from the light of reason. It is more certain than deduction, though deduction, as we noted above, is not something a man can perform wrongly (Descartes, 1985, p. 369).

We can conclude from the above that for Descartes, *intuition* connotes something cognitive in nature; something which has to do with a person holding a belief to be indubitably true. Furthermore one may observe that Descartes distinguishs between intuition and deduction. The difference is that while deduction involves understanding the propositional content of a belief through some kind of inferential reasoning, intuitions are propositions understood immediately. Sidgwick also explains that when we call a judgment *intuitional*, “it would be meant that the results in question are judged to be good immediately, and not by inference from experience” (Sidgwick, 1963, p. 97). Much more recently Goldman has construed intuitions in the philosophical sense as *epistemic* in nature, suggesting that they are possible sources of knowledge and justified beliefs (Goldman, 2007, p. 11). What is common however, between the commonsensical sense of intu-ition and the philosophical sense is that in both cases intuitions are not held to be the result of any inferential process of reasoning. Indeed, Descartes describes intuition as ‘‘self-evident’’ while Goldman describes it as ‘‘basic sources of evidence’’ (Descartes, 1985, p. 368; Goldman, 2007, p. 5). In this thesis, I shall focus on the philosophical sense of the term *intuition*. In this sense of
the term, intuitions connote a cognitive state of mind; they are beliefs held to be true. In addition, whatever beliefs are in question on this account are *self-evident* meaning that the evidence for their truth lies in themselves and not in other beliefs or experiences.

**2.3. What are moral intuitions?**

In the previous section, it was pointed out the defining marks of intuitions are that they are cognitive in nature and also self-evident; not justified by inference from any further beliefs or experience. Since this thesis examines intuitions in relation to the justification of moral beliefs, it is pertinent to ask what moral intuitions are.

Moral intuitions can be defined as moral beliefs that are self-evident (Brink, 2014, p. 666). More specifically, they can be defined as self-evident beliefs about what actions are morally right. Moral intuitions are distinguished from intuitions as generally understood by virtue of the fact they have a practical content, i.e., they are self-evident beliefs that entail that we have reasons to perform certain actions. Consider the belief that it is morally right to feed hungry babies. The practical content of such a belief is that the person holding that belief has a reason to feed hungry babies or that she is obligated to feed hungry babies. Can such a belief be self-evident? What does it mean for a moral belief to be self-evident? A self-evident moral belief can be characterized as a moral belief that is not inferred from other moral beliefs or non-moral beliefs. In other words whatever reasons there are for holding the moral belief(s) in question is not inferred from anything else. Prichard characterizes self-evident moral beliefs as immediate apprehensions of what our moral obligations are (Prichard, 1912, p.21). The term *immediate apprehension* suggests that the belief that we have certain moral obligations is not inferred from any further beliefs. Indeed he contends that any attempt to justify such immediate apprehensions by any process of reflective reasoning is mistaken (Prichard, 1912, p. 24). Prichard’s position seems to sug-
gest that self-evident beliefs about what actions are morally obligatory, are infallible for which reason they require no further justification. Are self-evident moral beliefs necessarily infallible? I do not think self-evident moral beliefs are necessarily immune to error because an individual’s self-evident belief that he has such and such moral obligations might be false. Certain moral beliefs might seem self-evident because an individual may not have taken the trouble to reason and compare them with other beliefs. Until such a process of reasoning has been carried out, it is unclear why self-evident moral beliefs should be construed as infallible. Thus Moore recognizes that although beliefs about what is good are self-evident, they are not necessarily infallible (Moore, 1903, p. 40). Moore’s position is however problematic. If a self-evident moral belief can turn out to be false, is it plausible to say that it was self-evident in the first place? I argue in the next section of this thesis against the view that there are self-evident moral beliefs can which be used to justify other moral beliefs.

2.4. Are there self-evident moral beliefs?

If there are moral beliefs that can be justified without being inferred from other moral beliefs or non-moral beliefs, then it seems Armstrong’s regress argument can be answered. The self-evident moral beliefs in question will successfully halt the infinite regress. In this section I examine Ross and Audi’s claim that there are self-evident moral beliefs which can be used to justify other moral beliefs. I argue that they do not make a convincing case for the existence of self-evident moral beliefs from which the justification of other moral beliefs can be inferred.

2.4.1 Ross’ principles of prima facie duty

In The Right and the Good, Ross maintains that there are principles of prima facie duties that are self-evident. These are the principles of justice, fidelity, gratitude, reparation, beneficence, non-
maleficence and self-improvement. In Ross’ view, we come to know what the self-evident principles of *prima facie* duty are by means of reflection. He remarks in the following:

We find by experience that this couple of matches and that couple make four matches, that this couple of balls on the a wire and that couple make four balls; and by reflection on these and similar discoveries we come to see that it is of the nature of two and two to make four. In a precisely similar way, we see the *prima facie* rightness of an act which would be the fulfilment of a particular promise and of another which would be the fulfilment of another promise, and when we have reached sufficient maturity to think in general terms, we apprehend *prima facie* rightness to belong to the nature of any fulfilment of promise (Ross, 1930, p.32).

The key notion that requires examination here is *reflection* since Ross indicates that it is the key to the knowledge of what the self-evident principles of *prima facie* duty are. What does this reflection entail? Ross claims that it involves arriving at general self-evident beliefs about some subject matter beginning from the particular beliefs that one acquires through experience. Ross characterizes this reflective process as *intuitive induction* and defines it as “the process whereby after experience of a number of particular instances, the mind grasps a universal truth which then and afterwards is seen to be self-evident” (Ross, 1923, p. 223). Ross’ principles of *prima facie* duty in this case constitute general self-evident moral beliefs that are acquired by reflection on the particular moral beliefs an individual acquires through experience. The mention of *intuitive induction* and *experience* might suggest that Ross thinks the particular moral beliefs one acquires through experience are to be *inferred* from sense experience. Such an interpretation should however be resisted. While Ross agrees that sensory experience plays an important role in the acquisition of particular moral beliefs, he does not think these moral beliefs can be inferred in some
straightforward manner from sensory experience. He asserts that “the moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people are the data of ethics just as sense-perceptions are the data of natural science” (Ross, 2002, p. 41). It is clear therefore that in justifying his self-evident principles of *prima facie* duty, Ross does not appeal to sense experience as a foundation. There is a foundation nevertheless and it is the “moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people”. However, it is not clear to me how reflection on the moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people produces Ross’ *self-evident* principles of *prima facie* duty. If the moral convictions of the thoughtful and well-educated are already self-evident, then Ross’ principles of *prima facie* duty which are based on these moral convictions cannot be self-evident. On the other hand if the moral convictions of the thoughtful and well-educated are not self-evident then some clear account is needed as to how reflection on them yields the self-evident principles of *prima facie* duty. Ross has not provided any account of how reflection on the moral convictions of the thoughtful and well-educated yield the self-evident principles of *prima facie* duty.

Ross concedes that in the case of certain individuals, justified beliefs about what actions are right in particular circumstances often requires deduction from the self-evident principles of *prima facie* duty. Thus in such situations, it is not self-evident to the individual that some particular action is right and he must deduce its’ rightness from a general principle laid down by some authority. But what about the general principle itself? Ross states that:

> It is probably the case that many people all through their lives remain in the condition of accepting most of their moral principles on authority, but we can hardly fail to recognize in the best and most enlightened of men an absolutely original and direct insight into moral principles, and in many others the power of seeing for themselves the truth of moral principles when these are pointed out to them (Ross, 1935, p.172).
Ross’ claim above poses some difficulties. Why do the best and most enlightened of men not infer the truth of moral principles but rather have direct insight into their truth such that the truth of the moral principles is self-evident to them? It appears Ross offers a foundationalist justification for his principles of prima facie duty. In this case, Ross’ principles of prima facie duty play the role of basic beliefs in that they are non-inferentially justified. Ross describes them as the principles we arrive at through reflection on the moral convictions of thoughtful and well educated people. The self-evident principles of prima facie duty are not, Ross points out, arrived at inferentially but rather through direct insight. Non-inferentially justified beliefs function in epistemology to answer the regress problem. The regress problem arises because most of our justified beliefs are inferentially justified, that is, they are justified by being inferred from further beliefs. But for these further beliefs to justify any beliefs, they too must be justified. We can justify these further beliefs by citing still further beliefs but this process cannot continue ad infinitum, non-inferentially justified beliefs are therefore introduced to stop the regress. Ross’ principles of prima facie duty on account of their self-evident nature are supposed to put a stop to any further requirement of justification for our moral beliefs. However, it is not clear to me how they succeed in terminating the regress because I think the case for their self-evidence has not been well argued for. How does reflection on the moral convictions of the thoughtful and educated yield the self-evident principles of prima facie duty? Let us consider the case of epistemic peer moral disagreement.

2.5. The question of epistemic peer moral disagreement

In this section, I point out that the issue of epistemic peer moral disagreement poses a problem for Ross’ claim that reflection on the moral convictions of thoughtful and educated people yields the self-evident principles of prima facie duty. I argue that in the face of epistemic peer disa-
agreement about morality, it is not clear how Ross’ claim that there are self-evident principles of *prima facie* duty can be defended.

Perhaps no phenomenon is more common in the domain of morality than disagreements in beliefs about which actions are right or wrong. According to Knobe and Khoo ‘‘One of the most salient and fundamental facts about ordinary moral discourse is the fact that people disagree’’ (Khoo and Knobe, 2016, p. 67). This can be partly attributed to the fact different people growing up in different cultures internalize different moral norms and principles. Indeed it is not infrequent to find people holding diametrically opposed beliefs as to which actions are morally right or wrong. The problem of moral disagreement seems more intractable if it is a question of disagreement with an epistemic peer. According to Fanselow, epistemic peers are ‘‘those that are equivalent to us in terms of cognitive abilities, motivation to arrive at truth and available evidence (Fanselow, 201, p.3). In other words epistemic peers are those whom we cannot presume deficient to us in capacities of knowledge and cognitive competence. Fanselow argues that a challenge to moral beliefs put forward by an epistemic peer serves as a *prima facie* defeater for the moral belief(s) in question. One may deny that one’s opponent is an epistemic peer but this move does not seem to be a plausible one in all instances. It seems very unlikely that we shall not at least on some occasions, engage with those who can be properly regarded as our epistemic peers.

Epistemic peer moral disagreement poses a problem for Ross’ claim that reflection on the moral convictions of thoughtful and educated people will yield self-evident principles of *prima facie* duty. Suppose X, an epistemic peer of Y maintains that it is self-evident that one ought to fulfil one’s promises while Y maintains the very opposite of this, which principle is really self-evident in this case? How do we tell? Ross maintains that:
But if we are told, for instance, that we should give up our view that there is a special obligatoriness attaching to the keeping of promises because it is self-evident that the only duty is to produce as much good as possible, we have to ask ourselves whether we really, when we reflect, are convinced that this is self-evident, and whether we really can get rid of our view that promise-keeping has a bindingness independent of productiveness of maximum good (Ross, 1930, p. 40).

Ross seems to advocate for reflection in instances of epistemic peer moral disagreement. However, given that what is at issue is epistemic moral disagreement it is not clear how reflection on the moral convictions of the thoughtful and well-educated can show that Ross’ principles of prima facie duty are self-evident. Indeed Ross’ claim that there are self-evident principles of prima facie duty is contended by certain philosophers⁴. It will be highly implausible to suggest that philosophers who contend the existence of Ross’ self-evident principles of prima facie duty are not thoughtful and well-educated. Ross himself, undoubtedly would not want to draw such a conclusion but this conclusion seems inescapable given the strong tie Ross establishes between reflection on the moral convictions of the thoughtful and educated and the self-evident status of his principles of prima facie duty. Ultimately, pressed further for a response to disagreement about the self-evident status of his principles, Ross defers to notions like actual apprehension and direct insight. Apart from the fact these notions are unclear, each party can always claim he actually apprehends or has direct insight into what he believes is self-evident. The intuitionist method of justification as exemplified by Ross is problematic because if one is required to say something on behalf of the moral beliefs that one postulates as self-evident one is simply led to endorse the

---

⁴ For instance, Jonathan Dancy denies the existence of any general moral principles and thus by extension Ross’ self-evident principles of prima facie duty. See Dancy, J (1993) Moral reasons.
moral belief that one already holds. No further reason is given for claiming that the moral belief in question is to be accepted.

2.6. The problem of arbitrariness

The second problem Ross’ appeal to self-evident principles of prima facie duty faces is the problem of arbitrariness. Ross indicates that there are moral beliefs that are relics of by gone systems and for that matter are arbitrary (Ross, 1930, p.13). I think what Ross rightly wants to suggest is that there are moral beliefs for which no rational basis can be given for their acceptance. An example of an arbitrary moral belief, according to Ross, is a moral belief that is held simply on the basis that it is endorsed by one’s society (Ross, 1930, p.14). Ross contends that so far as a necessary connection does not exist between being endorsed by Society x and being right, then moral beliefs held merely on societal basis are arbitrary. It seems Ross wants to suggest that his principles of prima facie duty are not justified simply because they are endorsed by society but also because they are self-evident. However, without a plausible proposal of how arbitrary moral beliefs can be distinguished from rationally justified ones, it is not clear why the principles of prima facie duty should be accorded a self-evident status and not construed as principles simply endorsed by some society. I argue that such a proposal is lacking and therefore Ross’ principles of prima facie duty risk being arbitrary.

It is important to point out that while Ross thinks the moral convictions of the thoughtful and well-educated provide the foundation for justifying moral beliefs, he concedes that not all of these moral convictions are accurate. This means that there ought to be some way to sift what is arbitrary and merely illusionary from what is justified. Indeed Ross opines that just as perceptual illusions are rejected only when they contradict with correct sensory perceptions, arbitrary moral beliefs of the thoughtful and well educated are also rejected when they conflict with ‘‘other con-
victions which stand better the test of reflection” (Ross, 1930, p.41). Thus it is clear that Ross thinks there are moral beliefs that are arbitrary and that these should be discarded. Furthermore he proposes the test of reflection as the way to discard the arbitrary moral beliefs. But is Ross’ proposal feasible? I don’t think Ross’ proposal is helpful. It would be recalled that reflection as Ross espouses it, must be *based on* the moral convictions of thoughtful and well educated people. Now if it is admitted that some of these moral convictions are erroneous and need to be discarded, it is not clear how reflection is going to be of help in separating what is arbitrary from what is justified. In the case of perceptual illusions, observation serves as an adequate tool of correction because the things observed are distinguished from the act of observation. Perhaps reflection as Ross construes it, would have been helpful if it were not *required* that it be *based* on the moral convictions of thoughtful and educated people. So required however, it is difficult to see how reflection can separate arbitrary moral convictions from justified moral convictions. How can we tell whether the moral convictions of the thoughtful and well-educated upon which reflection must be *based* are not arbitrary? In other words, how can reflection help us choose between a moral belief whose justification derives from being merely endorsed by some society and a moral belief that is self-evident? Since the self-evident status of Ross’ principles of prima facie duty are based on this questionable process of reflection there is cause to question whether they are really self-evident as claimed. No clear reason has been given for us to think that Ross’s principles of prima facie duty are self-evident and not arbitrary.

2.7. *Audi on Ross’ principles of prima facie duty.*

Robert Audi attempts to revise and improve upon Ross’ intuitionist approach to the justification of moral beliefs. Audi’s chief strategy is to give an alternative account of what it means for a
proposition to be self-evident.\textsuperscript{5} I argue in this section that notwithstanding Audi’s laudable efforts, his method of justification of moral beliefs suffers the same problems as Ross’.

Audi characterizes a self-evident proposition as follows:

a truth such that any adequate understanding of it meets two conditions: (a) in virtue of having that understanding, one is justified in believing the proposition (i.e., has justification for believing it, whether one in fact believes it or not); and (b) if one believes the proposition on the \textit{basis} of that understanding of it, then one knows it’’ (Audi, 2004, p.25).

Unlike Ross, Audi holds that being justified in believing a self-evident proposition does not require also knowing that it is self-evident. In Audi’s view one can apprehend the truth of a proposition that is self–evident without necessarily apprehending its self-evident nature. This is something that Audi considers Ross to have overlooked or at least not made explicitly clear. Audi remarks that ‘‘Ross also speaks (e.g., in the same passage) of the relevant moral and mathematical propositions’ becoming ‘‘self-evident to us’’. He does not always distinguish apprehending the truth of a proposition that \textit{is} self-evident from apprehending \textit{its self-evidence}’’ (Audi, 2004, p.42)

According to Audi, the question of knowing whether a proposition is self-evident or not is a second-order issue which is quite distinct from knowing whether it is true. It seems here, Audi wants to keep the question of justification distinct from the question of truth such that one might have true beliefs without possessing any justification for them. To what end however, does Audi posit such a distinction? According to him if we concede that grasping the truth of a self-evident proposition does not entail knowing that it is self-evident then one’s justification for it can be

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Audi use of the term \textit{proposition} can be interpreted as beliefs with propositional content. The use of the term \textit{proposition} therefore does not distract from the general tenor of this thesis.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
seen to be defeasible. Audi thinks that this view is somewhat attributable to Ross and can consequently exculpate him from thinking the principles of *prima facie* duty infallible. Audi remarks in the following:

> Once it is seen that in Ross’s intuitionism the primary role of intuition is to give us direct, i.e., non-inferential, knowledge (or at least justified belief) of the *truth*, rather than of the self-evidence, of moral propositions (especially certain moral principles), there is less reason to think that moral beliefs resting on an intuitive apprehension of principles are indefeasibly justified (Audi, 2004, p.45).

Audi’s interpretation of Ross however, is highly contestable in view of Ross’ explicitly stated position that the self-evident principles of *prima facie* duty are like mathematical axioms because they cannot be proven and indeed are in need of no proof. Ross’ view thus suggests that the self-evident principles of *prima facie* duty are infallible. With respect to Audi however, we may conclude that justification for the self-evident principles of *prima facie* duty are defeasible but how does one acquire that justification in the first place?

Audi claims that an adequate understanding of a self-evident proposition is what justifies one in believing it. He maintains that self-evident propositions can be complex and careful reflection is often needed in order to understand them. To clarify the notion of adequate understanding, Audi makes a distinction between *conclusions of reflection* and *conclusions of inference*.

He illustrates the difference as follows:

> Consider reading a poem with a view to deciding whether its language is artificial. After two readings, one silent and one aloud, we might judge that the language is indeed artificial. This judgment could be a response to evidential propositions that occur to one, say that the author has manipulated words to make the lines scan. But the judgment need not
so arise. If the artificiality is subtler, there may just be a stilted quality in the poem. In this second case, one judges from a global, intuitive sense of the integration of vocabulary, movement, and content. Call the first judgment of artificiality a conclusion of inference: it is premised on propositions noted as evidence. Call the second judgment a conclusion of reflection: it emerges from thinking about the poem as a whole, but not from one or more evidential premises (Audi, 2004, p.45).

It would seem that the distinction Audi wishes draw is that conclusions of inference result from explicit consideration of premises while conclusions of reflections are not results of such explicit consideration of premises. In other words, a person who arrives at a conclusion of reflection is not aware of anything that acts as a premise or ground for his conclusion. A conclusion of reflection, according to Audi, is comparable to how one responds to the sight of a painting; one makes a judgement about it without carrying out any inferential reasoning. Having distinguished between conclusions of reflection and conclusions of inference, Audi nevertheless goes ahead to concede that one could in principle formulate explicit premises for a conclusion of reflection (Audi, 2004, p. 47). One could do so because – as Audi has already maintained – knowing the truth of a self-evident proposition does not require knowing that it is self-evident, i.e., the evidence for its truth lies only in itself. Thus it is quite possible to justifiably arrive at the truth of a self-evident proposition by some process of inference. It is important to point out that for Audi, adequately understanding a self-evident proposition by reflection may also require some kind of inferential reasoning. This kind of inferential reasoning is however distinguished from conclusions of inference by the fact that the premises of reasoning are internal to the self-evident proposition in question. (Audi, 2004, p. 52). I want to point out that it is not clear to me what Audi means by drawing inferences that are internal to a self-evident proposition. How different are
such inferences from inferences drawn from premises purportedly external to the self-evident proposition? Perhaps the idea is that internal inferences are drawn from a self-evident proposition by merely analysing its conceptual contents.\(^6\) Be that as it may, what clearly Audi wants to defend is that although a self-evident belief can be justified inferentially, it need not be so justified. Thus Audi states that “still, the point that a ground of intuitive judgment can be formulated through articulation of one’s basis for judging does not entail that the ground must do its justificatory work in an inferential way” (Audi, 2004, p. 47).

Adequate understanding, in Audi’s view, is what reveals truth non-inferentially (Audi, 2004, p.48). In relation to self-evident propositions one may grasp their truth non-inferentially without necessarily grasping that they are self-evident. Thus an individual may have an adequate understanding of a self-evident proposition though he feels no compulsion to believe it since its self-evidence may not be obvious. According to Audi, whether one in fact believes it or not, one is justified in believing it by virtue of having adequate understanding of it. Thus if we assume, for instance, that the proposition All bachelors are unmarried is a self-evident proposition, then Audi would have it that we are justified in believing it if we adequately understand it even though we may actually not believe it.

On the basis of his account of what a self-evident proposition is and how an individual can be justified in believing it, Audi maintains that Ross’ principles of prima facie duty are self-evident. Furthermore, that putting them forth as self-evident moral propositions does not require second-order account of what makes them self-evident. Indeed Audi indicates that ordinary moral agents can postulate Ross’ principles of prima facie duty as an answer to the regress argument without incurring the extra task of explaining why they are self-evident (Audi, 2004, p. 44). It is

---

\(^6\) Audi appears to hint at such an analysis of inferences internal to the self-evident proposition See Audi. p. 52
difficult however for me to grasp why *ordinary moral agents* should be deemed to have an answer to an epistemic problem and yet be spared the task of defending and justifying their answer. One can safely conclude that Audi is committed to a foundationalist epistemology as far as justification of moral beliefs is concerned. Ross’ principles of *prima facie* duty play the role of basic beliefs that are justified non-inferentially and consequently bring a stop to the infinite of regress of reasons. In Audi’s view, they are self-evident moral propositions though an individual may not believe them to be justified due to lack of *adequate understanding*.

Audi does offer a much more extensive discussion on the problem of epistemic moral disagreement than Ross. The question I want to explore here is how, in Audi’s view, Ross’ principles of *prima facie* duty can be defended in the face of a denial of their self-evident status. Audi has number of responses to the objection that the self-evident status of Ross’ principles may be questionable in the face of epistemic moral disagreement. One response he offers is that the failure to assent to the self-evident status of Ross’ principles of *prima facie* duty may be attributed to lack of adequate understanding on the part of the objector. Audi asserts:

> Indeed, given the complexities of understanding ‗prima facie’, some people have difficulty understanding Ross’ principles in the first place. Without adequately understanding them, one has little or no reason to assent to them; and—given that they attribute pervasive duties to us and are to that extent demanding—there is some reason to expect resistance to granting them (Audi, 2004, p. 60).

Explaining lack of belief in the self-evident status of Ross’ principles of *prima facie* duty as a case of lack of adequate understanding seems implausible to me. Since Audi has clearly stated that one may understand a self-evident moral proposition without believing it, the absence of belief in a self-evident moral proposition cannot be taken as an indication of lack of adequate un-
derstanding. Besides, when dealing with an epistemic peer as pointed out earlier, one cannot presume any cognitive defect on their part. It seems to me that one may very well adequately understand the Ross’ principles of prima facie duty and yet not agree that they are self-evident.

Another response Audi offers centres on philosophers worrying about the self-evident status of Ross’ principles of *prima facie* duty. According to Audi, philosophers worry about the self-evident status of Ross’ principles of *prima facie* duty because they think that they need second-order knowledge of their self-evident status of before assenting to them (Audi, 2004, p.60). In Audi’s view however, they can very well assent to the principles even if they do not know whether it is actually self-evident or not. Audi’s response here too is problematic. If assent can be given to Ross’ principles of prima duty on grounds other than their self-evidence, it is unclear why they should be put forward as self-evident principles in the first place. If on the other hand, it is their self-evidence that is in contention then Audi has not provided an account of how that may be shown. Finally, Audi maintains that even if it is granted that the self-evident status of Ross’s principles may be legitimately doubted, “‘there is no need disagree about the basic moral force of the considerations they cite’” (Audi, 2004, p. 60). Audi illustrates his point about the basic moral force of Ross’ principles provide with the principle of fidelity. According to Audi, when we promise to do something, we take the fact of our having promised to do it as a basic moral reason to fulfil our promise. In Audi’s view it is basic because we do not consider any other ground to fulfil our promise except the fact that we promised to do so. Audi’s point is that at this level of thinking about Ross’ principles of *prima facie* duty, there is not much disagreement that they give us reason to act in certain ways. This is what Audi calls agreement *in reasons* (Audi, 2004, p.61). According to Audi those who agree in reasons need not formulate in explicit
terms why what they take as a reason actually counts as a reason. They need no beliefs, Audi says, about the epistemic status of reasons. Lets us consider the following illustration by Audi:

If I do something simply because I promised to, I am like a Russian “plain man.” In consciously doing the deed because I promised to, I am manifesting my acceptance of promising as providing a reason. That I promised to do the deed is my reason for doing it; and I unselfconsciously accept its reason-giving status (Audi, 2004, p.61)

The key term here is unselfconsciously, which suggests that the reason-giving nature of the principle is not consciously available to the agent. Suppose, however, that I meet an epistemic equal who challenges my claim that the fact that he has made a promise gives him or her prima facie reason to fulfil it, what plausible answer can I give? The point I want to emphasize here is that if two epistemic equals disagree as to whether, say, there is reason to keep promises or that it is self-evident that one must keep one’s promises, it would not be of much help for one party to suggest that the reason (to keep promises) is unconsciously available to the other party. The question here is how a person can have a reason to do something when yet the reason is not consciously available to him. If a person’s reason for a moral action is not consciously available to him, it is not clear to me how he can be said to have such a reason. I think any moral agent can coherently deny that Ross’ principles of prima facie duty give him a basic moral reason to act in some specific manner. And this denial cannot be attributed to lack of adequate understanding.

Audi also concedes that there are moral beliefs that are arbitrary and an individual must be able to distinguish these ones from justified ones (Audi, 2004, p. 38). The difficulty here is whether Audi provides some plausible proposal as to how this might be accomplished. If Audi successfully provides such a way then there is reason to believe that Ross’ principles of prima facie duty are not arbitrary. Audi seems to allow for some weighing and comparing of moral beliefs to sort

38
out what is arbitrary from what is justified. Audi, in contrast to Ross can allow weighing and comparing of moral beliefs because he does not think self-evident moral beliefs have indefeasible justification and furthermore that they can be justified through inferential reasoning (Audi, 2004, p.39). Perhaps an individual may discover that his self-evident moral belief is mistaken through comparison with other beliefs that he holds. However, given the difficulty in Audi’s notion of drawing inferences that are internal to the self-evident proposition, it is no clear how the weighing and comparing of moral beliefs is to be carried out. If the inferences drawn are supposed to be internal to the self-evident moral proposition, it seems the self-evident moral proposition in question will be immune to any genuine revision through comparison with other moral beliefs. It appears one is more likely to hold the self-evident moral proposition in question come what may because all an individual does in this case is to compare it with propositions that are internal to it. Given Audi’s hint that drawing inferences internal to the self-evident proposition bothers on analyzing the conceptual content of the proposition, it is difficult to envisage how any genuine comparison can be made with other conflicting and opposing propositions. What kind of weighing and comparing of moral beliefs will show that Ross’ principles of prima facie duty are self-evident? Audi seems to lack a clear answer to this question. Therefore like Ross, I think Audi has not succeeded in making a case for the existence of self-evident moral beliefs that can answer Sinnott-Armstrong’s regress argument against the justification of moral beliefs.
CHAPTER THREE

NATURALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE JUSTIFICATION OF MORAL BELIEFS

3.1. Introduction

Perhaps if moral beliefs can be inferred from justified non-moral beliefs then the regress argument can be answered. Naturalistic epistemology is a family of views about how the methods and procedures of science can be employed to answer epistemic questions of knowledge and justification. However, in view of the particular author whose work I will be analyzing in this section, I shall restrict myself to a specific conception of naturalistic epistemology. Naturalistic epistemology as I shall understand it in this chapter is the method of justifying beliefs by providing an objective causal explanation of them based on empirical observation. Is it possible to justify moral beliefs by providing a true causal explanation of them on the basis of empirical observation? In this chapter, I examine Richard Boyd’s application of naturalistic epistemology to the justification of moral beliefs. I argue that Boyd does not make a good case for the view that moral beliefs can be justified by providing a true account of their causal origin based on empirical observation.

3.2. What is Naturalistic Epistemology?

Naturalistic epistemology can be defined as the attempt to justify beliefs by showing how those beliefs arose in the first place and what bearing that has on their justification status. For instance, if I am in doubt as to whether my belief that there is black table in front of me is justified, naturalistic epistemology enjoins an investigation into the process that led to the formation of those beliefs. This will involve providing an accurate account of the causal origin of my belief. According to Lewis, causal explanation has to do with providing information about the causal histo-
ry of an event (Lewis, 1986, p.217). Scientists typically explain events in the world by providing some information on how they can be causally traced to some other event in the world. For example, scientists explain the continuous expansion of the universe by providing information on its causal link to the Big Bang Event. The true causal explanation on this score is the one that accurately reflects the causal mechanisms underlying the phenomenon to be explained. Thus from the perspective of naturalistic epistemology, a plausible answer to the question of whether our beliefs about the external world are justified must reflect the real causal structure that underlies the formation of these beliefs and to accomplish that, one requires empirical observation.

Naturalistic Epistemology has its roots in the work of the philosopher W. V Quine. In his article “Epistemology Naturalized”, Quine undermines the foundationalist approach to the justification of our beliefs about the external world (Quine, 2012, p.242). He points out that the attempt to derive our beliefs about the external world from *a priori* propositions of logic and set theory is an impossible task. Quine sees the persistent failure of the project of providing indubitable foundations for our empirical beliefs as pointing to the need for new approach (Quine, 2012, p.244). In place of this foundationalist epistemology, Quine proposes the actual procedures and methods of natural science (Quine, 2012, p. 247). In Quine’s view, an enquiry into whether our beliefs about the external world are justified is synonymous with a scientific inquiry into how in fact we arrive at such beliefs. Quine’s proposal has however been objected to on the ground that it abandons the normative question of what we ought to believe for the descriptive question of how beliefs about the world are formed (Kim, 1988, p. 389). Quine has retorted that his critics are mistaken in construing the normative element to be absent from his account. According to him, our beliefs about the external world *ought* to be based on the scientific account of how we arrive at
such beliefs given that such an account is based on the evidence of the senses (Quine, 1992, p.19).

Goldman’s causal reliabilism is another version of naturalistic epistemology. The causal reliabilism theory holds that a belief is justified if it is caused by a reliable belief-forming process (Goldman, 1979, p.4). Goldman maintains that the belief-forming process in question must have the tendency over time to lead to true beliefs. While Goldman, unlike Quine does not think epistemology is to be converted into a scientific project, he nevertheless suggests that the help of empirical science should be enlisted in addressing epistemological questions. According to Goldman:

not everything about the mental that is epistemologically relevant can be established or understood via armchair or introspective methods. Instead, it is valuable—indeed essential—to bring empirical psychology into the picture as an aide-de-camp to the traditional epistemological enterprise (Goldman, 2017, p. 18).

It seems that cognitive science, as Goldman understands it, is supposed to inform us about which of our cognitive faculties or methods of belief formation generate reliable beliefs and under what conditions.

3.3. Naturalistic Epistemology as applied to the justification of moral beliefs.

While different philosophers conceive naturalistic epistemology differently when applied to the justification of moral beliefs, Brandt has nevertheless identified some views these philosophers generally share in common:(1) Moral statements connecting some moral term with some non-moral predicate can be literally true or false. (2) These statements are sometimes true (3) Moral properties are identical to natural properties that is they play a role in our empirical thinking like the theoretical properties of science. (4) Knowledge of the truth of moral statements can be ob-
tained through ordinary methods of empirical and moral reasoning but do not require appeal to self-evident moral beliefs. (5) The above conclusions do not derive solely from an analysis of the meaning of moral terms (Brandt, 1996, p.165).

Naturalistic epistemology applied to the justification of moral beliefs involves showing how moral beliefs are causally linked to phenomena in the natural world. It becomes an empirical study of the processes by which we arrive at our moral beliefs. As Copp remarks, it is the claim that “an acceptable moral epistemology must fit with the psychological facts about how we come to have moral belief” (Copp, 2007, p. 67). The justification of moral beliefs therefore ceases to be an a priori issue since empirical investigation is required to determine what factors influence how we form our moral beliefs. Much like naturalistic epistemology in science, naturalistic epistemology as applied to moral beliefs seeks to do away with appeal to self-evident moral beliefs. The difficulty that the attempt to justify moral beliefs by naturalistic epistemology encounters is to show how moral beliefs are causally linked to natural properties in the natural world such that observation of the natural properties in question explain why we hold the moral beliefs we have. Even if it can be shown that there are natural properties such that observation of these properties adequately explains why we hold the moral beliefs we have, how moral beliefs are justified by providing a true causal explanation of them is still problematic. The point here is that moral beliefs have normative content, i.e., they are beliefs about what ought to be the case. Empirical observation of natural properties on the other hand only reveals what is the case. How is it possible then to justify beliefs that have normative content with beliefs that lack normative content? In the next section, I espouse how Boyd attempts to justify moral beliefs by providing a true account of their causal origin based on empirical observation.
3.4. Boyd’s application of naturalistic epistemology to the justification of moral beliefs.

As pointed out earlier, if naturalistic epistemology can be deployed to justify moral beliefs, this will constitute an answer to Sinnott-Armstrong’s regress argument. It would seem that from a true causal explanation of our moral beliefs based on empirical observation, one could infer that they are justified. In this section I rehearse how Boyd applies naturalistic epistemology to the justification of moral beliefs.

In order to apply naturalistic epistemology to the justification of moral beliefs, Boyd first espouses a causal theory of linguistic reference. Boyd spells out his motive for this move:

The connection between causal theories of reference and naturalistic theories of knowledge and of definitions is quite intimate: reference is itself an epistemic notion and the sorts of causal connections which are relevant to reference are just those which are involved in the reliable regulation of belief (Boyd, 1988, 195).

The point Boyd seems to be making is that if it is possible to indicate the causal mechanisms that regulate the use of some term \( t \), then the question of whether beliefs expressed with the term \( t \) are true, must be answered by deference to the same causal mechanisms. Thus for Boyd, a causal theory of reference is also an epistemic theory, i.e., it is a theory about how beliefs expressed with the relevant term in question can be known to be true. The causal theory of linguistic reference was first propounded by Saul Kripke.

The gist of the causal theory of linguistic reference is that names pick out natural properties in the world by virtue of an initial event in which the referent of name is fixed by ostentation and subsequent episodes whereby the name is used to refer to the initial referent (Kripke, 1972, p.87). What links the subsequent use of the name to the initial referent is a causal chain leading
back to the initial event where the referent was first fixed. In his *Naming and Necessity*, Kripke offers an example of this process:

Someone, let’s say, a baby is born; his parent call him by a certain name. They talk about him to their friends. Other people meet him. Through various sorts of talk the name is spread link to link as if by a chain. A speaker who is on the far end of this chain who has heard about say Richard Feynman in the market place or elsewhere may be referring to Richard Feynman even though he can’t remember from whom he ever heard of Feynman. He knows that Feynman is a famous physicist. A certain passage of communication reaching ultimately to the man himself does reach the speaker. He then is referring to Feynman even though he can’t identify him uniquely (Kripke, 1972, p.91).

The point Kripke is making with the above example is that names refer to objects by virtue of an initial act of naming where a causal link is established between the object and the name by which one refers to it. This same process, according to Kripke, explains how the theoretical terms of science refer to the natural properties of things in the world. Thus a team of scientific experts initially fix the referent for a term like *electron* by mapping it to some property in the natural world. Subsequent usages of the term refer to this property by virtue of membership in the relevant community in which the initial act of naming occurred. From Kripke’s point of view, it will be necessarily true by virtue of the initial act of naming by the relevant members of the community that an *electron* possesses the property x. However this truth can only be discovered *a posteriori*. In other words, an individual would have to be empirically acquainted with causal mechanisms that led to the association of the term *electron* with property x (Kripke, 1972, p. 105).
Boyd supplements Kripke’s causal theory of linguistic reference with his own modified version involving a causal *regulation* of the use of linguistic terms. He writes:

Roughly, and for non-degenerate cases, a term $t$ refers to a kind (property, relation, etc.) $k$ just in case there exist causal mechanisms whose tendency is to bring it about, over time, that what is predicated of the term $t$ will be approximately true of $k$ [...]. Such mechanisms will typically include the existence of procedures which are approximately accurate for recognizing members or instances of $k$ (at least for easy cases) and which relevantly govern the use of $t$, the social transmission of certain relatively approximately true beliefs regarding $k$, formulated as claims about $t$ [...], a pattern of deference to experts on $k$ with respect to the use of $t$, etc. [...] (Boyd, 1988, p. 195).

In the modified casual theory of linguistic reference that Boyd espouses above, a term $t$ refers to a property $k$, if there exist causal mechanisms that increase the tendency that whatever is said of the term $t$ over time will be approximately true of the property $k$. Therefore the gap between the term $t$ and its referent $k$, which is a natural property in the world, is mediated by certain causal mechanisms. For Boyd, the question of which features about $k$ the term $t$ picks out is to be answered by attending to norms regulating the use of $t$ in some community of discourse. Presumably, the norms in question would have arisen as a result of a causal interaction between the natural property $k$ and the language using community. This idea of a causal interaction between language and the world is what Boyd has in mind when he characterizes the reference relation as involving the causal regulation of a term by the property or kind picked out. Thus in order to find out the features of the natural property $k$ being talked about one has to defer to the norms and rules that regulate use of the term $t$ which is employed to talk about $k$. In Boyd’s view, these will include the norms sanctioned by the expert members of the community of discourse in question.
One can think for instance of the norms and rules guiding the usage of specific scientific terms as sanctioned by expert scientists. It is important to point that for Boyd the question of which norms regulate the use of the term $t$ and for that matter what the term $t$ refers to will be an empirical matter. Given Boyd’s admission of the intimate connection of reference and epistemic access, it follows that to find out whether beliefs about the referent of the term $t$, are true, one must undertake empirical investigation.

Boyd proceeds to point out that the term *goodness* refers to a natural property in this world. He holds that goodness is a property quite similar to the other properties which are studied by psychologists, historians, and social scientists, and observations will play the same role in moral inquiry that they play in the other kinds of empirical inquiry about people. He identifies the property of goodness with human goods which satisfy physical, social and psychological needs. These needs include the need for love and friendship, the need for intellectual and artistic appreciation the need to engage in cooperative efforts, the need to have control over one’s own life, the need for physical recreation, etc. Boyd maintains that these needs (when satisfied) are *homeostatically* clustered which means that they are bound together by certain causal mechanisms and for that matter mutually reinforce each other (Boyd, 1988, p.203). Furthermore, moral goodness also entails mechanisms, policies and actions that are implemented for the mutual realization of the human goods. It is important to point out that for Boyd, it always remains an open question whether some particular action is good or not just as it is always an open question in science whether some object exhibits the property x or not. This is because empirical investigation is required to determine whether that action instantiates the natural properties of human good.

In Boyd’s view, beliefs about what is good are justified by providing a true account of the causes that regulate beliefs about what is good. Since providing such a causal account requires the use
of the senses, Boyd concludes that moral beliefs like scientific beliefs are justified by observation\(^7\) (Boyd, 1988, p.206). Indeed Boyd argues for his own conception of moral goodness by appealing to the empirical fact of changes in conceptions of moral goodness within history. According to him, there have been changes in humanity’s conceptions of moral goodness in response to evolutionary and psychological facts about human nature (Boyd, 1988, p. 208). These changes, Boyd maintains, are skewed towards an understanding of moral goodness as the fulfillment of the needs he elucidates in his consequentialist conception of moral goodness. Boyd nevertheless realizes that there are still existing conceptions of moral goodness that identify moral goodness with the will of God. For him, such conceptions of moral goodness are mistaken in the light of the causal theory of reference he advances for moral terms. According to Boyd, what in fact regulates the use of moral terms like good and right are facts about human well-being. Thus a person’s use of the term moral goodness is in fact regulated by facts about human well-being though he might be mistaken about the real nature of these facts, describing it as the will of God. Boyd’s argument in short, is that, what causes people to use the term morally good are facts about human well-being world located in the natural world and these are moral facts. He maintains that as evidence for this claim, we must look to how there has been changes within history in our conception of moral goodness. Such changes can only be explained as the effect of facts about human well-being on our belief-forming mechanisms about morality. Our beliefs about moral goodness must therefore be explained by reference to facts of human well-being such as the satisfaction of love and friendship needs.

\(^7\) Boyd proposes here that observation should replace intuition in Rawls method of reflective equilibrium in order for it to become a viable method of acquiring moral knowledge. This attempt however to reconstruct Rawls method of reflective equilibrium is clearly different from the interpretation I offer here and indeed different from Rawls’ own description of his method.
3.5. Criticisms of Boyd’s application of naturalistic epistemology to the justification of moral beliefs.

Has Boyd successfully shown that moral beliefs can be justified by providing a true causal explanation of them based on empirical observation? I argue that Boyd has not made a plausible case for the justification of moral beliefs by naturalistic epistemology.

Firstly, it is not clear to me how empirical observation of the natural world can lead to objective conclusions about the casual mechanisms underlying the formation of our moral beliefs. Given that we approach empirical facts with pre-conceived notions of right and wrong, it seems more probable that different people might render different accounts of the same empirical fact. Let us take for instance the natural properties in this world that in Boyd’s view, possess the property of goodness, i.e., satisfaction of friendship needs, satisfaction of love needs, etc. It is very possible that an individual can agree with Boyd that these actions are indeed good. However, if asked for an account of the causal mechanisms that underlie his belief that these actions are good, he may not cite the observable consequences of these actions as Boyd would. He can offer a causal explanation that does not mention the observable consequences of the actions in question. He might for instance, say that his belief that they are good, is caused by the will of God. The same problem arises when we consider what Boyd cites as evidence for his claim that goodness is a natural property of this world, i.e., the historical fact that people have adopted consequentialist conceptions of goodness, caused by natural facts about goodness in the world. Boyd’s historical fact can however be explained in different ways. One could for instance say that such changes were caused by some divine being or by some non-empirical property. Nothing by way of historical fact can count as an incontestable evidence for deciding in favour of one theory of explanation or the other with regards to what causes people hold the moral beliefs that they have.
To illustrate the difficulty in the idea of arriving at true causal explanation of our moral beliefs by means of empirical observation let us analyze the following example by Harman. A man observes a group of children pouring gasoline on an innocent cat intending to set the innocent animal on fire (Harman, 1988, p.4). According to Harman, a person who comes across such a scene will obviously judge such an act to be wrong. How will the question of what caused the moral judgment be answered? I suppose on Boyd’s account, the moral judgment can be explained as being due to observing the property of wrongness that the act possess. Harman protests against such an account. Indeed, in his view, one could explain what caused the moral judgment without any talk of observing any property of wrongness. It is sufficient, in Harman view to observe what kind of action it is and to have a *pre-conceived* belief that it is wrong (Harman, 1988, p.7). The question of observing the wrongness of the action does not arise. I think that Boyd’s idea that empirical observation can help us give an objective answer to the question of the causal mechanisms underlying the formation of moral beliefs is tainted by his own substantive presuppositions about what morally good actions are. Moral beliefs, according to Boyd can be justified by giving an objective account of the causes of these beliefs by means of empirical observation. However if empirical observation cannot help us settle on the objective causes of our moral beliefs then it is not clear to me how moral beliefs on Boyd’s account, can be justified.

Secondly, even if it is granted that an objective account of the causes of our moral beliefs can be offered it is still not clear how our moral beliefs can be justified by such an account. To use Boyd’s own example, suppose it was established by empirical observation that the belief that *friendship is good*, is caused by certain natural properties in the world, how will such an objective account of the cause of this belief show that the moral belief is justified? It is important to point out that what is at issue here is the justification of *moral* beliefs. What is implied, for in-
stance, in the belief that friendship is good is that friendship *ought* to be promoted. To put the matter briefly, moral beliefs have *normative* content. It is therefore difficult to see how a normative conclusion that some action *ought* to be promoted can be justified by being inferred from a *descriptive* premise of what causes people to believe that the action in question ought to be promoted. The following argument will bring out my point clearly:

**Prem**: Peter’s belief that friendship ought to be promoted is caused by a certain natural property $X$ in the world.

∴ Friendship ought to be promoted.

One may very well grant that the premise of the above argument is true but it is not clear how one can make the move from the descriptive premise to the normative conclusion. The problem here is what Scottish philosopher David Hume called the *is-ought fallacy*. According to Hume, at no point in time in any process of reasoning is it logically permissible to infer conclusions about what ought to be the case from premises about what is the case (Hume, 1978, p.112). What Boyd advocates for, is an empirically based psychological account of what causes people to hold the moral beliefs they have. Even if such any account is true, say his own consequentialist account, it is not clear how the moral beliefs can be justified by being inferred from any such account given that moral beliefs have normative content. One may conclude that in view of the above discussions, Boyd has not succeeded in showing that moral beliefs can be justified by being inferred from justified non-moral premises and thus he has not successfully the applied naturalistic epistemology to the justification of moral beliefs.
CHAPTER FOUR

RAWLS’ REFLECTIVE EQUILIBRIUM AS A METHOD OF JUSTIFICATION OF MORAL BELIEFS.

4.1. Introduction

The central problem of this thesis is how moral beliefs can be justified in view of Sinnott-Armstrong’s epistemic regress argument against the justification of moral beliefs. The inadequacies of certain extant responses to the problem of how moral beliefs can be justified have been pointed out in the previous chapters. In this chapter I will argue for Rawls’ reflective equilibrium as a plausible method of justifying moral beliefs in response to Sinnott-Armstrong’s regress argument. The problems that Sinnott-Armstrong’s regress argument poses for Rawls’ method of reflective equilibrium are circularity, arbitrariness and epistemic peer moral disagreement. This chapter shows how these problems can be surmounted.

4.2. Rawls’ method of reflective equilibrium

A defence of Rawls reflective equilibrium must proceed from a clear elucidation of what the method entails. This section is therefore dedicated to a clear exposition of the method of reflective equilibrium as conceptualized by Rawls.

In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls employs the term *reflective equilibrium* to describe a method for arriving at a justified conception of justice. The method of reflective equilibrium, according to Rawls, begins with a set of initial judgments he terms as *considered convictions of justice*. Rawls interprets *considered convictions of justice* as intuitive beliefs about justice held with the greatest confidence. In the next stage of the method, moral principles are formulated to explain and account for the considered convictions of justice. Where there is inconsistency between principles
and considered moral judgments, one works from both ends, revising judgments and principles until one achieves coherence between them. In summary, Rawls writes:

By going back and forth, sometimes altering the conditions of the contractual circumstances, at others withdrawing our judgments and conforming them to principle, I assume that eventually we shall find a description of the initial situation that both expresses reasonable conditions and yields principles which match our considered judgments duly pruned and adjusted. This state of affairs I refer to as reflective equilibrium. It is equilibrium because at last our principles and judgments coincide and it is reflective since we know to what principles our judgments conform and the premises of their derivation (Rawls, 1971, p.12).

There are three important features of the method of reflective equilibrium I would like to elaborate on. The first important feature I wish to point out is the feature of coherence. Rawls’ emphasis on the achievement of coherence agrees with his claim that justification of the conception of justice is a matter of many considerations mutually supporting each other. Coherence naturally implies logical consistency between the set of beliefs one holds in view of the fact that Rawls speaks of the derivation of moral principles from premises. A proper logical structure between one’s set of beliefs implies that one belief should not contradict another. Beyond construing derivation in the sense of logical consistency, one could also understand it in terms of the explanatory relations between the set of beliefs. Suppose Kwame believes that his friend’s act of lying is bad. As a reason for holding this belief, Kwame can cite a general principle that lying is bad. In this case, the particular belief and the general principle will cohere in terms of explanation. Indeed, it is in this sense that Rawls speaks of the match between moral principles and considered convictions of justice. The concept of coherence is fleshed out in detail by Bonjour as follows:
(1) A system of beliefs is coherent only if it is logically consistent.

(2) A system of beliefs is coherent in proportion to its degree of probabilistic consistency.

(3) The coherence of a system of beliefs is increased by the presence of inferential connections between its component beliefs and increased in proportion to the number and strength of such connections.

(4) The coherence of a system of beliefs is diminished to the extent to which it is divided into subsystems of beliefs which are relatively unconnected to each other by inferential connections.

(5) The coherence of a system of beliefs is decreased in proportion to the presence of unexplained anomalies in the believed content of the system (Bonjour, 1985, p. 95).

The second important feature of the method is the revisability of all considerations that enter into this method of belief justification. No set of beliefs, as it were, are immune to change. This feature of the revisability of all beliefs distinguishes Rawls’ reflective equilibrium from the intuitionist method of justification where some beliefs are impervious to change no matter what. In the method of reflective equilibrium as Rawls espouses it, there is no a priori constriction on which belief or set of beliefs should be altered if revision becomes necessary. The subjection of all beliefs to revision is best illustrated by Quine’s concept of web of belief. On Quine’s model, all our beliefs are subject to change in the light of experience. The seemingly unchangeable beliefs such as logical and mathematical truths simply occupy the centre of the web and for that matter are just difficult to alter but they are alterable nevertheless. At the periphery of the web, according to Quine, are the beliefs that are more closely tied to experience therefore easily revisable. Nevertheless irrespective of which position every belief or set of beliefs occupy in the web, all beliefs are subject to change (Quine, 2012, p.244).
The third important feature of the method of reflective equilibrium I want to consider is reflection, which involves conscious awareness of the reasons that form the basis of one’s beliefs. Reflection as construed by Rawls seems to entail recognizing the inferential links between the set of beliefs one holds. According to him, the method is reflective because “we know to what principles our judgments conform and the premises of their derivation” (Rawls, 1971, p. 12). This means that some kind of internal access to the grounds and reasons for one’s beliefs is required such that one is capable at least in principle of citing what those reasons are. In summary, the method of reflective equilibrium as described by Rawls is marked by three salient features; coherence, revisability of all beliefs and reflection.

In his article “The Independence of Moral Theory” Rawls discusses his method of reflective equilibrium again. However in this article he discusses wide reflective equilibrium, distinguishing it from the earlier account narrow reflective equilibrium. The distinction lies in the nature and scope of the beliefs that enter into the process of belief justification. In the case of narrow reflective equilibrium as described in the previous paragraph, one works at achieving coherence between particular moral judgments (considered convictions of justice) and general moral principles (two principles of justice) that explain or account for these particular moral judgments. Wide reflective equilibrium however incorporates a much larger set of beliefs in the belief justification process, considering beliefs of a second party as well. Rawls writes:

Furthermore, because our inquiry is philosophically motivated, we are interested in what conceptions people would affirm when they achieve wide and not just narrow reflective equilibrium.....Taking this process to the limit, one seeks the conception of or plurality of conceptions that would survive the rational consideration of all feasible conceptions and all reasonable arguments for them. (Rawls, 1974, p.8).
Thus apart from the particular moral beliefs and the general moral principles that explain the particular moral beliefs, one must consider all *feasible conceptions and all reasonable arguments for them*. This latter class of much broader beliefs is what Rawls calls *background theories*. Rawls’ conceptions of personhood and society as captured in his description of the original position serve as good examples of background theories. Background theories can consist of both descriptive and normative beliefs. They must also cohere with the particular moral beliefs and the general moral principles. Furthermore, they are equally subject to revision. Thus, according to Daniels:

> the method of wide reflective equilibrium is an attempt to produce coherence in an ordered triple of sets of beliefs held by a particular person, namely, (a) a set of considered moral judgments, (b) a set of moral principles, and (c) a set of relevant background theories (Norman, 1979, p.258).

Wide reflective equilibrium, as described above would seem to be a humanly impossible task. One might object that given the very wide scope of the beliefs that wide reflective equilibrium is supposed to embody, it is quite beyond anybody’s cognitive powers to take into consideration *all* feasible conceptions and *all* reasonable arguments for them. In response, Rawls maintains that the method of wide reflective equilibrium is a regulative *ideal* for justifying one’s moral beliefs (Rawls, 1974, p.10). The point Rawls wishes to express is that employing the method of wide reflective equilibrium involves making the effort to take into account the most comprehensive set of beliefs as possible though the possibility still remains that as a matter of fact not all beliefs relevant for achieving justification might be considered.

In summary, Rawls’ reflective equilibrium is a method of forming justified moral beliefs which involves achieving coherence between one’s moral as well as relevant non-moral beliefs by
means of reflection. It is important to also mention that wide reflective equilibrium as distinguished from narrow reflective equilibrium possesses a dialogical aspect which has to do with taking into consideration alternative and diverse points of view.

4.3. Is reflective equilibrium viciously circular?

As pointed out in the first chapter of this thesis, reflective equilibrium as a coherentist method of justification must surmount the problem of vicious circularity as a way of answering Sinnott-Armstrong’s regress argument against the justification of moral beliefs. In this section, I answer the vicious circularity charge by developing a thesis of moral belief ascription holism based on Donald Davidson’s thesis of belief ascription holism. If the thesis of moral belief ascription holism is plausible then it follows that although reflective equilibrium entails circularity, the circularity involved is a virtuous one.

A circular argument is can be defined as an argument in which the premise (s) is reinstated in the conclusion. It is termed as vicious if the premise(s) provide no genuine support for the conclusion and for that matter is uninformative. Not all circular argument however ought to be characterized as vicious. It seems in cases where although the premise(s) is somewhat reinstated in the conclusion, it nevertheless provides genuine support to the conclusion, one could maintain that the circularity is virtuous (Goodman, 2012, p. 233). Sinnott-Armstrong’s case is that if in justifying any moral belief \( p \), an individual would have to cite \( p \) itself as a premise in support of itself and then the justification is circular and vicious. I argue against this position in what follows.

Davidson’s thesis of belief ascription holism is the view that an individual cannot ascribe a belief either to himself or another without at the same time presupposing the existence of a background of beliefs. He remarks in following:
One holistic thesis is that the identity of a given thought depends in part on its relations to other thoughts. The simplest question we can raise about holism, therefore, is whether a creature could entertain a single thought, since if a creature could entertain a single thought, it would be plausible to hold that even given more than a single thought, each thought might be essentially independent of other thoughts there might be no constraints on the combinations of thoughts that were possible (Davidson, 2004, p.11).

In response to the question of whether a creature could entertain a single thought (belief) Davidson’s answer is that it is not possible. How does Davidson defend his answer?

What makes Davidson’s thesis of belief ascription holism thrive is the interdependence he establishes between the notions of belief, meaning and truth. According to Davidson, ‘‘the notion of a belief is the notion of a state that may or may not jibe with reality’’ (Davidson, 1986, p.318). Thus for Davidson, beliefs are veridical, i.e., they are by nature truth-apt. Not only are beliefs veridical but according to Davidson they are intimately connected with meaning. He asserts as follows: ‘‘Belief, however, depends equally on meaning, for the only access to the fine structure and individuation of beliefs is through the sentences speakers and interpreters of speakers use to express and describe belief’’(Davidson, 1986,p.318). On the basis of this interdependence of meaning, truth and belief, Davidson argues that since the meaning of a word cannot be given in isolation from the meaning of other words\(^8\), it follows that a belief cannot be ascribed independently of ascribing other beliefs. Let us take as an example, the belief that Grass is Green. Davidson’s view is that if the belief that Grass is Green is true then it presupposes a background of true beliefs about the meaning of the terms that compose the belief sentence, i.e., It presupposes true beliefs about the meaning of the terms Grass, Green, is . To give the meaning of these

---

composite terms in turn equally presupposes true beliefs about the meaning of other terms in the language. Davidson also advances a principle of charity which requires ascribing beliefs to others against a background of beliefs that they hold (Davidson, 1974, p.19). The principle of charity enjoins that in ascribing beliefs to others one must aim for the maximum coherence in their total body of beliefs.

In view of the foregoing, I define moral belief ascription holism as the thesis that an individual cannot ascribe a moral belief either to himself or another without at the same time presupposing the existence of a background of moral and non-moral beliefs. For instance to ascribe the belief that Stealing is wrong to myself presupposes a background of non-moral beliefs about what kinds of act instantiate the concept stealing and moral beliefs about what kinds of act instantiate the concept wrong. I employ Davidson’s principle of charity in this case too. Thus to ascribe a moral belief to others requires presupposing that they possess a background of moral beliefs and non-moral beliefs.

What is the bearing of the thesis of moral belief ascription holism on Sinnott-Armstrong’s charge of vicious circularity? It seems to me that Armstrong’s regress argument against the justification of moral beliefs embodies a fundamental presupposition that one might call moral belief ascription atomism, i.e., the idea that it is possible to ascribe a moral belief at some time t to oneself or another without presupposing the existence of a background of moral and non-moral beliefs. This presupposition seems to account for Sinnott-Armstrong’s linear conception of the process of justifying moral beliefs. In justifying moral beliefs, Sinnott-Armstrong seems to think that justification must proceed in a linear fashion, i.e., one moral belief must be justified after another. But if at any particular point in time, what exists is not just a moral belief but a host of moral and non-moral beliefs then it is not clear how the justification of moral beliefs can plausibly proceed
in a linear fashion. And if justification of moral beliefs need not proceed in a linear fashion, then the problem of infinite regress need not arise. Indeed the upshot of the arguments I have been making above is that given the plausibility of the thesis of moral belief ascription holism, each moral belief at any particular point in time \( t \) is going to be part of a body of moral and non-moral beliefs in the process of being justified. The point is here is that no single moral belief can support itself but is rather part of the body of moral and non-moral beliefs that support it. In this case, the justification proceeds in a circular manner indeed because whatever moral belief is in question constitutes a premise in the set of premises that support it. The circularity here will however be a virtuous one since the body of beliefs taken as a whole has much more stronger support than each belief on its own. Thus if thesis of moral belief ascription holism is plausible then the charge that the circularity is vicious does not hold.

4.4. Reflective Equilibrium and the problem of arbitrariness

Even if the circularity charge is answered, the question still remains as to whether an internally coherent body of beliefs may not lack any connection to reality. Indeed Armstrong remarks that ‘‘the internal coherence of a set of beliefs is not evidence of any relation to anything outside’’ (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1995, p.13). Brandt takes up this worry by noticing that one internally coherent system of beliefs may be as fictitious as another (Brandt, 1979, p. 19). And in order to forestall this problem, Brandt suggests that internally coherent systems must be constrained by facts of observation (Brandt, 1979, p. 20).

I concede that the worries of Armstrong and Brandt are legitimate. What is at issue here is how we can know whether some coherent body of beliefs is true. In order to address this problem, it will be helpful to distinguish here between coherence as a method of justification and coherence as a theory of truth. What has been defended in this thesis is coherence as a method of justifica-
tion. The claim has been that the coherence of our moral and non-moral beliefs constitutes *adequate reason* for holding that our moral beliefs are true. In short, what has been defended is coherence as a *test* for the truth of our moral beliefs. It has not been claimed that if our moral and non-moral beliefs cohere, then whatever moral beliefs are in question are necessarily true. A coherence theory of truth for moral beliefs has not been defended, i.e., what makes our moral beliefs true is their coherence.

The upshot of the points I have been making is that while a coherent body of beliefs may be false, it does not follow that coherence cannot be a test for the truth of our moral beliefs. Armstrong and Brandt seem to expect too much strong connection between coherence and truth and once they suspect this connection is not forthcoming, they are led to the conclusion that internally coherent body of beliefs lack evidential import and thus some form of constraint is required from *outside*. This conclusion however cannot at least hold for all domains of enquiry. Let us take for instance mathematical beliefs. If one maintains that mathematical beliefs are truth-apt, it seems to me that only way to *test* whether they are true is to check for their internal coherence. Hardly anybody requires that in order to find out if they (mathematical beliefs) are true one must check them against facts of observation. I suggest a similar approach to the testing of the truth of our moral beliefs. Beliefs about the external world can be checked against facts of observation to find out whether they are true. Indeed, even with regards to beliefs about the external world, coherence nevertheless constitutes an important test for the truth of these beliefs. Moral beliefs are beliefs about what *ought* to be case and even after we have satisfied ourselves by means of observation that something is the case, it is still remains legitimate to ask whether it *ought* to be the case. It follows that some other test of the truth of moral claims is needed other than direct comparison with facts of observation. Coherence appears to be the only test available. Suspicions
about whether our body of moral and non-moral beliefs might be false even if maximally coherent does not show that coherence cannot be an adequate test of truth for our moral beliefs. The problem briefly put is that it seems Sinnott-Armstrong and Brandt expect coherence to yield an infallible test of truth of our moral beliefs. However, it is possible for us to have adequate reasons for holding our moral beliefs to be true though they may in fact be false. My contention in this thesis is that the coherence of our moral beliefs and non-moral beliefs as enjoined by the method of reflective equilibrium counts as an adequate reason for holding our moral beliefs to be true.

Singer also points out that Rawls’ method of reflective equilibrium faces the problem of arbitrariness. Singer’s charge of arbitrariness centers on Rawls’ notion of considered moral judgments. These judgments, in Singer’s view, are just moral intuitions that have a very arbitrary origin and therefore cannot play any justifying role in Rawls’ method of reflective equilibrium. I argue that Singer has misconstrued the function of considered moral judgment in the method of reflective equilibrium and thus his objection does not hold.

In “Ethics and Intuitions”, Singer writes:

There is little point in constructing a moral theory designed to match considered judgments that themselves stem from our evolved responses to the situations in which we and our ancestors lived during the period of our evolution as social mammals, primates, and finally, human beings (Singer, 2005, p.348).

In the passage above, Singer is alluding to Rawls’ method of reflective equilibrium in ethics. It would be recalled that according to Rawls’ account of the method, the considered convictions of justice must be brought into coherence with the general moral principles that explain them (considered convictions of justice). However, it seems Singer assumes that the considered convic-
tions of justice are immune to revision in Rawls’ methodology. Thus Singer further makes a remark about Rawls’ method of reflective equilibrium. He maintains that ‘‘on this view, the acceptability of a moral theory is not determined by the internal coherence and plausibility of the theory itself but to a significant extent by its agreement with those of our prior moral judgments that we are unwillingly (emphasis added) to revise or abandon’’ (Singer, 2005, p.345).

In view of Singer’s remarks about Rawls’ method of reflective equilibrium, it is important to probe into what role considered moral judgments play in the method. In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls identifies considered convictions of justice with ‘‘judgments about the basic structure of society which we now make intuitively and in which we have the greatest confidence’’ (Rawls, 1971, p.21). For example, according to Rawls, the judgments that religious intolerance and racial discrimination are unjust, express intuitive beliefs that western liberal democracies hold with the greatest confidence. This identification of considered moral beliefs with intuitive beliefs held with greatest confidence is what for Singer poses a problem for Rawls’ method of reflective equilibrium. Why, Singer asks, should moral principles be designed to fit such intuitive beliefs? Could these intuitively held beliefs not be irrational and arbitrary and for that matter render the moral principles that are designed to match them unjustified? To support his argument Singer brings forward Haidt’s social intuitionist theory of moral judgment. Haidt and his colleagues did interview experiments in which participants were presented with various hypothetical scenarios and asked to make a judgment as to whether or not the actions of the characters in the scenarios were morally right or wrong. In one of the scenarios, the participants were presented with the following:

Julie and Mark are brother and sister. They are travelling together in France on summer vacation from college. One night they are staying alone in a cabin near the beach. They
decide that it would be interesting and fun if they tried making love. At very least it would be a new experience for each of them. Julie was already taking birth control pills, but Mark uses a condom too, just to be safe. They both enjoy making love, but they decide not to do it again. They keep that night as a special secret, which makes them feel even closer to each other. What do you think about that, was it OK for them to make love?\textsuperscript{9}

Haidt and his colleague observed that most participants judged the incest act in the scenario to be wrong. Some cited the dangers of inbreeding as the reason for judging the act to be wrong. Others mentioned the possible emotional harm that the siblings might suffer. In both cases however, it was shown to the participants that there were no such dangers in sight given the scenario they were presented with. The interesting discovery Haidt and his colleagues made was that even though, the participants had been shown that their reasons for judging the incest to be wrong were groundless, they still held on to the judgment that it was wrong. Haidt and his colleague drew the conclusion that moral judgments are intuitive moral beliefs that people rationalize by looking for reasons to support what they already believe.

The conclusion Singer draws from the experiment is that we have to be skeptical about Rawl’s reflective equilibrium in as much it requires us to match moral principles to considered moral judgments which are intuitive beliefs held with the greatest confidence. Is Singer’s objection justified?

Singer is quite right in observing that Rawls identifies considered moral judgments with intuitive moral beliefs held with the greatest confidence. The admission of intuitive beliefs in the method

of reflective equilibrium appears not to jibe with its coherentist tenor. However I think that it would be presumptuous to associate these intuitive beliefs with beliefs that are immune to revision as Singer does. It appears the sense in which Rawls identifies considered moral judgments with intuitive beliefs has nothing to do with their being self-evident or immune to revision. In fact Rawls indicates that the considered moral judgments are ‘‘provisional fixed (emphasis added) points which we presume any conception of justice must fit’’ (Rawls, 1971, p.20). Given Rawls’ description of considered moral judgments as provisional fixed points, it seems Rawls sees them as beliefs that are presently held to be justified pending any further revision. The idea here is that moral beliefs are not generated in a vacuum. They are beliefs that an individual acquires through membership in some particular society. Pending any revision, these moral beliefs are taken to be prima facie justified. These moral beliefs serve as the initial inputs of Rawls’ reflective equilibrium.

One may therefore admit that Rawls’ reflective equilibrium accommodates moral intuitions in the sense of moral beliefs that we derive from the particular societies that we have been brought up in and which are considered to be prima facie justified. It is possible that such intuitions are arbitrary and irrational as Singer thinks they are but it is precisely for such reasons that they must be subjected to Rawls’ method of reflective equilibrium. Applying Reflective Equilibrium to sort out arbitrary moral intuitions involves comparing them with each other through inferential reasoning to detect and eliminate incoherence among them. It would be recalled that reflection as Rawls construes it is inferential in nature and thus not tied to any particular set of beliefs. It is therefore possible that by means of reflection an individual can discard arbitrary intuitions he has imbibed from his society. It is important to point out though reflective equilibrium aims at coherence, coherence is achieved by means of reflection which involves considering the reasons
for the beliefs that are held. Indeed, it is difficult to see how we can do away with moral intu-
tions in the sense explained here in seeking to form justified moral beliefs. It seems the only ra-
tional method that remains is to make these intuitions explicit and resolve tensions that arise be-
tween them by means of reflection. This is what Rawls’ reflective equilibrium seeks to accom-
plish.

4.5. Wide Reflective Equilibrium And Moral Disagreement Between Epistemic Peers

If both the charge of vicious circularity and arbitrariness are answered, one may nevertheless
wonder how two people who each hold coherent belief systems but which nevertheless diverge
when compared to each other can respond in the event of a disagreement. The problem of moral
disagreement between epistemic peers is the problem of how to respond when the justification
status of one’ moral belief is challenged by an epistemic peer. The main challenge here is the
avoidance of dogmatism where one refuses to subject one beliefs to scrutiny and criticism. How
can the problem of dogmatism be avoided? In this section I want to argue that Rawls’ wide re-
flexive equilibrium offers a plausible way to respond to the problem of dogmatism related to
moral disagreement between epistemic peers.

Rowland correctly captures the phenomenon of moral disagreement between epistemic peers in
what follows:

Deep seemingly irresolvable disagreements seem particularly troubling when those with
whom we disagree seem to be open-minded, seem to have thought about the moral issues
that are in contention at least as much as we have…For when we find ourselves in a mor-
al disagreement with our epistemic equals, we might wonder how we could be justified in
thinking that we and not them are correct about the moral issue about which we disagree
(Rowland, 2017).
The key notion to notice in Rowland’s description of the problem of moral disagreement is the notion of an epistemic peer. According to Rowland:

A is our epistemic peer about \( p \) if A has been exposed to the same evidence and arguments regarding whether \( p \) has the same relevant background knowledge as we have and possesses general epistemic virtues (such as intelligence, freedom from bias, and reasoning skill) to the same degree that we do (Rowland, 2017).

In other words, an epistemic peer is a person with respect to whom one can equally be mistaken as far as asserting the truth of some proposition \( p \). Epistemic peerhood puts two people who make justification and knowledge claims about some subject matter on a level ground since the one is not presumed to be epistemically superior to the other.

Fanselow argues that awareness of epistemic peer disagreement regarding a moral belief \( B \) serves as a \textit{prima facie} defeater for the moral belief in question. A defeater for a belief \( B \) is a further belief that undermines or overrides an agent’s justification for believing \( B \) (Fanselow, 2011, p.5). According to him prior to any challenge to one’s moral beliefs by an epistemic equal, one may be justified in holding one’s moral beliefs because one may have held them to be self-evident. However, one’s epistemic position is changed after being challenged by one’s epistemic equal and some form of response must be given. I regard Fanselow’s position as very plausible.

Consider for the example the disagreement among philosophers about which moral principles we ought to accept. The dispute among philosophers can be regarded as disagreement with epistemic peers where a challenge to one’s moral principles in the form of an opposing principle serves as a \textit{prima facie} defeater for one’s moral principles. Some form of response is required. The question here is: how should one respond?
In order to show how wide reflective equilibrium can deal with dogmatism in the event of epistemic peer disagreement about moral beliefs, it will be helpful to recall the key features earlier identified with Rawls method of reflective equilibrium; coherence, revisability, and reflection. In cases of moral disagreement between epistemic peers, what is required is some rational way to settle the dispute. Rationality here involves seeking for a solution in a manner that takes to consideration the viewpoint of the opposite party. I want to point out here that Rawls’ wide reflective equilibrium in particular, possesses the required resources for addressing the problem of dogmatism that is engendered by disagreement between epistemic peers about moral beliefs.

Firstly, wide reflective equilibrium as pointed out is dialogical and thus requires that we be interested in alternative moral beliefs from other people. Secondly, the feature of reflection that attaches to the method demands that one must be in the position to articulate reasons for one’s beliefs. A combination of these two features will suggest that two people employing wide reflective equilibrium to resolve a moral disagreement must be ready to consider each other’s reasons for the respective moral judgments they make. Without this approach, it seems the only options available are for each opponent is to suspend judgment altogether or simply insist on the correctness of one’s views without attending to the opposing viewpoint.

Thirdly, the open consideration of alternative viewpoints and their supporting reasons allows for the application of the criterion of coherence. It thus becomes possible to investigate whether the reasons one’s opponent offers for his or her moral beliefs are consistent and supportive of each other while equally subjecting oneself to the same test. A person for instance cannot lay down the general principle that *Stealing is wrong*, accept that some particular action is a case of stealing but conclude that it is not wrong. His opponent in such an instance will be quite right to point out incoherence in his belief system and justly charge him with irrationality. The criterion of co-
herence here has a normative function. One cannot just draw any inference from the beliefs that one currently accepts. On the contrary, given that one presently accepts some particular sets of beliefs some other particular sets of beliefs cannot logically be inferred from them. Again, consider a scenario where Frank believes that an abortion should not be carried because all human life is sacred and must be preserved. Now suppose that a medical expert points out that the mother’s life is equally endangered by the retention of the foetus. If in a case of epistemic moral disagreement, let us say Ben makes Frank aware of this point then Frank must undertake some revision in his structure of beliefs. He ought to either alter his conclusion or some premises in his argument. It is important to point out that the method of reflective equilibrium, as pointed out in the previous does not preclude the input of moral intuitions. Thus a person may already possess moral beliefs that he considers as having prima facie credibility before applying the method. Reflective equilibrium only requires that these beliefs be open to revision by being subjected to the test of coherence with other beliefs that are held as one engages reflectively with alternative perspectives.

In the end, wide reflective equilibrium as a response to the problem of dogmatism that may rise as a result of moral disagreement between epistemic peers requires those who hold divergent moral opinions to work at achieving coherence and consensus through the investigation of the reasons that are offered in support of the moral beliefs held.

Haslett has objected to wide reflective equilibrium as an adequate response to the problem of moral disagreement. According to him wide reflective equilibrium protects its practitioners against any possible refutation and this makes it an “the ideal vehicle for nurturing rationalizations and prejudices” (Haslett, 1987, p.311). The argument he puts forth is that no clear criteria exists for distinguishing adjustment decisions that are correct from those that are not. The criteri-
on of coherence, he maintains, is trivial and can allow for the arbitrary selection of any moral principle(s). Consequently the method of wide reflective equilibrium, in his view, cannot show from an interpersonal perspective whether any moral principle(s) are justified than others and thus it is not a method of justification at all\(^\text{10}\).

Haslett’s claim that there are no clear criteria for distinguishing adjustment decisions that are correct from those that are not needs some investigation. Haslett seems to overlook the strength and objective nature of the criterion of coherence. As I have pointed out in the examples above, logical consistency and explanatory support among beliefs are tests that can be objectively applied to any belief system. Internal coherence is a \textit{prima facie} requirement for anybody of beliefs to be regarded as rational. However, the criterion of coherence cannot be applied independent of actually engaging in the wide reflective equilibrium process itself. Thus when my epistemic peer challenges my justification for some moral belief \(B\), we need to engage the wide reflective equilibrium method to be able to make plausible judgments about whose structure of reasons are coherent and whose are not. It is possible to tell whether anybody of beliefs is coherent by examining the logical relationships between the beliefs in question. Haslett objection to the criterion of coherence is that it \textit{can} allow for the arbitrary selection of moral principles in the case of interpersonal disagreement about which moral principles ought to be accepted. This objection however appears plausible only where the criterion of coherence is taken apart from the other features that attach to wide reflective equilibrium as I have described it. Therefore in response to Haslett’s objection, I point out two characteristics of wide reflective equilibrium in addition to the feature of coherence that jointly mitigate the problem of arbitrary selection of moral principles where there is epistemic disagreement about which moral principles to adopt . Wide reflec-

\(^{10}\) Ibid
tive equilibrium is dialogical and also requires openness to revision of all beliefs. These two features plus the criterion of coherence restrict one’s freedom to choose whatever moral beliefs one wishes which is what it seems Haslett means by ‘‘arbitrary selection of moral principles’’. To engage the method of wide reflective is to commit to a willingness to revise one’s beliefs given some convincing reason(s) offered by one’s opponent in the process of deliberation about what to believe.

It seems the conclusion Haslett draws from the possibility that wide reflective equilibrium can lead to arbitrary selection of moral principles is not valid. I don’t think one can infer from this possibility to the conclusion that wide reflective equilibrium ‘‘immunes anybody against possible refutation’’. This conclusion is not valid because it is equally possible that by engaging my epistemic peer through the method of wide reflective equilibrium, I am able to see flaws and errors in my argument. I am thus capable of being refuted. It is the case that human beings are fallible and can make errors in their reasoning processes. Errors in processes of reasoning undermine the justification a person has for his moral beliefs. On the question of human fallibility, Wiredu writes that ‘‘we may contrary to our best intentions, misperceive an object. Or we may be caught up in a fallacious inference or unsound analysis’’ (Wiredu, 2007, p.125). Engaging Rawls’ wide reflective equilibrium seems to me to be the best way to remedy such errors that impede our forming epistemically justified moral beliefs. Therefore given the potential of wide reflective equilibrium to expose errors in our reasoning processes it not clear to me how wide reflective equilibrium, on Haslett’s account can ‘‘immune anybody against possible refutation’’.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

My aim in this thesis has been to explore how moral beliefs can be justified. The basic challenge to the justification of moral beliefs is posed by Sinnott-Armstrong’s regress argument. The intention is to search for a method of justification of moral beliefs that adequately answers the challenge posed by Sinnott-Armstrong’s regress argument against the justification of moral beliefs.

I have explored some basic concepts relevant to the subject of how moral beliefs can be justified. I have explored the concept of justification and its application to moral beliefs. I also espoused Sinnott-Armstrong’s regress argument against the justification of moral beliefs which was the central problem that this thesis was designed to solve. Sinnott-Armstrong argued that any attempt to justify a moral belief will require providing an infinite number of reasons for the moral belief in question. He concluded that if such an infinite number of reasons cannot be supplied then no moral belief can be justified.

I examined whether it is possible for the intuitionist method of justification to answer the challenge posed by Sinnott-Armstrong’s regress argument. The intuitionist method of justification involves positing self-evident moral beliefs to terminate the regress. W. D Ross and Robert Audi are two philosophers who deploy this method to show how moral beliefs can be justified. I have argued that the self-evident principles of prima facie duty Ross and Audi posit to answer the regress are problematic. I have argued that they are problematic because it is possible in the case of epistemic disagreement about moral beliefs to deny that these principles are self-evident and to insist further on their self-evident leads to a situation of dogmatism. I have also pointed out that
Ross’ self-evident principles of prima facie duty are problematic because it is not clear how these self-evident principles can be distinguished from arbitrary moral beliefs.

In view of the fact that Armstrong’s regress argument is limited to the justification of moral beliefs; it would seem that if moral beliefs can be justified by being inferred from justified non-moral beliefs, the regress can be brought to a halt. Naturalistic epistemology, when applied to the justification of moral beliefs is the attempt to justify moral beliefs by the methods and procedures of science. I have argued against Richard Boyd’s view that moral beliefs can be justified by providing a true causal account of how they were formed based on empirical observation. I have pointed out that this strategy fails for the reason that it is not clear how empirical observation can lead to any objective conclusion about what causes people hold the moral beliefs they have. It seems people can offer different causal accounts of why moral beliefs are held. I have also indicated that even if such an objective account could be provided, it will be a logical fallacy to draw conclusions about what ought to be case morally speaking from empirical accounts of what is the case. Thus Boyd’s application of naturalistic epistemology to the justification of moral beliefs does not successfully answer Sinnott-Armstrong’s regress argument.

In view of the problems with the intuitionist method and naturalistic epistemology, I proposed Rawl’s method of reflective equilibrium as plausible method of justification in response to Sinnott-Armstrong’s regress argument. Rawls’ reflective equilibrium is a coherentist method of justification of moral beliefs. However, as a coherentist method of justification, Rawls’ reflective equilibrium must answer the question of how moral beliefs can justified by being inferred from other moral beliefs without engaging in vicious circularity. I advanced the thesis of moral belief ascription holism to support the claim that while reflective equilibrium entails circularity, the circularity entailed is a virtuous one.
It was pointed out that even if the circularity charge is answered, the question of how one can be sure a coherent body of beliefs connects to truth still remains. I have argued that reflective equilibrium as a coherentist method of justification is a test for the truth of our moral beliefs. It need not be construed as guaranteeing that if our moral beliefs are coherent then they are true. I have pointed out that given that moral beliefs cannot be compared directly against what is observed in the empirical world, it is not clear how else their truth can be tested except by coherence. Another form of the charge of arbitrariness is that considered moral judgments are arbitrary moral intuitions. I have indicated that considered moral judgments are merely initial inputs in the method of reflective equilibrium that are subject to revision by means of comparison with other beliefs that are held.

Another problem that Rawls’s reflective equilibrium needs to address is what to do in the face of epistemic disagreement about the justification status of moral beliefs. The challenge here is how to avoid dogmatism. I have showed that wide reflective equilibrium possesses the needed resources to address this problem. Wide reflective equilibrium requires parties engaged in deliberation to subject their beliefs for critical review and be willingly to revise their views should any incoherence and inconsistency in their views be pointed out to them.

In view of the analysis of issues carried out in this thesis, the main conclusion of this thesis on the justification of moral beliefs is that Rawls’ reflective equilibrium is a plausible method of justifying moral beliefs that adequately answers Armstrong’s regress argument. It will noticed however that this thesis has focused on reflective equilibrium with respect to epistemic justification of moral principles. In Political Liberalism, Rawls attempts to develop an account of reflective equilibrium as a search for moral principles to guide political action, bracketing questions of epistemology. Is such a project feasible? Should an epistemic account of reflective equilibrium
have implications for political deliberations about what is to be done? These are questions beyond the scope of this study which are nevertheless worth considering.


