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# Moral Epistemology

**Ethics**

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## 2 Today

- I. Coherentism and Reflective Equilibrium
- II. Intuitions and Intuitionism
- III. Philosophy, Expertise, and Deference
- IV. Course Content Review, Q&A

# Moral Epistemology

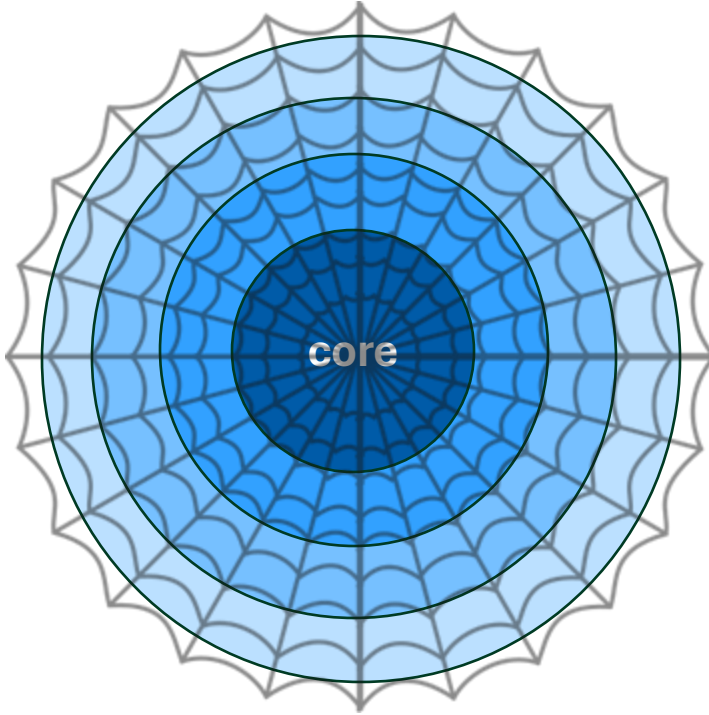
## 4 The Problems of Moral Knowledge and Justification

**The Knowledge Problem.** How do we gain moral knowledge? Is there moral knowledge?

**The Justification Problem.** When are moral beliefs justified? Are moral beliefs ever justified?

- Knowledge is factive: you can only know that p if it is the case that p
- Justification is non-factive: you can be justified in believing that p even if it is not the case that p
- Knowledge/Justification are not (strong) problems for subjectivist views
- They are especially pressing problems for realism, especially non-naturalism
  - If moral facts are non-natural, how do we get ‘in touch’ with them?

## 5 Quine's Metaphor: A Web of Beliefs



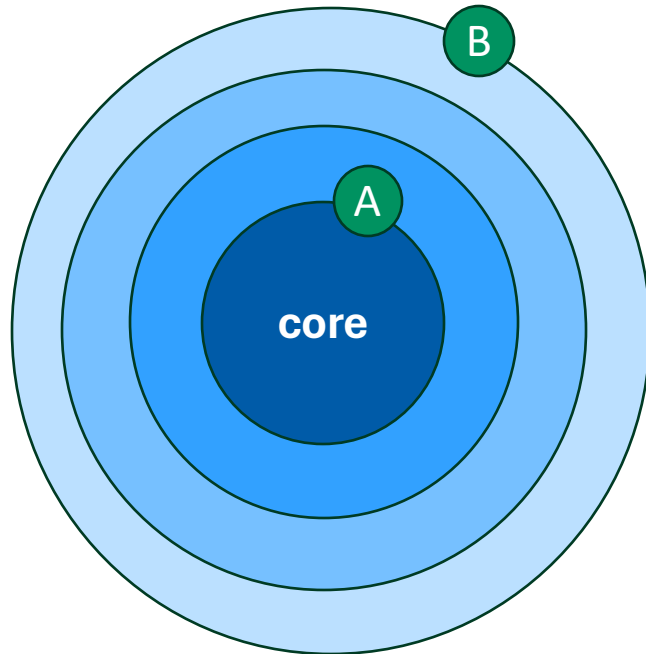
- Our beliefs are organised as a '**web**': all beliefs hang together with all other beliefs
- There is no '**foundation**' (sensory perceptions are not privileged)
- Some our beliefs are '**core**' beliefs and resistant to change, others are on the '**periphery**' and more easily given up
- If new evidence comes to light, we adjust the web **holistically**: there are multiple possible adjustments ('one person's *modus ponens* is another person's *modus tollens*')

## 6 Coherentism

**COHERENTISM.** “our beliefs, moral and otherwise, are justified only if, and then to the extent that, they cohere well with the other things we believe” (Sayre-McCord 1996)

- Some webs of beliefs are better-connected than others
  - If a web of beliefs has many unconnected beliefs, then it is less well-connected
  - If a web of beliefs has more contradictory or opposing beliefs, then it is less well-connected
  - If a web of beliefs has fewer beliefs in it, then it is less well-connected
- This makes justification relative to one’s overall web of belief; one person might justifiably believe  $p$  while another justifiably believes not- $p$

## 7 Belief Revision



- Imagine information comes to light that A and B are incompatible
- Given that A is closer to this person's core beliefs, the person will likely modify their beliefs and drop B
- For another person, this might be the other way around, and they will more likely drop their belief that A
- (It is also possible to drop the belief that A and B are incompatible!)

## 8 The Regress Problem (Agrippa's/Munchhausen Trilemma)

What justifies your belief that  $p_1$ ?

**A. Foundationalism.** The belief is self-justifying, does not require justification, or is based on some belief-external process which bestows justification

or: The belief is justified on the basis of some other belief—e.g., the belief that  $p_2$

We reiterate: what justifies your belief that  $p_2$ , your belief that  $p_3$ , ...?

**B. Infinitism.** There is an infinite chain of justification.

**C. Circularity.** The belief that  $p_n$  is justified on the basis of the belief that  $p_1$



## 9 The Regress Problem (cont.)

- It seems the coherentist is committed to circularity. But circularity looks like a logical error.
- Coherentist Responses
  - The Regress Problem presumes that justification happens on a belief-by-belief basis. But this begs the question: justification is a **system-level property**, not a belief-level property
  - The Regress Problem presumes that justificatory support is asymmetrical. But this begs the question: the coherentist thinks that epistemic support goes both ways (two beliefs can mutually support each other)
- The coherentist needs to specify what justification as a system-level property means. This is pretty philosophically difficult!

# Discussion

Can there be a coherent racist?  
Is the possibility worrying?

# 11 Worries about Coherentism

‘Garbage In, Garbage Out’: what about the coherent racist?

- Answer 1: the racist has not followed the method of reflective equilibrium long or careful enough; there can be **no *ultimately* coherent racist**
- Answer 2: a coherent racist is imaginable, but coherence is not the only virtue; the racist cannot accommodate evidence in the same elegant way as the non-racist
- Answer 3: racism being epistemically justified for the racist does not make racism true, or makes the racist morally justified on acting on these beliefs
  - epistemic justification of a belief  $\neq$  moral justification of an action

# 12 Rawls: Method of Reflective Equilibrium

- The method of reflective equilibrium
  1. Collect all **considered judgments**—i.e., robust judgments which you think you made after careful reflection under the right deliberative circumstances
  2. Consider possible **moral principles** and **philosophical arguments** which explain as many of these judgments as possible
  3. Adjust your judgments and principles until you have reached **reflective equilibrium**: the judgments and principles fit together
- “Wide” Reflective Equilibrium: not just equilibrium amongst our moral beliefs, but all our beliefs
- Almost all contemporary moral philosophy uses reflective equilibrium!
  - Think especially of our sessions on applied ethics
  - One need not be a coherentist to use reflective equilibrium—e.g., our considered judgments could come from intuition

# 13 Worries about Reflective Equilibrium

- **Triviality.** “Adjust your beliefs till you reach agreement” is trivial or empty advice
- **Conservatism.** Reflective equilibrium starts from beliefs which are shaped by our environment. This leads to a bias towards the status quo
- **Relativism.** There are different starting sets of beliefs, and thus different reflective equilibria
- **Indeterminacy.** Both reflective equilibrium and coherentism can get us to different outcomes from the same starting set, because inputs underdetermine outputs

# Intuitions and Intuitionism

# 15 The Perception Analogy

First analogy: Moral intuition works similar to perception in epistemology

- Perceptual beliefs are basic and non-inferentially justified
  - You believe that there is a tree because you see a tree; there is no further ground for your belief
  - You don't deduce or infer 'there is a tree' from other beliefs
  - Perceptual beliefs are fallible
- Moral intuitions are basic and non-inferentially justified
  - You believe that inflicting pain is bad because you intuit that inflicting pain is bad; there is no further ground for your belief
  - You don't deduce or infer 'inflicting pain is bad' from other beliefs
  - Moral intuitions are fallible

The claim is not that intuition **is** perception; only that it **works like** perception. But some intuitionists might avoid the analogy

# 16 Intellectual Seemings

- How do you know that
  - $2+3=5$
  - If p, and p entails q, then q
  - If X is larger than Y, and Y is larger than Z, then X is larger than Z
  - At this very moment, I am self-aware
- These claims, when you consider them carefully, **simply seem true!**
- It seems you are justified in believing these propositions if you adequately understand them
  - No **further** argument or evidence is needed
  - This does not exclude that additional arguments can be given

**Intuitionist Claim:** We come to know morality in a similar way, by ‘intellectually seeing’ that some moral claims are true



# 17 Intuitions

- Intuitions are **intellectual seemings** (Audi, Huemer)
- Audi lists some conditions for intuitions (2004, 33-6):
  1. **Non-Inferentiality (Directness) Requirement**: if we know a proposition intuitively, we know it without inference from any other proposition
  2. **Firmness Requirement**: intuitions require a moderately firm belief in them (and need to be somewhat stable)
  3. **Pretheoreticality Requirement**: the ground of an intuition cannot be our belief in a certain theory

(Huemer, Michael. *Ethical Intuitionism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.  
Audi, Robert. *The Good in the Right*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.)

# 18 Intuitions (cont.)

## Intuitions

- can be false (compare to perceptual seemings)
- can conflict with each other
- do not imply certainty
- do not always override non-intuitive insights
- do not need to be about particulars

# Discussion

Are intuitions mysterious? Does relying on intuitions look like a source of moral knowledge?

## 20 Doubts about Intuitions

- Various objections to moral intuitions
  - Unlike for perception, there is no naturalistic explanation for a capacity like ‘moral intuition’; it is better explained in other ways (e.g., through non-cognitivism)
  - The Problem of Disagreement (again): if people had a capacity like moral intuition, we would expect them to come to agree over time, but people do not
  - General Evolutionary Debunking: there is no reason to think that evolution would have provided us with moral intuition, because such a faculty would not be evolutionarily helpful
  - Specific Evolutionary Debunking: there is good reason to think that aspects of our moral intuitions are systematically mistaken or subject to biases
- Over the last decade, there has been growing research in so-called **experimental philosophy**, which investigates moral intuitions on empirical grounds

(A good overview is Knobe, Joshua. “Experimental Philosophy.” *Philosophy Compass* 2, no. 1 (2007): 81–92.)

## 21 Personal vs Impersonal Violence

**SWITCH.** You can throw a switch redirecting a train. Doing so will kill one person instead of five.

**FOOTBRIDGE.** You can push a fat man off a bridge. Doing so will kill one person (the fat man) instead of five.

- Philosophers, and most people questioned on these two cases, tend to agree that it is permissible to kill the one person in **SWITCH**, but impermissible in **FOOTBRIDGE**
- We seem to be more ‘utilitarian’ in **SWITCH**, and more ‘deontological’ in **FOOTBRIDGE**

## 22 Evolutionary Debunking

- Greene: there is an evolutionary effect where people are unwilling to do “up close and personal” violence
  - In “personal” trolley cases (like FOOTBRIDGE), the brain parts responsible for emotions are activated, for “impersonal” trolley cases (like SWITCH), those for higher cognition
  - People with damage to the emotional brain parts choose in a more ‘utilitarian’ way
- ⇒ Our moral intuitions are systematically distorted by evolutionary forces (in an ‘anti-utilitarian’ way)

(Greene, Joshua. “The Secret Joke of Kant’s Soul.” In *Moral Psychology, Vol. 3: The Neuroscience of Morality: Emotion, Disease, and Development*, edited by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. MIT Press, 2007.)

# Review; Exam; Q&A

## 24 Overview of Topics

<b>Normative Ethics</b>	1	Welfare
	2	Utilitarianism
	3	Deontology
	4	Virtue Ethics
<b>Applied Ethics</b>	5	Autonomy and Consent
	6	Moral Status
	7	Collective Obligation
<b>Metaethics</b>	8	Subjectivism
	9	Objectivism
	10	Moral Epistemology



# Course Reflection

1. What surprising thing have I learned in the course?
2. On what topic am I still the most confused?
3. What do still want to learn?

## 26 Exam

- **Primary Date:** Tuesday, 5 August, 14:00-16:00 (come 15 minutes early), S5 (GWII)
- **Secondary Date:** tbd
- **Part A:** answer 5 out of 8 questions, 10% weight each question, focus: understand and summarise material
- **Part B:** answer 1 out of 6 questions, 50% weight, focus: critically discuss material
- More Information: ELearning, “Information for Exam”

# Sample Exam Questions

Part A: Explain qualitative hedonism, and one objection to it.

Part B: Could someone validly consent to be killed and eaten?

# Course Evaluation