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Moral Inquiry and Mob Psychology¹

1.

Some people have thought that there is a power of intuition by which we have a priori knowledge of self-evident moral truths. Bernard Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* writes of this view:

This model of intuition in ethics has been demolished by a succession of critics, and the ruins of it that remain above ground are not impressive enough to invite much history of what happened to it.²

Williams' confident use of the achievement word "demolished" will provoke disagreement from some. Some people still accept this picture.³ I do not but I have nothing here to add to what has already been said in criticism of it.⁴

Some people think moral knowledge is just empirical knowledge. If what makes actions morally eligible is that they make people happy, then moral inquiry is just the business of investigation into what makes people happy. If, Trouble is, saying what makes actions morally eligible is that they make people happy doesn't itself look much like an empirical claim so this kind of very strong naturalism looks unpromising.⁵

Another view I'm going to put to one side here is what Allan Gibbard calls "moral logicism".⁶ This is the view that Hare was expressing when he claimed it was possible to derive the substantive content of morality with no more starting out kit than, as he put it, "logic and the facts"⁷. This too is a view some people still accept. Gibbard himself attributes a version of it to Christine Korsgaard.⁸ But I do not believe it and will not discuss it here.

So if we don't – either literally or by analogy - just see it and if we can't just figure it out, how on earth is moral inquiry supposed to proceed? The orthodox answer here is to appeal to what John Rawls characterised as the method of reflective equilibrium.⁹ The term was not

¹ I am grateful to an audience at the EIDYN conference at Edinburgh, 9-11 May, 2014, especially my respondent on that occasion Geoff Sayre-McCord; and to Graham Bex-Priestley, Carl Fox, Anca Gheaus, Stephen Ingram, Rosanna Keefe and Yonatan Shemmer for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

² 1985, p. 94.

³ The leading contemporary champion of a view such as this is Robert Audi. See his 1999, 2002, 2004, 2008 among many other writings.

⁴ Williams cites Hare 1952, Toulmin 1950, Nowell-Smith 1954 as well as Mill. For a painstaking more recent critique see Cowan 2011.

⁵ For a slowed-down version of the argument of this paragraph, see Lenman 2013.

⁶ See his 1999.

⁷ 1981, pp. 6, 101ff

⁸ 1999.

⁹ 1972, chapter 1, section 9, "Some Remarks About Moral Theory" is the core Rawlsian text here.

new. He took it over from Nelson Goodman's work on logic and applied it to ethics. Nor were Rawls' methodological ideas specifically about ethics especially new. As he himself observes, they express an approach quite similar to that Aristotle appears to favour in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹⁰ But Rawls's methodological discussion is especially rich and has been especially influential.

We start with considered judgements. These are roughly the same features of our moral phenomenology which earlier philosophers called "intuitions". They differ however from what some contemporary moral psychologists like to call "intuitions", which are raw, unreflective moral gut reactions. Whereas Rawlsian considered judgements are just that: considered. Stable. Reflectively endorsed. Rawls moreover imposes a number of filters on which considered judgements are eligible as inputs to the pursuit of reflective equilibrium. Those we are hesitant about or lack confidence in; those we make when we are upset or frightened; those where our own interests are implicated.¹¹

The central virtue the reflective equilibrium, as I think it best understood, can attribute to a considered judgement is that of being stable under reflection.¹² That's why judgements made when we are frightened or upset don't count unless we continue to stand by them when we are relaxed and have calmed down. Similarly if we learn about ourselves that we tend to make different judgements about certain questions because the questions are set in different contexts, are differently framed, that is something we need to focus some reflective attention on in seeking to arrive at a stance we are prepared to stick to across such changes. Stability under reflection indeed doesn't just motivate the filters on input judgements. It largely constitutes the method itself. For the winning judgements are those that stand up to reflective scrutiny, i.e. those that are stable under reflection where reflection is reflection in the light of other judgements we hold, and in particular those that themselves prove to be stable under reflection.

Such scrutiny pursues coherence by identifying and seeking to resolve tensions between the judgements we are disposed to make. If I find utilitarianism very plausible but am not inclined to think it ever acceptable to kill someone to harvest their organs, there is an apparent tension between my general theoretical beliefs and my more particular beliefs about cases. I either need to make a credible case that the tension is merely apparent or something will have to give. Or there may be tensions between relatively particular beliefs. If I think it wrong to kill someone to save several people by harvesting the organs of the former; but I don't think it is wrong to secure the same result by the sort of threat-deflection that happens when we turn trolleys, but I can give no credible principled reason able to withstand critical scrutiny why there should be a difference, then I find myself under dialectical pressure to revise some of what I believe. Our judgements should survive the kind of argument-driven scrutiny that made Socrates so unpopular in certain quarters. Justice does not require one to return a weapon to a friend who has lost his mind. So justice is not simply speaking the truth and returning what one has borrowed. We throw a proposal out when we see it has consequences we cannot accept.¹³

¹⁰ Rawls 1972, p. 51. On Aristotle's moral methodology see Hardie 1980, chapter 3; Nussbaum 1986, esp. chapters 8 and 10, Bostock 2000, chapter 10.

¹¹ 1972, p. 47. For interesting discussion of these 'filters' see DePaul 1993, pp. 17–18.

¹² The importance of stability in shaping our practical thought has been emphasised by e.g. Tiberius 2002, Bratman 2006, Lenman 2009

¹³ Republic I 331c-d.

Our judgements should also survive scrutiny in the light of such empirical knowledge as is supplied by an understanding of history and the human sciences. To survive this they must often survive scrutiny in the light of knowledge of their causal origins. Considered moral judgements perhaps do not have the sort of vindicating explanations enjoyed by some judgements of other kinds where what explains them is their own truth but some still survive causal explanation better than others. The explanation of why humans care so much about the welfare of children, especially our own, is probably rather a lot to do with our being mammals who have offspring in small numbers but ensure that a good number survive by loving and nurturing them. Other creatures have very large numbers of offspring who are all left to fend for themselves, a small number getting lucky in making it through the very dangerous period of unprotected early development. If we were creatures of the latter kind we would have had very different moral sensibilities. More simply, if we were not social animals our normative sensibilities would be unrecognizably different. But my fondness for children and my interest in their welfare easily survive this understanding. Whereas if I learn that my odd feeling of moral disturbance at the fact that you often cycle to work is the result of my having been manipulated by post-hypnotic suggestion to feel disgust whenever I encounter sentences with the word “often” in them, I would surely revise the judgement or at least withdraw reflective endorsement from it.¹⁴

There is a role too for imagination. Intelligent moral and political thinking requires some capacity to appreciate sympathetically the experiences of people whose experiences may be very much more difficult than, or just very different to, our own. And indeed to understand the moral and political perspectives of those whose moral and political perspectives are very different from our own, and to understand these in ways that allow us to engage constructively and sympathetically with them and not simply sanctimoniously denounce them to fellow members of our respective ideological tribes. Being engagingly articulate about our diverging experiences and values is an important part of moral discourse as the construction of arguments. We often learn as much about ethics from works of imaginative literature as we do from the writings of moral philosophers.¹⁵

Constructive and sympathetic mutual engagement matters because the pursuit of reflective equilibrium is not something I do by myself, not simply a matter of sitting in my armchair trying to sort my values, commitments and plans into a coherent package that might shape a life that will bear my survey.¹⁶ It is something that we do together seeking to arrive at shared moral understandings that can shape the moral communities we aspire together to make and sustain. We might not have been social animals but we are and, as such, we need not just to deliberate but to codeliberate, to deliberate together, seeking to reach shared understanding that bear all our surveys. By saying “all our surveys” I express here an aspiration to inclusivity that some might question, not because they do not share it (though some still do not) but because it seems to import substantive moral commitment into my account of moral epistemology. It does indeed, but I think that is entirely proper for reasons that I hope will be clear by the end of this article.

2.

But I would like to turn first to an interesting recent critique of reflective equilibrium found in Thomas Kelly and Sarah McGrath’s important 2011 paper “Is Reflective Equilibrium

¹⁴ Wheatley and Haidt, 2005. See further Lenman f’coming.

¹⁵ The essays in Nussbaum 1992 makes an eloquent case for this.

¹⁶ Hume, 1740, book III, part III, section 6, paragraph 6. Cf. Tiberius 2008, Lenman 2009.

Enough?”¹⁷ The answer to the question in their title is, they argue, No. They begin by arguing that there is no unique reflective equilibrium that we can expect by way of output no matter what we stick in by way of input. I’m not concerned to contest that. For it to be false would be for formal coherence constraints to give us all we need, for a form of moral logicism to be true, and I am here assuming it is not.

But given this dependence of what comes out on what goes in, Kelly and McGrath go on to argue, the method has no credibility at all unless we have some warrant, independent of the method of reflective equilibrium itself, to suppose the input judgements to have relatively high credibility. So there needs to be some way of ascertaining this that is not itself the method of reflective equilibrium. So the method of reflective equilibrium is not enough for moral inquiry to be possible. Unless there is some other way of making contact with moral reality. And indeed if there is some such other way of making contact with moral reality then reflective equilibrium may end up looking pretty otiose.

I use rather realist language here. And that coheres with Kelly and McGrath’s understanding of the method at this point in proceedings. At an early point in their paper they say, in discussing Rawls:

Although a great deal of what Rawls says about reflective equilibrium suggests the descriptive interpretation, let us set it aside and concentrate on the deliberative interpretation, on which it is a procedure for figuring out what to believe, or the truth, about morality.¹⁸

This distinction between deliberative and descriptive interpretations of reflective equilibrium is drawn from Scanlon’s paper on Rawls’ moral epistemology.¹⁹ On the descriptive interpretation what the method does is clarify for us what we think, or perhaps even just what I think. It is an exercise in self-interpretation, as Rawls himself puts it, a kind of psychology.²⁰ Whereas the deliberative method is an attempt to figure out not just what we, or I, think. It is an attempt at discovery of the moral truth.

This distinction feels a little slippery to me. The labels “deliberative”/”descriptive” rather make it sound as if one project is merely descriptive while the other is normative, the project of determining what to do. The latter gets rather superimposed, certainly by Kelly and McGrath, on a conception of moral inquiry that is really quite robustly realist in taking it to be an attempt to determine the truth about a domain of moral reality that is prior to and independent of us and the interest we take it in and where this is not just the relatively deflationary truth and independence in which a quasi-realist might trade.

But if we are not robust realists about moral inquiry, the game changes rather significantly. Let me quote here a brief passage from that thing of beauty that is chapter 6 of Williams’ *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.

It is sometimes objected against the method of reflective equilibrium that the intuitions to which theory is being adjusted merely represent our local ethical beliefs, and that these may not be correct. When the enterprise is taken in the way I have described, this is not a relevant objection. The intuitions are supposed to represent our

¹⁷ 2010. The paper was published slightly later than the cover date.

¹⁸ Kelly and McGrath 2010, p. 336.

¹⁹ Scanlon 2003.

²⁰ Rawls 1999, p. 288, 290.

ethical beliefs, because the theory being sought is one of ethical life for us, and the point is not that the intuitions should be in some ultimate sense correct, but that they should be ours.²¹

What does Williams here mean by “When the enterprise is taken in the way I have described”? What I think he means is when we conceive of the project of moral inquiry as concerned with the distinctively practical project of a group of people trying to arrive at an agreement about what moral understandings they might all be prepared to accept and to share and regulate their lives together by. It is not the sort of theoretical project that science is engaged in. That, I think, is in a Rawlsian spirit and it is also, I think, dead right.

We should not accept, it seems to me too sharp a distinction between description and deliberation. Consider the following question. What sort of moral outlook that I might govern my life by might I be prepared happily to endorse at the level of highest order desires after sustained and careful reflection? That is a descriptive question. It is a question of self-interpretation. It is a question about who I am and what is important to me. But it is not a question inquiry into which is very deeply distinct from the activity of deliberation. Rather the two are continuous. (Continuous though not equivalent. No sort of reductionism is on offer. On the thinnest reading of “might”, the foregoing question invites the answer, Any outlook you like. In that thin sense, pretty well anything might happen. On the much thicker reading we need, “might” is already normative and our question no mere question of descriptive psychology, though still very emphatically a question about who I am and what is important to me.)

I want to live my life in ways I can reflectively endorse, that will bear my survey, as Hume has it, and that will do this in a way that it stable, throughout my life. My wanting this is not rationally compulsory and is contingent.²² I might not have wanted it but it is quite a deep and important fact about me that I do and almost certainly this is true also of you. This desire, the desire to live in ways I can accept and justify to myself, is the spur for reflection and deliberation. Moreover we want, you and I - do we not? - to live lives together in moral community in ways that will bear our respective surveys, ways that we can all accept and justify to each other, and that is a spur for reflecting together and for codeliberation. This enterprise is what moral inquiry is and (the point is again precisely Rawlsian), it is fundamentally more akin to a political process of seeking agreement than to a scientific process of seeking understanding of some independent domain of reality.²³

This is in large measure an interpretative project, a project of understanding who we are and what is important to us.²⁴ Our judgements should survive broader philosophical reflection informed by a knowledge and understanding of the moral ideas of our own and other

²¹ 1985, p. 102.

²² Cf. Lenman 2009.

²³ Thus in characterising his constructivist understanding of political justice, Rawls writes:

The bases of this view lie in fundamental ideas of the public political culture as well as in citizens’ shared principles and conceptions of practical reason. Thus, if the procedure can be correctly formulated, citizens should be able to accept its principles and conceptions along with their reasonable comprehensive doctrine. (1993, p. 97)

²⁴ On moral inquiry as self-interpretation cf. Hurley 1989, Taylor 1989, Scanlon 1992, Walzer 1993, Dworkin 2011.

traditions. The conversation about what moral understandings we can agree upon and share was not initiated by you and me in the last five minutes. It has gone on a long time and we are joining it very late at a point where very considerable progress has been made towards reaching shared understanding even if in ways that are often partial, plural and contested. So it is a conversation we have in the context of that long history and the place it has brought us to in terms of the moral culture we inhabit. In that sense it is true that there is something conservative about reflective equilibrium but it is not something that should trouble us. The point is simply that we cannot start from nowhere. We start from here. And to that extent too there can be no sharp distinction between self-interpretation and normative inquiry. As Susan Hurley put it:

[W]e can determine ourselves, exercise our autonomy, in relation to given forms of life by depending on certain of them as the basis for criticism and revision of others; but we must always occupy ourselves in the process. Self-determination does not involve detaching ourselves from the whole of what we are.²⁵

I think we might go further in demystifying moral epistemology by following Gibbard, Simon Blackburn²⁶ and others into an expressivist turn. My robust intuition that murder is wrong is, I propose, best understood, at least at a first approximation, as an unwillingness on my part to accept as a body of moral rules regulating my community any body of such rules that permits murder. Unwillingness is a state of mind more closely affiliated to desire than to belief. A desire about the standards that should inform our moral community is not concerned with making contact with reality. Rather it is concerned to cohere with my other desires in ways that will bear my survey and those of my fellows. In saying murder is wrong I do not seek to describe some robustly real normative reality. Rather I express (though I do not of course report) something about me that you will need to engage with if you and I are to live together in moral community.

It would be wrong to say simply that all moral judgements express our desires about what standards we would wish to inform our moral community. They also often express the standards that do inform it. This is, as I have noted, an old conversation. It has not just begun. It is also far from being over. It works towards an ideal equilibrium it will no doubt never attain – perhaps should never attain insofar as reflection is itself a central human good. But we do not capitulate to a ludicrous conventionalism by acknowledging that our moral discourse doesn't just point ahead to that idea. It expresses where we our moral conversation is now. In this house we don't take each others' stuff without asking permission. In this country we don't tolerate cruelty toward children. These are not exactly descriptions, generalizations inviting counter-examples. But they serve to affirm and express the standards we have already in place.

I think that on this, broadly Humean, picture of moral inquiry²⁷, Williams' retort suffices to evade the concern articulated by Kelly and McGrath. Indeed, all that concern perhaps comes to in the end is that the robust realist has a problem making good sense of moral epistemology that invoking reflective equilibrium won't fix and that is not really news to many of us. However, while a turn away from robust realism makes the concern Kelly and McGrath raise abate, there is another concern which perhaps comes to the fore.

²⁵ 1989, p. 322.

²⁶ In many writing. See especially Blackburn 1998, Gibbard, 2003.

²⁷ Cf. Lenman 2007, 2009, 2010.

3

My title, you will have observed, echoes the words of Imre Lakatos in a famous discussion of Thomas Kuhn. Lakatos here airs the concern that the Kuhnian picture of scientific change contrasted with the more reassuring picture painted by folk like Hempel and Popper, replacing what had seemed a description of an orderly rational process with a story about “mob psychology”.²⁸ We think of science as a rational process by means of which scientists successfully track objective scientific truths that are prior to and independent of both scientists and science. But of course there is a strand in recent philosophy of science, originating with Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, that challenges this comfortable picture and offers explanations for scientific changes and developments from which vindicatory reference to any explanatory role for the truth of what scientists believe is alarmingly conspicuous by its absence. Such explanations indeed suggested sceptical conclusions about science which some philosophers seemed to embrace. If so that might seem to discredit science, to show that it is really just a fraud on the taxpayer and the taxpayer might as well close it down.

I don’t myself embrace such scepticism. I think science does track truths that are prior to and independent of both science and scientists. At least on a good day. No doubt there is always plenty of junk science about. But this paper is not about science and I have nothing to say here to defend this optimism. My concern is to address a reader who is thinking, OK you *don’t think it true of science that rather than tracking some prior and independent truth it, it is just mob psychology*. But you do think moral inquiry fails to track any such independent reality. *So doesn’t that mean there is nothing left for moral inquiry to be except mob psychology?* In which case, *isn’t it likewise discredited?*

No. Let’s think for a minute about the rhetorical force here of the term “mob psychology”. Its use invokes a distinction we make between good and bad ways of forming and revising beliefs. Talk of mob psychology calls to mind the kind of phenomena described in Charles MacKay’s 1841 classic, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, including such exemplary triumphs of unreason as financial bubbles, the mania that drove The Crusades and the witch trials of early modern Europe and America. The depressing phenomenon here is just the tendency people have when gathered together in large groups to do and to believe whatever everyone else does even if it is something quite mad. The phenomenon is perhaps even more depressing now than when MacKay was writing as the internet enables people to be members of crowd even when sitting alone at home in their pants in front of a computer. There is no longer any need to actually assemble.

That is messed up. It is messed up if I believe P (“She’s a witch”) through the kind of unreasoning epistemic contagion that can grip a mob. It is also messed up if I believe P because I think that will contribute to my popularity and make people like me. And it is messed up if I believe P because Comrade Stalin or Chairman Mao has declared that P is the case and that makes it really, really dangerous not to believe P. We think there are messed up ways to form beliefs and we think there are other ways that are not messed up. There are many ways to characterise the good ways. A popular one is in terms of epistemic virtues, virtues such as objectivity, open-mindedness, conscientiousness and a suitable degree of epistemic humility.

²⁸ Lakatos 1970, p. 178.

The worry here is that in ethics, if we are not robust realists, we may not be able to make this contrast at all. We cannot simply say that the good ways of forming and revising beliefs are the ways that reliably track the moral truth while the bad ways do not. Well actually we sort of can if we are quasi-realists and I am. But we can't just say it. The thing with quasi-realism is we don't get to help ourselves to truth at the outset. We have to explain how its invocation might make sense given our wholesale rejection of the robust realist's metaphysical commitments. If that explanation succeeds we end up in a position to speak the way realists do. But we have to earn that position. I think this can be done here.

I'm not the first philosopher to worry on this score. Valerie Tiberius recently published an excellent paper "Open-Mindedness and Normative Contingency" where she addresses the question how we can explain what she calls the legitimacy of epistemic virtues in a domain such as ethics as she understands it (where the way Tiberius understands the domain of ethics is as near as dammit the same as the way I do.) One thing she emphasizes there is that we make a decent bit of headway by paying attention to the extent to which moral and prosaically factual judgements are mutually entangled. An awful lot of what we are up to in our practical reasoning including our moral reasoning is prosaically factual, often instrumental, reasoning and there you just want to be able to track the truth. But we would like to be able to say more than this, making sense of such epistemic virtues even to the extent that our practical thought is not instrumental but concerned with what we are to take as important or as morally demanded of us in relatively basic ways. And, like Tiberius, I think we can.

Let us think about what is surely a paradigm case of a messed up way to decide an issue. Trial by combat. Suppose that you and I have a dispute. You say I wronged you. I say no. There are things we could do. We could reason with each other. We could get a wise judge or a jury of our peers to arbitrate. These might all be sensible enough proposals. But here instead is a stupid proposal. We could have a fight. Whichever of us is able to beat the other up to the point where they either give up or expire gets the dispute decided in their favour. This way of settling disputes is messed up. Why is it messed up? Well here is a natural thought. Trial by combat is messed up because it fails to track justice. When people have these kinds of disputes some of them are in the right and some are in the wrong and there is absolutely no reason to believe that being in the right remotely likely to correlate with being big and strong and having excellent combat skills.

Of course justice is a very thick concept, one where the normative and the prosaically factual are again entangled. So sometimes it may be very straightforward why trial by combat is messed up. In a case here you say I have wronged you and I say I did not, sometimes the disagreement is straightforwardly factual. You say I took money from your wallet and spent it on sweets. I say I did not. Then when a jury use the epistemic virtues we hope they have to determine their verdict there is no problem. The truth is out there and we hope their deliberations manage to track it. But not all disputes about justice are of that sort. Sometimes it is not contested what my actions were but what is contested whether doing that, whatever it is we all agree I did, should be counted as wronging you. Perhaps I have captured you and made you my slave. Perhaps I forced myself upon you sexually at a time when we were married to each other. Many people have believed that these things are not wrong. Some people still do. But the moral mainstream at least, in the cultural setting we inhabit, has abandoned these beliefs. Mob psychology? Or some rational progress of a kind that is clearly superior to combat as a decision procedure? And if the latter, in virtue of what?

Here's how. The process we use to determine what we believe has to be attentive in the right ways to the right things. Suppose that Ian is a morally immature 13-year old and as such is greatly addicted to bullying the puny and rather funny-looking Mark. Two years later Ian has become a far more morally mature young man, has ceased to bully Mark or anyone else and looks back on having done so with some shame and regret. What has happened to him, we might conjecture, is a shift in the sort of things he pays attention to and the kind of relevance that he attaches to them. He used to pay very little attention to the question of how his behaviour might make Mark feel. He used to pay a lot of attention to whether Mark's responses to his behaviour were, by his then 13-year-old boy's lights, amusing. He now pays enough attention to how his ill-treatment made Mark feel to realize it made Mark feel extreme distress and thinks this has a moral significance that renders any question of whether Mark's responses are amusing, simply of no moral relevance. This, it seems to me, is clearly an improving change in Ian. Or go back to my earlier example. Suppose I make you my slave, believing this is OK. Someone might say, I should not think that. I should attend to the impact of my doing this on your welfare and on your autonomy. But I might disagree. Considerations of your welfare and your autonomy have, I suggest, little or no weight because of certain characteristics you have, in particular, that you belong to a certain racial group. So there's no great need for me to attend to that. If you can get me to see that this is a mistake, that your racial membership does not have the sort of significance I think it does, we make moral progress. It is not a feature of you, I now see, that could ever warrant my withholding attention from what my treatment of you is costing in terms of your welfare and liberty. We do well, then, when we attend to the right things, badly when we do not. It is not always easy to be clear what those things are, but whatever they are, they are things to which the outcome of trial by combat has no sensitivity whatever. And that is why trial by combat is a stupid way of solving a moral dispute.

The worry you may now be having is that I seem to have spent the last paragraph not so much doing moral epistemology as simply moralizing. But I think that is a false dichotomy. We may sometimes be inclined to conceive of moral epistemology as a branch of something we call metaethics where that is an activity that stands, as it were, outside of ethics and reflects, from a detached, neutral perspective, on what on earth we are up to when we go in for it, without itself engaging in ethics. Like Blackburn and Gibbard, unlike, say, Dworkin, I think there is such an activity and occasionally dabble in it myself. But most of moral epistemology does not stand outside ethics in this way. Moral epistemology is the business of saying which ways of forming and exercising moral beliefs are messed up and which are good. And the only way to do that is to get stuck right in to first order ethical thinking. Because a central question to which moral epistemology is addressed, which are the good, which the bad ways of forming and revising beliefs, it is itself thoroughly ethical.²⁹ So while the foregoing four sentences are morally neutral metaethical observations made from a standpoint detached from engaged ethical thought and those four sentences are about moral epistemology, most of moral epistemology, its main substance is simply a branch of ethics. The virtuous moral inquirer, we will find ourselves saying, attends to things like this, ignores

²⁹ Here I do find myself essentially in agreement with Dworkin:

Our moral epistemology – our account of good reasoning about moral matters - must be an integrated rather than an Archimedeian epistemology and must therefore be itself a substantive, first-order moral theory. [paragraph] We are always guilty of a kind of circularity. There is no way I can test the accuracy of my moral convictions except by deploying further moral convictions. (2011, p, 100)

things like that, gives things of this kind this sort of weight, accords things of that kind this kind of relevance. What happens when such admirable types get their heads together to discuss what the moral rules in their society will be, is, I submit, something very different to science but a great deal more morally impressive than the more disreputable manifestations of mob psychology.

The method of reflective equilibrium, in the form in which I endorse it here is a form of coherence theory of how moral inquiry had best proceed. Rather more exactly, what matters on this account is the robustness of a normative judgement under pressure of scrutiny from our other normative judgements, roughly what Tiberius calls resilience.³⁰ But that is not to say that either coherence or resilience should be seen as some kind of master value.³¹ That would be a bad misunderstanding. If coherence were all that mattered, we might sensibly choose it even at the cost of transforming ourselves into everything our present substantive values most dispose us to loathe. And of course that would not be sensible.

The input to the method of reflective equilibrium consists³² in the moral sensibilities we bring to the moral conversation, in all the substantive detail shaped by our shared nature and our history. Moral truth is what survives such scrutiny but not what explains that survival. And as a value, it pulls no weight of its own in informing that scrutiny.³³

It need not at all follow that we are left unable to distinguish, in the moral case, between epistemic reasons and reasons of other kinds. Consider slum tourism. Is that a good way of improving one's moral understanding of extreme poverty and the moral issues it raises? It is natural to say the question is ambiguous. And here what we perhaps want to say is that, well, epistemically, it may very well be a very good way to do this. Rather as my hacking into your phone and your private email would be an epistemically effective but morally appalling way to obtain information about your private life. But morally it perhaps is not. Is it perhaps a

³⁰ Tiberius 2007, pp. 190ff.

³¹ Hurley is admirably clear on this point.

It is in deliberating about ends that an agent exercises his or her autonomy; the value of autonomy emerges immediately from the need for deliberation and the search for coherence... Though autonomy has a special role in relation to other values, and indeed in making human beings distinctive among animals as self-interpreting animals, or persons it is still one value among others which may conflict with it.(1989, pp. 318-319.)

³² Among many other things, of course, where reflective equilibrium aspires, as it always should, to be wide.

³³ Again cf. Dworkin 2011, esp. Part II. And cf. Tiberius 2007, p. 196:

The facts must be appreciated—deemed relevant, weighed and compared in importance—to arrive at a normative verdict. The non-realist can say that there are norms for appreciation of the facts that draw on other values, ones whose authority does not have to be explained in terms of straightforward truth conduciveness. For example, norms of empathy, imagination, and courage might be employed to assess how a person appreciates the facts, and these norms may be grounded in an ideal of the person rather than in reliability.

problem for the view defended here that it cannot make this distinction?³⁴ I don't think it is. Remember that for the quasi-realist, we don't get to help ourselves to truth at the outset. We need to earn the right to invoke it and we only get there after the philosophical work is done. Only then do we end up in a position to speak the way realists do. But the point here is that we do then end up in just that position. So at that point we can go right ahead and say the problem with slum tourism is that, while it might be a great way of coming to understand and appreciate certain moral truths, it is a morally objectionable way to pursue that goal. Distinctively epistemic reasons speak in its favour but moral reasons do not. It may of course very properly be doubted that I have in fact done anywhere near enough in this short essay to earn the right to say such things but I hope I have made at least some progress and perhaps contributed to pointing a way for others.

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³⁴ This was suggested to me by Geoff Sayre-McCord.

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