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In Defense of Wide Reflective Equilibrium

I

The account I will argue for is a defense of morality without philosophi-
cal foundations. Indeed, it is a view designed to set aside many of the
considerations which have exercised philosophers since the rise of moral
philosophy as we understand it now. It seems to me that traditional
moral philosophy rests on a mistake. That is to say, accounts such
as the various varieties of utilitarianism, deontology, contractarian-
ism, rights-based theories or perfectionism cannot attain the kind of
justificatory purchase they seek and need and that as well the once
fashionable meta-ethical turns are largely pointless as is the 'new sub-
jectivism' of J.L. Mackie and Gilbert Harman. Moral philosophy needs
to redefine its role. A start is to develop in the understanding of moral
domains as thorough an anti-foundationalism and coherentism as
Quine, Davidson and Rorty have developed in what was once called
epistemology. (I take 'foundationalist epistemology' to be pleonastic.)
I will argue for an account of justification in ethics which is a distinc-
tive variant of the appeal to considered judgments in wide reflective
equilibrium and I will seek to show how it can reasonably set aside
the epistemological and traditionalist considerations it has been tagged
with by some of its most acute critics (i.e. Joseph Raz and David Copp).
My account is a coherentist model of justification but the elements
that go into *wide* reflective equilibrium, if thought through carefully,
burst asunder all autonomous conceptions of moral philosophy,
redefining moral philosophy in such a way that it becomes a part of
a general conception of critical theory tendering an approach to hu-
man problems (including moral problems) which remains emancipa-
tory but still systematically empirical-cum-theoretical where moral

theory and social theory come to be closely integrated into the human sciences. This shift, if carried through properly, will bring a sea change all around: to moral theory, to social theory and even to elements of the human sciences. Moral philosophy, if that is still the right name for it, comes to be something radically different than it was for Kant, Mill, Sidgwick and W.D. Ross.

I have in various places developed this programmatic account.[1] Here I want to turn to the more negative and defensive task of rebutting some perceptive criticisms of wide reflective equilibrium which if sound would undermine it as a moral methodology. I shall first briefly characterize the way I want to construe wide reflective equilibrium and then turn to an examination of certain such criticisms of it. I hope the result will not only be a successful rebuttal of those criticisms but will as well afford a more adequate understanding of this method and its underlying rationale. (It will not be the case that this response will simply consist of rebuttals but will consist as well of clarifications and modifications of this account in the light of these criticisms.)

II

What I call *wide* reflective equilibrium was first developed in another context by Nelson Goodman and V.W. Quine. John Rawls then took it up as a central method in moral theory.[2] It was subsequently developed by Jane English, Norman Daniels, and me as a moral methodology and was in turn given a more general application by Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty.[3]

Someone who is committed to wide reflective equilibrium, hereafter WRE, is committed to a holistic anti-foundationalist account of morality. There is, on such an account, no conception of basic or fundamental moral beliefs or principles which will provide an unchallengeable basis for moral beliefs. WRE sets aside any such quest for certainty, any such effort to discover or even construct moral foundations for moral beliefs in accordance with which we could provide a framework to assess extant moralities or judge the rationality of taking the moral point of view. For WRE there can be no such ahistorical, perfectly

general, Archimedean point. Indeed the very idea of seeking an Archimedean point will be seen to be a mistake.

WRE instead, using a coherentist model, starts with our considered judgments given in the traditions which are a part of our culture. (The equilibrium we seek is clearly a social equilibium.) It does not, with talk of desire, wants, preferences, or even considered preferences, try to 'get behind' what in the Life-World of which we are a part are our most firmly fixed considered judgments or convictions given to us in our traditions.⁴ It does not try to show how these considered judgments, one by one, match with or answer to or 'really are' something more fundamental.

Starting with that, WRE seeks first to set out perspicuously what for a time are our most firmly fixed considered judgments, winnowing out those convictions which we would only have when we were fatigued, emotionally excited, drunk, caught up with an ideology, misinformed about the facts and the like. With such a cluster of considered convictions — that is, firmly held, winnowed, moral beliefs — WRE then seeks to match these considered judgments with more general moral principles consistent with them (which may themselves also be more abstract considered judgments), which also explain them and rationalize them (in this way show they have an underlying rationale) and in this distinctive way justify them.

However, WRE goes beyond that, for if it were to limit itself to such a rationalizing of considered convictions it would be, as some of its careless critics have maintained, a form of intuitionism or something rather like intuitionism: the matching of more specific moral judgments with more general ones, sometimes rejecting particular considered judgments which are not in accordance with the more abstract principles and sometimes modifying or even abandoning those abstract principles, say the principle of utility or perfectionist principles, which failed to match with a whole cluster of firmly held, more specific considered judgments.⁵ The thing here, in a rational reconstruction of our considered judgments, is to get them into a coherent and consistent package. But this narrow or partially reflective equilibrium would never give us a *critical* morality.

What WRE seeks to do is to get beyond this rational reconstruction of narrow reflective equilibrium to a wide reflective equilibrium which not only gets specific considered convictions in equilibrium

with abstract moral principles but gets both in a consistent whole with moral and social theories and with other scientific theories about the nature of human nature. We appeal in rationalizing and, in some instances, criticising specific considered judgments not only to abstract moral principles but as well to whole moral theories, empirical-cum-theoretical theories about the function(s) of morality in society, about social structure, the basis of solidarity in society, theories of social stratification, class, and gender, theories about ideology, human nature and the like. The thing is to get our considered convictions, jettisoning some along the way where they fit badly, into a coherent fit with such general moral principles and with those background social theories and the like. What we seek is a consistent and coherent equilibrium to which we, on reflection, would assent.

There are no moral foundations here, no underlying foundationalist moral epistemologies, no principles à la Bentham, Kant or Sidgwick, that we must just accept as self-evident intuitions or basic beliefs on which everything else rests. There is nothing in WRE that is basic or foundational. Instead we weave and unweave the web of our beliefs until we get, for a time, though only for a time, the most consistent and coherent package which best squares with everything we believe we know and to what we on reflection are most firmly committed.[6] There are some fixed points, points which we *may* always in fact retain anywhere, anywhen, but they are still, logically speaking, provisional fixed points which are not, in theory at least, beyond question if they turn out not to fit in with the web of our beliefs and reflective commitments, commitments which will not be extinguished when we take them to heart under conditions of undistorted discourse.[7]

III

Joseph Raz in his 'The Claims of Reflective Equilibrium' carefully queries WRE. He wants to know how WRE leads to the endorsement of reliable beliefs (310).[8] What is there, he asks, about the process of shuttling back and forth between the various beliefs, views and convictions, that gives these views their soundness? What, if anything, is there more to it than saying that our views, to be correct, must be informed and consistent (309)?

It is clear enough, Raz continues, that WRE can clarify the implications of views we already hold (310). But it would seem at least that it cannot have more force than the views from which WRE is derived. We have moral convictions at the start of engaging in the moral deliberation characterized as WRE and we will have moral convictions, which may or may not be identical with those initial convictions, at the end of such deliberations. Raz asks why should we have any greater confidence in the moral convictions we have at the finish than we have at the start (309)?

Raz thinks, most strangely it seems to me, that WRE gives us no reason for greater confidence here. But, for starters, he characterizes reflective equilibrium in a most inadequate way, setting up a straw man. 'Suppose,' to quote Raz, 'I reach reflective equilibrium but that you know that my deliberations were greatly influenced by a large number of clearly false factual assumptions, or were arrived at by a series of logical howlers such as affirming the consequent, or were based on accepting a demonstrably false epistemological theory' (309). But if I (for example) so reasoned, then, whatever I thought, my views would not in fact be in WRE. We start from the moral convictions extant in our traditions but we must, in reasoning in accordance with WRE, get them to square with out best available canons of correct reasoning. In the above case I have plainly failed to do that, so I have not got my views into WRE though I may very well be under the illusion that I have. But I have no privileged access here.

However, let us go back to Raz's query. Why believe that pursuing correctly WRE 'leads to the endorsement of reliable views' (310)? Indeed, Raz acknowledges, there is value in WRE, for 'It is likely to make people better aware of the implications of views which they already hold. Our firm beliefs may well help us decide cases about which we are hesitant, engaging in the process of reflective equilibrium may well help us see how' (311). But while this is clearly valuable it does not carry us very far, for, as Raz continues,

> the undoubted value of seeing clearly the implications of our own views on many occasions cannot however, blind us to the fact that these implications cannot have more force than the views from which they derive. The method of reflective equilibrium cannot be *the* method of

moral theory unless it can provide us with grounds for confidence in our views, and not only with an understanding of their implications regarding which we were in doubt. (311)

Why, he reiterates, have confidence in the considered judgments that remain after we have carefully reasoned in accordance with WRE? Why endorse these views as reliable views? I am thoroughly baffled here by Raz and fear I may be missing something. It seems to me the answer is obvious. I need—or so it seems to me—simply respond that we take such considered judgments to be reliable and do so with confidence because they are based on the most coherent package we can get of everything we can reasonably be expected to know or reliably believe and that this includes making careful comparisons with all the reasonably available alternatives. But this seems so blindingly obvious that it is difficult to believe that Raz could have overlooked it.

Perhaps Raz might resist by saying that *ab initio* we have no reasons for taking our initial considered judgments to be reliable and given that, on the principle of garbage/in garbage out, we have no good reason to take the considered judgments that result from WRE to be reliable. But whether that is so depends on what is done to the garbage in the process. We all know that some remarkable things have been done with the processing of garbage. It is not always the case that garbage in/garbage out. In WRE, to drop the metaphor, some considerable constraints and critical inspection are put on our initial considered judgments such that what remains after that process should lose a lot of whatever waywardness and arbitrariness the initial judgments may have had. Moreover, and as a distinct point, there is no reason not to believe that the considered judgments we start with have some initial credibilty. They are the most firmly entrenched considered judgments we have. As such they are part of the core convictions of our culture. They have a long and complicated tradition to support them, a tradition having many complicated lines. One does not have to be a conservative to believe they have some initial credibility. If these judgments would not have initial credibility what judgments would? And if it is replied that *none* do or could, then it can be reasonably asked: how else are we to make a start or find a footing in ethics? Considered judgments are to ethics what evidence is to

science. But again the analogy holds: there is no simple determining of the truth of any complex scientific theory from the evidence.

I have moved from consensus rooted in tradition to a claim to some initial justification for our initial considered judgments. But Raz resists that as well (311-12). I argue, as does Norman Daniels, that *if* WRE leads to a stable consensus, perhaps sustaining something of an initial consensus and, more importantly, producing an extended and perhaps different consensus, then we have good reason to believe that our resulting considered moral judgments have a reasonable objectivity.[9] Raz, like Copp, takes that to be confusing justifying a conclusion to a given person or persons in a culture at a given time and place with justifying a conclusion. After all, Raz comments, some people or even whole groups of people may 'be very gullible and happy to accept rather silly premises' (312). That last remark is surely true of many individuals but it is far less plausible (to put it minimally) when applied to a whole tradition, including, most plainly, our complex Western tradition—a tradition with a long history. Moreover, as Rawls stresses, justification, unlike proof, is a pragmatic notion.[10] We have no tolerably clear understanding of what it would be like to just justify a conclusion period as distinct from justifying it to some person or group (including the very wide group of humankind).

Raz goes on to argue that even a very extensive agreement, rooted in WRE, would not count as justification unless it secured agreement 'based on moral truth' (312). But the very notion of 'moral truth,' if we go beyond a Ramsey-like conception of truth, is a very problematic notion. One of the advantages of pursuing moral philosophy in the way Rawls, Daniels and I do is that it is so structured that it can remain utterly neutral on that thorny meta-ethical issue and a number of related issues, e.g. the fact/value issue. Whether or not moral utterances can in any interesting sense be said to be true or false they can be shown to be justified by WRE just as certain imperatives could by the same method be shown to be justified even though plainly no question of their truth or falsity could even arise.

Raz further argues that WRE cannot guide our choice between conflicting moral views. It 'cannot offer guidance in choosing between conflicting views held concurrently or diachronically' (318). It cannot account for why a '... morality is normative and binding. Morality provides reasons for certain actions and beliefs which do not directly

and exclusively depend on the fact that we already know that these are reasons for such actions and beliefs' (325). Again it seems to me that Raz is mistaken. Our initial considered judgments capture the element of sentiment here, though they are not 'pure sentiments' (if indeed there ever is such a thing). Reflective equilibrium cashes in in a distinctive way the structure of critical rationalization here, giving us an appraisal that in important respects, though not in all, is independent of our initial considered judgments. These considered judgments give us some of our reasons for our actions with WRE providing us with ways and grounds for critically assessing those actions and their associated beliefs. In this way (*pace* Raz) WRE can guide choices between conflicting moral views, moralities and moral theories both synchronically and diachronically.

Raz could respond that this presupposes that there is something good about coherence and that we should strive for coherence. That is indeed true. But coherence theories are common enough and in their general features unproblematic enough in our lives and practices. We do not want our views and convictions to be just an incoherent jumble and mess and we seek to show how they fit together and have a point and a rationale. In showing that point and rationale, we show something of their justification as we do in showing how they hang together in a consistent and coherent pattern and do not just co-exist as a jumble.[11] This, I should repeat, is part of what it is to show they are rational and that they are justified. This needs no special justification by WRE but can simply be accepted as an unproblematic background belief. This merely brings out what justification comes to in such domains (323).

Raz also argues that if WRE is to be justified it rests on 'a second- (or third-) order disposition that some of us share. This is a disposition to approve of moral views held as a result of engaging in the method of reflective equilibrium' (326). He goes on to add that this 'disposition is itself "subjective." Some people who have moral capacities may not share it' (326). I am not entirely confident that the appeal of WRE must or even does rest on that, but, letting that go for the nonce, even if it does, Raz himself in effect signals that something is fishy here by putting 'subjective' in scare quotes. Why should this disposition to approve be said to be subjective? Is it simply because some who have moral capacities do not share it? But it is (to put it

minimally) arguable that in not sharing it they are being less reasonable than they otherwise could be. The person who has this disposition and acts on this disposition reveals in her very behaviour that she is a more reasonable and a more reflective person—indeed more reflective in her actions—and less given to arbitrariness than the one who does not so act. This shows that one disposition is better justified than the other and that the differences here are not subjective. If alternatively it is said to be subjective simply because it is a disposition to approve—*any* disposition to approve at all—then we are engaging an arbitrary verbal stipulation simply taking, in an arbitrary deviation from a linguistic regularity, 'subjective disposition to approve' as a redundancy (326).[12]

Raz, speaking now more generally, sees, starting with our pre-WRE considered judgments, and stressing coherence and survivability, these things, even taken together, as giving us no grounds at all for showing the justifiability of any moral belief. We need instead to establish the truth of moral realism where we can show that some moral propositions reveal the existence of a moral reality beyond our mere moral capacities and reflective and informed approvals and disapprovals. Such talk is very problematic indeed and it is not clear that we understand what we are talking about when we so speak (327-9). But he does think if moral beliefs are to be shown to be justifed we must, problematic though it be, establish the truth of moral realism. Raz realizes that WRE is attractive for it, if successful, would provide an account of how moral beliefs can be justified without taking sides on such arcane epistemological and semantical issues. He only tries to show that its claims, as attractive as they are, will not stand up to critical inspection. I, in turn, have tried to rebut his criticisms, seeking to make viable or at least plausible the claim that the rest position should be the attractive and simplifying view making it the case that the burden of proof is to show why we should not remain content with that critically common-sensist rest position. We often should not rest content with common sense or even take as unproblematic what in some cases is said to be common sense; but philosophers, perhaps more than anyone else, need always (or almost always) to give us good reasons for departing from common sense.

IV

Raz remarks (*pace* David Copp) that a good thing about WRE is that 'it combines conservativism with reform. It builds on our existing views and yet allows us to revise any number of them' (329). David Copp argues, by contrast, that WRE is a conservative view and a mistaken conservative view at that.[13] By a 'conservative view' in that context Copp means a moral view which gives 'a privileged place in moral theory to our moral convictions or to those we would have under specified hypothetical circumstances' (141). If we use our considered judgments as a standard for assessing the correctness of moral principles, a morality or a theory of moral justification, we, at least in effect, commit ourselves, Copp would have it, to conservativism in moral philosophy. However, it is very important indeed to give a careful reading to this. Copp takes it that what he calls 'moral conservativism' makes 'a common assumption that a theory may be undermined if it can be shown to imply that some of our considered judgments are not justifed' (141). But this is not a sense of 'conservativism' that is correctly attributable to WRE either as I formulate it or as Rawls, Daniels or English formulates it. We not only allow but expect *some* of our considered judgments will not be justified. Indeed one of the tasks of WRE is to help us sort out which considered judgments are justified and which are not. The firm expectation is that they will not all be justified. So right at the start Copp is off the mark.[14] What is the case on our accounts is that if an abstract moral principle, set of moral principles, or theory of moral justification is massively incompatible with the great bulk of reflective considered judgments, then those principles or the parts of the moral theory that are so incompatible with the bulk of our considered judgments would have to be either rejected outright or modified until they were so compatible with those judgments.

To the demand to quantify or make more precise 'massive' so that we can say exactly when the extent of incompatibility with our considered judgments is sufficient to require such a rejection, it should be replied that moral theory cannot provide such precision. Instead we must rely here on the good judgment of reflective moral agents. But being without an algorithm here is not worrisome, for there are plenty of clear cases when a set of principles or a theory is so massive-

ly incompatible with the bulk of our considered judgments that it
would be unreasonable to hold those principles or accept that theory
just as it would be unreasonable to hold a scientific theory that was
massively incompatible with the empirical evidence in its domain. (That
we cannot say at what exact point loss of hair constitutes baldness
does not at all mean that being bald is not a useful concept. Similar
things should be acknowledged in the above domains.)

    This is hardly 'conservativism' in any accepted or even recognis-
able sense of that term but if by stipulation we call this 'conservati-
vism' then long live conservatism. We have to disambiguate the remark
'that conflict between theory and our convictions provides us with
a justification for rejecting the theory' (140). (a) A conflict between
some of our considered judgments may not justify the rejection of a
theory but (b) a conflict between very many of our deeply embedded
considered judgments would require a rejection of the theory. Sup-
pose, to be absurdly extreme in order to illustrate the point, we had
a normative ethical theory that offered as its supreme moral princi-
ple 'As much pain as is tolerable for as many people as possible is to
be caused.' There we have a clear case of a principle so massively con-
flicting with our considered judgments that that it so conflicts gives
us a firm ground for rejecting it. Moreover, there is no good reason
to believe the latter reading of Copp's sentence, i.e. (b), is either mis-
taken or expressive of conservativism—even a 'conservative coheren-
tism.' And when we consider that the considered judgments in question
are the considered judgments that we—that is we more or less moder-
nized Westerners—would have in ideal circumstances, the attribution
of conservativism is even more bizarre.

    Copp, like Raz, draws a distinction between theories of objec-
tive justification and personal justification that leaves out of account
an alternative conception of an objective justification which is argu-
ably more appropriate to the domain of morality than the ones Copp
and Raz offer. When this is noted another of Copp's worries about
a philosophical foundation for morality withers away or at least be-
comes problematic. For Copp we only have an objective justification
in ethics when we have a 'theory as to when a morality or moral judg-
ment *itself* may be justified, not an account of the circumstance under
which a person is justified in his moral views' (143). The latter is *per-
sonal* justification but we need the former to attain objectivity and

that, Copp would have it, cannot be attained if we use an appeal to considered judgments. But this forgets that there are other alternatives and forgets Thomas Nagel's point that objectivity is a very complex concept with different readings in different domains.[15] Copp simply stipulates a reading of 'objectivity' that may turn out to be a Holmesless Watson in moral domains. The demand for an objectivity that requires that 'our moral views are justified themselves' is very problematical. It is not clear that we have anything like that or that we even could come to have or know in any tolerably clear sense what it would be like to have *such* objectivity. We have something here which is on a par with moral realism. But there is, by contrast, available to us a whole range of rather more applicable conceptions of objectivity linked with forms of intersubjectivity. Suppose, to take just one of them, we say that a morality or a set of moral views is justified ('objectively justified' if that isn't pleonastic) when at a given time in a cool hour among reasonable people properly informed these people achieve a reflective consensus on what is to be done and on what moral views to hold. 'Reflective consensus' here would cash in as to what they would assent to under ideal conditions when they were dispassionately turning things over and taking them to heart and 'properly informed' would be cashed in in terms of the constraints on WRE or an ideal observer theory.

I do not see why this does not give us a reasonable and workable sense of 'objectivity' in moral domains completely in the absence of any account of how moral views could be justified *in themselves* or of any commitment to something as obscure as moral realism. But this mundane sense of 'objectivity' is an utterly non-metaphysical conception of objectivity compatible with reflective common sense (critical common sensism, to use Peirce's phrase) and with an appeal to our considered judgments.

Related to Copp's persuasive definition of 'objectivity' is his view that systematizing theories cannot be justificatory theories (143-4). But why should not the systematizing theories of a WRE sort be regarded as justificatory theories while remaining systematizing theories? Their scope leaves room for that. We do not in getting our views into WRE only systematize moral beliefs; we systematize and compare different sets of moral beliefs and different sets of moral theories with many other things we know or think we know, including concep-

tions of the social role of morality, the structure of society, the nature of human nature, what are the mundane non-moral facts in the case, the way ideology functions and the like. This kind of systematizing gives us plenty of *lebensraum* for the evaluation of competing moralities and moral theories and for criticizing moral judgments. There is no good reason for not regarding such systematizing theories as justificatory theories. They are explanatory and interpretative as well but they are also justificatory. (If some explanations and interpretations are shown to be correct justification almost comes along with it.) Moreover, there is no reason to believe that in specifying ideal circumstances here we cannot specify a non-vacuous contrast between when these ideal circumstances would obtain and when they would not (145-6).

Copp takes, mistakenly I believe, WRE to be a conservativism and he, as we have noted, thinks conservativism is mistaken. 'At root,' he tells us, 'conservativism relies on taking our confidence in certain moral judgments to be an index of justification' (149). Normative ethical theories and theories of moral judgments operating under that dispensation – and WRE, of course, encourages that – allow competing normative ethical theories to be 'defeated or undermined by *marshalling* counterexamples supported by considered judgments' (147). What Copp calls the conservative theories stand intact when they square with our considered judgments. This, Copp maintains, is a bad thing. It is important to see *why* this is supposed to be so and *if* it indeed really is so.

It is, of course, only 'the beliefs in which we would have full and non-temporary *confidence*' that we call considered judgments and which 'play an essential role in conservative theories of justification' (147). What, according to Copp, is so wrong with these theories is that they 'beg the question against skepticism' (147). Why is this said to be so? WRE is committed to the belief that 'a theory of moral justification is not tenable if it implies that *no* moral judgment is justified' (147). But moral skepticism is just such a theory, so, Copp argues, WRE begs the question with moral skepticism.

We have, in effect, a situation similar to some common responses to G.E. Moore's critique of epistemological skepticism.[16] However, we can say, correctly enough, both that WRE begs the question with ethical skepticism and ethical skepticism begs the question with WRE.

So we need to ask in such a circumstance which, if either position, is the better position to hold. We have here the familiar situation of trying to ascertain where the burden of proof lies. But the burden of proof here – or so it seems to me – plainly lies with the moral skeptic. Her account implies that no moral judgment – *no moral judgment at all* – is justified. But this is subject to a *reductio* for this implies that we are not justified in saying that it is wrong to torture little children just for the fun of it. But it is plainly more reasonable to believe that moral judgment is justified than to believe the general claim – in any event obscure enough – that no moral judgment is justified. Faced with a choice between assenting to moral skepticism and assenting to the proposition that there is nothing wrong with torturing little children just for the fun of it, it is plainly more reasonable to refuse to assent to moral skepticism. What a reasonable person, not trapped by philosophy, would do is conclude that somehow it is more reasonable to assume that there must have been a mistake in the chain of reasoning leading to moral skepticism than to believe that the plain person's firm considered judgment is unjustified that it is wrong (to understate it) to torture little children just for the fun of it. It is comparable to the claim in the domain of factual belief that there is at least one tree in Ontario is a more reasonable thing to believe than to believe any skeptical epistemological theory which maintains that no factual belief is ever justified.[17]

When questions get begged a burden of proof issue arises and here *totalizing* skeptical positions are the positions that need to be argued for. (Indeed, if we take them at face value, it is very difficult, perhaps impossible, to take them seriously.[18]) The plain person's sense of reasonability – a flat-footed staring down of skepticism – must be the position to be dislodged. (Here G.E. Moore on common sense is very valuable indeed. Epistemology should, after him, have been different, if existent at all. That it was not says something about the malaise of philosophy.[19]) Perhaps the proper response to moral skepticism is to deflate it, again, as is so often the case in philosophy, taking the fly out of the fly bottle.[20] Ridicule may be more in order than argument against the totalizing skepticism that Copp thinks it is our philosphical task to refute.

Copp might respond that by so arguing I am implicitly departing from the coherentism of WRE and accepting some kind of com-

mon sense foundationalism since I am implicitly treating some moral judgments deeply embedded in at least our culture as basic (152). Well, I do not take them to be self-evident or synthetic a priori truths or somehow accurate indicators or representations of a moral reality, as if we understood what any of that talk came to. But, all that notwith-standing, still do I not take them as somehow basic? Well, I do think that we have 'no option [if we want to do moral theory at all] but to begin with the set of moral convictions we find initially credible and to try to construct a moral theory on that basis' (148). But Copp does not object to that but only objects when we move from there to the claim that *justification* requires reference to some of those con-sidered judgments (148-9).

I, by contrast, do indeed believe we must both start with these considered judgments and use them in justification as well. But, that notwithstanding, none of them is taken in WRE to be basic in a *foun-dationalist* sense. Even my paradigm considered judgment (as any other judgment) could *in principle* be shown to be unjustified if it were shown to be incompatible with a host of equally firm considered judgments and other beliefs we think, and with good reason, are grounded in our knowledge of the world. We should first, of course, in such an eventuality, consider whether we had reasoned improperly in con-cluding that there was such an incompatibility but if we reasoned together and came to the firm and carefully weighed conclusion that we had not, then, even this considered conviction would have to be abandoned. But that is a mere theoretical possibility and there is no actual reason to think that a number of firmly held considered judg-ments are the least bit shakey. We can see how we can here, as we can in the factual case as well, preserve consistently, in a good Peir-cean manner, both a fallibilism and a critical common sensism. Any considered judgment whatsoever could at some time be up for grabs but not all of them together.

There may indeed be suspicious formative factors that go into certain of our considered judgments skewing them ideologically. Some of them may be little more than class biases or religious or anti-religious biases. But such considered judgments would be winnowed out by the resolute application of WRE. But we cannot block out all or even most such considered judgments in reasoning about what to do, though, as I have just said, any of our considered judgments taken *seriatim*,

could be challenged though certain of them, no matter how cross cul-
tural and developmental we get, would most probably never in fact
be challenged.

Certain idealized considered judgments (taken together) are in
a way *a* standard of justification in moral deliberation but in no way
the standard and they have no pride of place over other matters in
weaving and unweaving our web of belief until we get a consistent
and coherent set of beliefs with which we on reflection would stick.
But considered judgments do not have pride of place here any more
than do moral principles, moral theories, background factual beliefs,
theories about the function of morality and the like. Considered judg-
ments are an indispensible element in fixing moral belief in a reflec-
tive way but they are not the only or the prime element, thus
functioning as *the* or a central standard for warranted moral belief (155).
An appeal to considered judgments are, however, in the way I have
indicated, an essential element of such a standard in WRE. They are
part of the standard it gives us. We could not drop references to them
in WRE. *If* that is the mark of a conservative coherentism then a con-
servative coherentism it is.

However, no single considered judgment, no matter how fer-
vently and reflectively held, could undermine the coherent package
of moral beliefs that make up an essential part of WRE. That the con-
sidered judgment does not fit, if that is so, is a good reason for reject-
ing it or for believing that we have not yet got our beliefs in wide
reflective equilibrium. No considered judgment has such strategic or
justificatory power. Indeed, given a commitment to the thoroughgo-
ing coherentism of WRE, it could not *remain* a *considered* judgment
where we could not show how it could fit into what was a wide reflec-
tive equilibrium, though we must also consider the possibility, perhaps
even the likelihood, if it is a deeply embedded considered judgment
and it remains recalcitrant to our purported WRE, that we have not
yet actually attained WRE (156-7). Again, we have and can have no
mechanical decision procedure here. Raz is right in stressing how judg-
ment is unavoidable in moral reasoning.

However, a psychological sense of confidence in such an unruly
moral belief or set of such unruly moral beliefs is not sufficient to
justify them when they do not cohere with a very extensive and co-
herent package of beliefs of a diverse sort (the sort of thing that would

go into WRE). Indeed for a reasonable person reasoning in accordance with WRE, it is very likely that this initial psychological sense of confidence would be extinguished when this reasoning was carried through. But whether it would or not such confidence is not sufficient to justify such a belief in such a circumstance.

What Copp very fundamentally wants is some account, other than a coherentist one, of the initial credibility of our considered judgments (160). For *initial* credibility, I would respond, it is enough that they are judgments we on reflection have a firm confidence in when we have a reasonable knowledge of the facts, are being impartial and are being reasonable. Such considered judgments are the best candidates for *initial* credibility that we can have. It is sufficient to give considered judgments *some* initial plausibility and thus *some* initial justification. And the closer we come to getting them into WRE, the stronger their justification will become. (Remember something can be more or less well justified.) Copp tells us that what he calls a 'conservative coherentism would ... be implausible because it would take our considered judgments in ideal circumstances to be a standard of justification *ab initio*, while admitting that they need to be justified' (165). However, Copp's contention here is mistaken, for it is not that they have *no* prior justification. They have *some* and so provide a standard though by no means all that we can reasonably ask for by way of standards. For a further bolstering of them—for getting a more adequate cluster of standards, for getting a fuller justification—we turn to what we can get from resolutely and intelligently pursuing WRE. But without that they still have, if they are so held, some initial plausibility. Justification, unlike validity, is not an all or nothing affair.

FOOTNOTES

1 Kai Nielsen, 'On Needing a Moral Theory: Rationality, Considered Judgments and the Grounding of Morality,' *Metaphilosophy* 13 (April 1982); 'Considered Judgments Again,' *Human Studies* 5 (April-June 1982); *Equality and Liberty* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld 1985), Ch. 2; 'Searching for an Emancipatory Perspective: Wide Reflective

Equilibrium and the Hermeneutical Circle' in Evan Simpson, ed., *Antifoundationalism & Practical Reasoning* (Edmonton, AB: Academic Printing & Publishing 1987); 'Reflective Equilibrum and the Transformation of Philosophy,' *Metaphilosophy* 1988; 'Philosophy as Critical Theory,' *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* supplement to **61**:1 (September 1987), 89-108; 'On Sticking with Considered Judgments in Wide Reflective Equilibrium,' *Philosophia* **13**:3-4 (1985), 316-21. See also Marsha Hanen, 'Justification as Coherence' in M.A. Stewart, ed., *Law, Morality and Rights* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel 1983), 67-92.

2 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1971), 19-21, 48-51 and 577-87; John Rawls, 'The Independence of Moral Theory,' *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* **47** (1974/75), 7-10

3 Jane English, 'Ethics and Science,' *Proceedings of the XVI Congress of Philosophy*; Norman Daniels, 'Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics,' *The Journal of Philosophy* **76** (1979); 'Moral Theory and Plasticity of Persons,' *The Monist* **62** (July 1979); 'Some Methods of Ethics and Linguistics,' *Philosophical Studies* **37** (1980); 'Two Approaches to Theory Acceptance in Ethics,' in David Copp and David Zimmerman, eds., *Morality, Reason and Truth* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld 1985); Hilary Putnam, *Realism and Reason* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press 1983), 229-47; and Richard Rorty, 'The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,' in Meryl Patterson and Robert Vaughan, eds., *The Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press 1987)

4 Kai Nielsen, 'Searching for an Emancipatory Perspective: Wide Reflective Equilibrium and the Hermeneutical Circle' and 'Cultural Identity and Self-Definition,' *Human Studies* (1987)

5 Ibid., and articles by Daniels cited in n. 3.

6 Rorty, 'The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy'

7 See references to Rawls n. 2 and see, as well, Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge. MA: The MIT Press 1978), ch. 4; Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommnikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt an Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 1981); and David Ingram, *Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1987).

8 Joseph Raz, 'The Claims of Reflective Equilibrium,' *Inquiry* **25**: 3 (September 1982), 307-30. All future references to Raz will be given in the text.

9 See the references n. 2 and n. 3.

10 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 580-1

11 Stuart Hampshire, 'A New Philosophy of the Just Society,' *The New York Review of Books* **3**:3 (February 24, 1972), 34-9

12 J.N. Findlay, *Language, Mind and Value* (London: George Allen and Unwin 1963), 165-81, and W.D. Falk, *Ought, Reasons and Morality* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1986), 248-60

13 David Copp, 'Considered Judgments and Moral Justification: Conservatism and Moral Theory,' in *Morality, Reason and Truth*, 141-68. Future references to Copp are in the text.

14 Copp has, in conversation, objected that this too much relies on his preliminary formulations. Indeed there I *start* at his beginning, but I do not see that he ever *retracts* that initial mistake.

15 Thomas Nagel, 'The Limits of Objectivity,' in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* **1** (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press 1980), 77-139

16 C.J. Ducasse, 'Moore's Refutation of Idealism,' in *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore*, P.A. Schilpp, ed. (New York: Tudor 1952), 225-51, and Roderick Chisholm, 'Philosophers and Ordinary Language,' *The Philosophical Review* **60** (1951), 317-28

17 Kai Nielsen, 'On Refusing to Play the Sceptics' Game,' *Dialogue* (1973)

18 John Wisdom, *Philosophy and Psycho-Analysis* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1953)

19 A.E. Murphy, 'Moore's "Defence of Common Sense," ' in *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore*, 301-17

20 Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 1982), 160-90