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Three Limitations of Reflective Equilibrium's Justificatory Claims

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John Rawls's method of reflective equilibrium (RE) offers a non-foundationalist framework for moral and political justification by harmonizing considered judgments and principles through iterative recalibration. Positioned as a response to value pluralism and normative conflict, RE foregrounds coherence and internal consistency as its epistemic ideals. On three interlinked grounds, this paper offers a critical examination of RE. First, RE's reliance on moral intuitions can obscure the socio-historical construction of moral sensibilities. This effectively undermines the claims of universal moral justification. Second, in absence of external normative anchors, its procedural dynamism risks justificatory circularity. Third, RE assumes equal degree of epistemic accessibility to everyone that is unevenly allocated across social situations, favouring individuals possessing the cognitive, educational, and material resources required for prolonged contemplation. This asymmetry renders RE susceptible to epistemic exclusion, marginalizing subaltern moral imaginaries and reinforcing dominant normative frameworks. Consequently, RE's epistemic architecture narrows it aspiration to pluralism.

Introduction

The concept of *reflective equilibrium* (hereafter *RE*) represents one of the most philosophically rigorous and widely employed methodologies in contemporary normative theory, particularly within the tradition inaugurated by John Rawls. *RE* is not merely a technique of moral reasoning; it is a sophisticated method of normative justification that has acquired broad interdisciplinary traction in course of time. Its philosophical influence cuts across the domains of metaethics, bioethics, logic, and the philosophy of science—so much so that some scholars regard it as the methodological core of philosophy itself.[1]

RE is integral to the architecture of a well-ordered society in Rawlsian schema. A well-ordered society is governed by public reason and united by an overlapping consensus on principles of justice. This type of society does not subscribe or sustained by dogmatic

[1] Baumberger, Christoph. & Brun, Georg. Reflective equilibrium and understanding. *Synthese*, 198:8 (2020), p. 7924.

adherence to any one moral theory or doctrine. Instead they perpetually travel through an ongoing process of normative adjustment and alignment between our considered moral judgments and the collective principles we endorse.[2] The process of *RE* enables individuals to revise and reconcile their judgments in a way that yields the most reasonable conception of justice. As John Rawls defines, the most defensible sense of justice is not that which coincides with one's pre-reflective intuitions, but that which survives the test of *RE*.[3]

As a method, RE aims to provide a criterion of acceptability for ethical and political theories—one that does not rely on foundationalist certainties but emerges from the coherence among judgments, principles, and background theories.[4] Reflecting on its methodological importance, Michael William Schmidt has remarked that if we were to assemble an inventory of essential philosophical tools, RE would undoubtedly occupy a central place.[5] Paul Weithman similarly defends RE as a stabilizing mechanism in a social and political discourse capable of mitigating the epistemic and moral fragilities that liberal democratic societies must continuously navigate.[6] John Rawls introduced the term in *A Theory of Justice*. But he explicitly acknowledged its antecedents in Nelson Goodman's work on the justification of inductive inference.[7] He draws from Nelson Goodman's rejection of rigid foundationalism and his emphasis on necessary mutual adjustment as the basis for any kind of political justification.[8] What distinguishes John Rawls, however, is the manner in which he reconfigures this epistemological insight for the purposes of moral and political reasoning in a diversified society.

Among its staunch defenders, Thomas Michael Scanlon maintains that RE is the only viable method for moral justification, arguing that all putative alternatives are illusory.[9] Yet critics have voiced substantial reservations. One of the most forceful critiques comes from the epistemic direction: even when meticulously applied, RE may yield conclusions that remain normatively deficient or morally unsound.[10] This critique is instructive but not wholly sufficient. The weakness of RE lies not simply in its possible failure to guarantee moral truth but in a deeper set of conceptual problems that are often overlooked in the prevailing literature.

The aim of this paper is not to repudiate RE in its entirety. Rather, it is to draw attention to three significant limitations that can compromise its philosophical robustness and politically pragmatic applicability. While the method retains potential as a constructive tool for negotiating social and political disagreement, these limitations render the method increasingly inadequate for the pluralistic and fractured moral landscapes of the contemporary world society.

Two major camps dominate the academic discourse on RE. The first consists of those who uphold the method's enduring philosophical utility—among them Norman

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[2] Schaefer, Alexander. (2021). Is justice a fixed point? *American Journal of Political Science*, 67:2 2021, p. 2.
[3] Chung, Hun. Rawls's Self-Defeat: A Formal Analysis. *Erkenntnis*, 85:5 (2018), p. 1119. Also see - Kukathas, Chandran. & Pettit, Pettit. *Rawls: A Theory of Justice and its Critics*. Polity Press, 2007, p. 69.
[4] Maffettone, Sebastiano. *Rawls: An Introduction*. Polity Press, 2010, p. 140.
[5] Schmidt, Michael William. Defining the method of reflective equilibrium. *Synthese*, 203:5 2024, p. 170.
[6] Weithman, Paul. Stability and equilibrium in political liberalism. *Philosophical Studies*. 181:1 2023, pp. 23- 41.
[7] De Maagt, Sem. Reflective equilibrium and moral objectivity. *Inquiry*, 60:5 2016, p. 444.
[8] Daniels, Norman. Reflective Equilibrium, 2015, p. 711.
[9] Scanlon, Thomas Michael. (2002). *'Rawls on Justification', (2002),* Cambridge University Press, p. 149.
[10] Kelly, Thomas. & McGrath, Sarah. Is Reflective Equilibrium Enough? *Philosophical Perspectives*, 24:1 2010, p. 326.

Daniels, Thomas Michael Scanlon, Christine Korsgaard, and Samuel Freeman. They regard RE as a dynamic and context-sensitive process that lends itself well to ethical pluralism and political liberalism. The second camp adopts a more critical stance. Their criticism pointed out that RE is conceptually flawed or insufficiently rigorous to bear the normative weight placed upon it. This group includes thinkers such as Robert Nozick, Gerald Allan Cohen, Jürgen Habermas, Alasdair MacIntyre, Richard Mervyn Hare, and Amartya Sen.

This paper departs from this polarized camping by resisting both uncritical affirmation and outright dismissal. Excluding introduction, the paper has been divide in five sections. These are interconnected with each other. The first section explicates John Rawls's original formulation of RE. The second section engages with the cultural and historical contingency of moral intuitions. Here, we argue that RE cannot easily account for the diverse moral grammars that emerge across societies. The third section turns to the charge of circularity and the risk of infinite regress inherent in RE's structural design. The fourth section examines the epistemic privilege embedded in the notion of *"considered judgment,"*. We underlines that how it can marginalize non-dominant and subaltern perspectives. The final section synthesizes these critiques. Here, paper offers concluding reflections on the normative future of RE in a world marked by moral conflict and political asymmetry.

What is Reflective Equilibrium?

RE's initial formulation can be traced back to John Rawls's earlier essay, *"Outline of a Decision Procedure for Ethics"* (1951). The *term* does not appear in this foundational text. In that essay, John Rawls sought to address a fundamental question faced as a challenge in the process of almost all decision making: is it possible to devise a reasonable decision procedure robust enough to adjudicate among competing moral claims?[11] This inquiry emerged from his deeply held commitment to moral equality. This commitment specifies that no individual should benefit or suffer merely due to arbitrary forces and factors which are not a matter of their choice/efforts such as natural endowments or social position.[12] In *A Theory of Justice* John Rawls characterized RE as a state of balance or coherence that emerges when our moral principles and specific judgments align. Individuals possess awareness of both the principles our judgments confirm to and the justifications underlying those principles.[13] As Sebastiano Maffettone suggests rightly RE resembles a scientific model or a mathematical demonstration in its effort to generate coherent and testable normative conclusions.[14]

According to Woods Jack's observation, RE is perhaps best understood as the most robust form of "piecemeal method".[15] Rather than constructing or justifying an entire moral theory in a grand, top-down manner, RE proceeds incrementally. It foregrounded deductive certainty in favour of a more dialectical model. First, minor, localized adjustments are made between general principles and specific judgments until a state of coherence is achieved. The dialectic structure of RE emphasizes the interaction between two levels of moral cognition. First level is specific judgments (or what John Rawls calls

[11] Rawls, John. Outline of a Decision Procedure for Ethics. *The Philosophical Review*, 60:2 1951, p. 177.
[12] Lovett, Frank. *Rawls's A Theory of Justice: A Reader's Guide*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2011, p. 43.
[13] Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 18.
[14] Maffettone, Sebastiano. *Rawls: An Introduction*. Polity Press, 2010, p. 142.
[15] Jack, Woods. Against reflective equilibrium for logical theorising. *The Australasian Journal of Logic*, 16:7 2019, p. 319.

"considered judgments") and second one is general principles of collective life. Here, specific judgments are concrete responses to particular cases or moral dilemmas which individual realises in everyday life. John Rawls firmly believed that these judgments are epistemically reliable only when formed under conditions where our moral capacities are functioning at their best, undistorted by prejudice, fear, or ignorance.[16]

On the other side, the construction which aim to systematize and justify specific judgements, are general principles. They are abstract moral rules or theories. They possess broader thematic scope. The broader thematic scope helps to apply them across various situations to provide normative guidance in the process of decision making. What RE requires is not blind adherence to either specific judgments or general principles, but a continuous process of mutual adjustment in the form of a dynamic recalibration in which each is scrutinized and refined in light of the other. As Catherine Elgin notes, achieving RE may demand that we draw new evaluative and descriptive distinctions, discard existing ones, reorder moral priorities, or reconsider which facts and values are morally salient.[17]

David Wong has interpreted RE through a functionalist lens. In this exercise he emphasised on the role of moral convictions in shaping coherent belief systems. For David Wong, moral convictions fulfill epistemic and practical functions in diverse normative systems, and RE helps align those functions within internally coherent moral frameworks.[18] This account suggests that the utility of RE lies not in its capacity to produce universal convergence. The real role it has to play in its facilitation of intelligible and coherent moral outlooks across different political cultures and social traditions. This helps to understand that coherence in RE cannot be limited limited to logical consistency. It also involves normative integration in the process. As Folke Tersman explains, coherence demands that beliefs mutually support one another (not just logically but evaluatively) so that moral convictions are bolstered by principles and vice versa.[19] While we emphasize the depth of moral disagreement, this claim is not intended to dismiss the kind of shared moral terrain that David Wong (2006) describes as *moral ambivalence*. Rather, our point is that the presence of such ambivalence does not eliminate deeper conflicts over justification; it simply reframes them within a space of partial convergence.

As Jonathan Wolff points out, John Rawls's innovation lies in proposing a method where one need not begin with fixed starting points; both ends of the justificatory spectrum are open to negotiation.[20] This openness makes RE a deeply democratic method. It respects the complexity of moral reasoning and the plurality of reasonable viewpoints. Likewise, Michael DePaul reinforces this point by arguing that RE privileges no particular type of belief; all components are revisable in the search for coherence.[21] In this discussion, we argue that coherence must be understood as a matter of degree rather than an absolute state. In the process of political justification, coherence can never be perfect. The political tensions, disagreements, and unresolved questions *(shall & must)* inevitably remain. In other words, it is best conceived as gradual or partial, admitting stronger or weaker forms rather than demanding an unattainable completeness.

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[16] Rawls, John. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 29.
[17] Elgin, Catherine. *Considered Judgement*. Princeton University Press, 1999, pp. 106-107.
[18] Wong, David. *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism*. Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 46.
[19] Tersman, Folke. (2018). Recent work on reflective equilibrium and method in ethics. *Philosophy Compass,* 13:6 2018, p. 2.
[20] Wolff, Jonathan. Public reflective disequilibrium. *Australasian Philosophical Review,* 4:1 2024, p. 46.
[21] DePaul, Michael R. *Balance and Refinement: Beyond Coherence Methods of Moral Inquiry*. Routledge, 1993, p. 13.

Foundationalism and coherentism articulate two competing conceptions of justification. For foundationalism, knowledge is structured hierarchically: it begins with a base of self-evident, infallible, or non-inferentially justified beliefs—what Laurence BonJour terms "*epistemic* foundations."[22] These basic beliefs provide the ultimate warrant from which derivative beliefs gain justification. This seeks epistemic certainty by anchoring knowledge in a stable, privileged core. The concept of coherentism suggests that justification is achieved holistically, through mutual support, consistency, and explanatory integration of assumptions within an interrelated system.[23] No single belief enjoys foundational priority. The credibility of each depends on its contribution to the coherence of the whole. The philosophical tension between the two models reflects a deeper dispute between epistemic linearity—the idea that justification proceeds from fixed starting points—and epistemic circularity, which treats justification as arising from equilibrium in a dynamic web of beliefs or moral convictions. Whereas foundationalism prioritizes certainty and asymmetry, coherentism embraces fallibilism, interdependence, and systemic coherence as epistemic virtues. We will understand how does John Rawls's method of RE exemplifies this coherentist orientation. He distinguishes between "resting point" and "endpoint." On the one hand, former signifies a provisional stage of justification in which a sufficient degree of coherence has been achieved to guide action and confer legitimacy. It remains open to revision in light of new argumentative experiences. For example,, John Rawls's two principles of justice can serve as a resting point, but we need not consider this as an end point. Even though certain edge cases or practical applications may remain unsettled. A state of perfect coherence will be called an end point, in which all judgments, principles, and background theories stand in complete harmony. Such an ideal would embody the notion of full justification.

The connection between these two notions lies precisely in the gradational character of coherence. Because justification should be understood not as pursuing a final, metaphysical harmony but as attaining a satisfactory and workable level of alignment. In this case a resting point becomes adequate for practical purposes. John Rawls thus conceives political justification as essentially provisional and open-ended, always subject to revision, rather than as the discovery of an ultimate and unrevivable endpoint.

Before proceeding ahead, we shall clarify the distinction between narrow and wide RE, a task that is essential to our argument.[24] According to Margaret Holmgren, the distinction between narrow and wide RE concerns the scope of justificatory resources employed in moral theory. Narrow RE (NRE) is defined as "an ordered pair of (a) a set of considered moral judgments … and (b) a set of moral principles that economically systematizes (a)".[25] As Norman Daniels notes, NRE "leaves us with the traditional two-tiered view of moral theories and is particularly ill suited to provide a basis for a justificational argument".[26] Here, justification rests solely on achieving coherence between judgments and principles after screening unreliable intuitions. Wide RE (WRE), by

[22] BonJour, Laurence. *The structure of empirical knowledge*, 1985, Harvard University Press.
[23] Sosa, Ernest. The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5:1 1980, pp. 3–26.
[24] We are grateful to the reviewer for suggesting this direction.
[25] Holmgren, Margaret. The wide and narrow of reflective equilibrium. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 19:1 1989, p. 43.
[26] Daniels, Norman. Wide reflective equilibrium and theory acceptance in ethics. *The Journal of Philosophy,* 76:5 1979, pp. 256-282.

contrast, expands this model into "an ordered triple" including background theories.[27] These theories—ranging from conceptions of the person to social theory—provide independent grounds for assessing principles, thereby reducing the risk of accidental generalizations.[28] Thus, while NRE is restricted to coherence within moral judgments and principles, WRE seeks a more systematic integration by embedding them in a broader theoretical framework. Here, justification involves coherence among three elements: considered judgments, moral principles, and relevant background theories. The background theories include such as theories of the person, social institutions, or procedural justice. The role of these background theories, Norman Daniels emphasizes, is to ensure that principles are not "mere accidental generalizations of the considered judgments" but instead derive independent support from systematic theoretical considerations.

Taking a critical stance, Kai Nielsen argues that the method relies on considered judgments that differ across individuals and cultures, it appears unable to secure objectivity.[29] This concern is intensified by WRE's anti-foundationalist stance: there is, as Kai Nielsen stresses, no "ahistorical, perfectly general, archimedean point" from which justification could be anchored. Instead, WRE begins within particular traditions, which makes it context-sensitive but raises doubts about whether it can overcome cultural particularism. Moreover, the coherence it achieves is inherently provisional—valid "for a time, though only for a time".[30] This fallibilism ensures critical openness but also undermines stability. Sentiment too plays a residual role, risking conservatism or ideological accommodation if equilibrium is sought too quickly. Further Kai Nielsen argues that the equilibrium it achieves is necessarily "for a time, though only for a time"[31], making its results fallible and historically situated. The method depends on an overlapping consensus within democratic societies, yet issues such as abortion or pornography reveal "sharply divisive moral beliefs with clear political implications" that resist resolution even under sustained reflection.[32] Norman Daniels defend WRE as preferable, since background theories may help avoid accidental generalizations.[33] Margaret Holmgren, however, questions whether WRE marks a genuine advance. She argues that both methods presuppose the prima facie credibility of considered judgments and that WRE may simply represent a more sophisticated form of moral intuitionism rather than a fundamentally new methodology.[34]

According to Richard Booker Brandt, the main criticism of WRE is that it accords too much justificatory weight to coherence with our considered moral judgments, despite

[27] Holmgren, Margaret. The wide and narrow of reflective equilibrium. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 19:1 1989, p. 44.
[28] Holmgren, Margaret. The wide and narrow of reflective equilibrium. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 19:1 1989, p. 57.
[29] Nielsen, Kai. Relativism and wide reflective equilibrium. *The Monist*, 76:3 1993, p. 317.
[30] Nielsen, Kai. Relativism and wide reflective equilibrium. *The Monist*, 76:3 1993, p. 318.
[31] Nielsen, Kai. Philosophy Within the Limits of Wide Reflective Equilibrium Alone. *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical*. 43 1994, p. 16.
[32] Nielsen, Kai. Philosophy Within the Limits of Wide Reflective Equilibrium Alone. *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical*. 43 1994, p. 19.
[33] Daniels, Norman. *Justice and Justification: Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 57.
[34] Daniels, Norman. *Justice and Justification: Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 59–60.

the fact that such judgments lack evidential force.[35] Richard Booker Brandt questions whether agreement between principles and considered beliefs can genuinely ground justification, since these beliefs are themselves historically contingent and variable across cultures. He argues that John Rawls's reliance on coherence risks arbitrariness, as it makes moral theory depend on aligning principles with intuitions rather than with independent empirical or psychological tests of validity. Many studies omit clear descriptions of the adjustment process—an essential component of achieving equilibrium—while others inconsistently apply or fail to specify criteria beyond coherence.[36]

The Cultural Contingency of Moral Intuitions in Reflective Equilibrium

In this section the concern is to understand that how could RE hold its claim of universality of justification. RE despite its procedural rigor, is vulnerable to the very particularisms it seeks to abstract from, thereby undermining its claim to universal applicability.[37] John Rawls acknowledges that intuitions may be distorted by the burdens of judgment, which is why his method of RE requires testing and revising them against principles and background theories to filter out general biasness and commonly practiced partiality. The shaping of intuitions by culture and history can also be read as an effect of ideology, whereby moral sensibilities may unconsciously reproduce systems of domination such as patriarchy or class hierarchies.

A person's moral outlook emerges through a complex interplay of relationships, institutional norms, and community engagements. Important to note that what RE treats as foundational and stable are in fact historically situated and often laden with socio-cultural bias. As Michael DePaul observes, the method of RE compels theorists to include ordinary moral beliefs in theory construction, even if these beliefs lack argumentative support. He critiques this tendency, noting that it permits insufficient revision of these beliefs. This concern is also raised by thinkers such as Richard Mervyn Hare and Peter Singer.[38]

Peter Singer suggested that the problem lies precisely in the fact that moral intuitions are not neutral at all but are shaped by evolutionary pressures, cultural traditions, and socio-historical contexts that have no genuine universal moral relevance.[39] Findings from moral psychology, such as Jonathan Haidt's incest case or Joshua Greene's trolley problem studies, illustrate how our "gut reactions" often arise from emotional or evolutionary mechanisms rather than rational moral reasoning. This, Peter Singer argues, casts serious doubt on their reliability as guides to moral truth. From his perspective the charge that reliance on intuitions undermines universality is exactly correct. The contingencies that shape our sensibilities make them an unstable foundation for moral justification. In *Practical Ethics*, Peter Singer argues that the very nature of morality requires us to adopt a universal point of view, one that demands impartial consideration of all

[35] Brandt, Richard Booker. The science of man and wide reflective equilibrium. *Ethics*, 100:2 1990, pp. 259–278.
[36] Helms, Kevin. Applications of the Wide Reflective Equilibrium. *J Ethics* 28:0 2024, pp. 215–237.
[37] Richard Mervyn Hare in a critical note on *A Theory of Justice,* called this phenomenon 'a form of basic subjectivity'. See Hare, Richard Mervyn. (1973). Rawls's Theory of Justice. *Philosophical Quarterly*, *23* ,144–155.
[38] Hare, Richard Mervyn. *Moral thinking: Its Levels, Method, and Point.* Oxford University Press, 1981. Singer, Peter. *Practical ethics*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. DePaul, Michael. Reflective equilibrium and foundationalism. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 23:1 1986, p. 60.
[39] Singer, Peter. Ethics and intuitions. *The Journal of Ethics*, *9:*3–4 2005, pp. 331–352.

interests. From this standpoint, cultural biases—such as the widespread but unfounded intuition that our obligation to help diminishes with physical distance—are revealed as morally irrelevant.

In *Ethics and Intuitions: A Reply to Singer,* Joakim Sandberg and Niklas Juth argued against Peter Singer's critique. They acknowledged that reliance on intuitions in isolation is problematic, but contended that Peter Singer's rationalist alternative, which seeks to base ethics solely on reason, suffers from parallel difficulties.[40] They introduce a distinction between "practical intuitions" (case-specific, pre-reflective responses such as those elicited in trolley dilemmas) and "theoretical intuitions" (abstract moral axioms such as the claim that five deaths are worse than one). While Peter Singer privileges the latter as rational and reliable, Joakim Sandberg and Niklas Juth argued that theoretical intuitions are no less susceptible to evolutionary, cultural, and psychological influences than practical ones, and therefore cannot serve as an indubitable foundation for moral theory. They believe strength of RE lies precisely in its coherentist structure. In their view, wide form of RE provides a more plausible and balanced methodology than either intuitionism or Peter Singer's rationalist foundationalism.

Norman Daniels refines John Rawls's notion of considered judgments in a more graspable way. On the one side, John Rawls described considered judgments as those moral judgments made under favourable conditions, when our moral capacities are least likely to be distorted by bias, self-interest, or lack of information.[41] On the other side, Norman Daniels emphasises that their significance lies not merely in their psychological stability, but in their support by reason and argument. In his account, a considered judgment is a moral judgment that we are prepared to defend with reasons we find acceptable upon reflection, and that is formed under conditions conducive to fairness and critical scrutiny.[42] Such judgments are not infallible. They are provisional but reasoned commitments that can justifiably serve as starting points in the process of RE. By characterising considered judgments in this way, he aims to strengthen the epistemological basis of RE. It shows that they do not rely on unexamined intuitions but on judgments that are already the product of critical reflection and rational deliberation.[43]

When we goes back to John Rawls, we finds that he deliberately replaces the language of "moral intuitions" with that of "considered judgments" to avoid the implication that moral justification rests on unexamined or purely affective responses. For him, considered judgments are moral judgments made under conditions conducive to rational and impartial reflection, where our sense of justice is least likely to be distorted by bias, ignorance, or self-interest. They are judgments in which "our moral capacities are most likely to be displayed without distortion." By contrast, intuitions—in the ordinary or traditional philosophical sense—refer more broadly to immediate moral responses or pre-reflective moral beliefs. They are the spontaneous outputs of our moral sensibility, which are not necessarily filtered through deliberation or argumentation. While intuitions can serve as the raw data for moral reflection, they lack the epistemic vetting that defines a

[40] Sandberg, Joakim, & Juth, Niklas. Ethics and Intuitions: A reply to Singer. The Journal of Ethics, 15:3 2010, pp. 209–226.
[41] Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice.* Harvard University Press, 1971, pp. 42–43.
[42] Daniels, Norman. *Justice and Justification: Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice.* Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 22. And Daniels, Norman. *Reflective Equilibrium and Archimedes' Point. Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 9:2 1979, pp. 259–276.
[43] Daniels, Norman. *Justice and Justification: Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice.* Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 23-24.

considered judgment. Norman Daniels sharpens this distinction further by insisting that considered judgments are those which can be defended with reasons upon critical examination. Whereas intuitions may simply register what feels right or wrong, considered judgments are reflectively endorsed moral beliefs—those that survive scrutiny and can be rationally supported within a coherent moral framework.

Norbert Paulo's empirical findings corroborate this critique by demonstrating that moral intuitions vary markedly across cultural contexts.[44] In pluralistic societies, differing moral norms shape what are perceived as 'intuitive' responses. For example, practices seen as morally benign in one culture may be deeply objectionable in another. Such divergence reflects not irrationality but deeply embedded cultural conditioning. Consequently, RE's initial assumption—that moral intuitions are reliable guides toward moral truth—cannot withstand scrutiny in the face of cultural diversity or in a case where radically diverse people or group are coming together as one political community. Margaret Urban Walker notes that RE permits the disqualification of some intuitions when they obstruct the coherence of a preferred equilibrium.[45] This selectivity illustrates that moral intuitions are not treated consistently within the method, further problematizing the normative weight they carry.

Georg Brun's defence of RE attempts to address this issue by minimizing the role of moral intuitions. He asserts that intuitions occupy a minimal place in RE's epistemology, which prioritizes coherence among judgments over the preservation of any particular intuitive belief.[46] Yet, such a defence sidesteps a central difficulty, which is determining which intuitions merit preservation and which should be revised. This evaluative task is itself embedded in cultural presuppositions.

The relation between judgment and revision in RE mirrors broader tensions in philosophical discourse regarding coherence and pluralism. The conceptual apparatus of Jürgen Habermas, particularly his notion of communicative reason, offers a lens through which we can further examine this dilemma. Todd Hedrick characterizes communicative reason as grounded in the emancipatory potential of dialogue in the form of a discursive process aimed at consensus through the mutual overcoming of subjective standpoints.[47] In a homogeneous cultural context, such a reason may yield a shared moral understanding. However, in a world increasingly marked by hyper-pluralism—a term Alessandro Ferrara uses to describe radical, overlapping moral commitments—this model of reason faces significant challenges. The dialogical process envisioned by Jürgen Habermas assumes at least some shared normative space. Yet in today's global society, such a space is frequently fragmented and diminishing continuously.

Margaret Urban Walker contends that moral deliberation cannot be disentangled from the socio-political and relational contexts in which individuals are situated.[48] From this vantage point, RE's abstraction from social particularity renders it ill-suited to grapple with the power dynamics that structure moral reasoning. In a society stratified along lines

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[44] Paulo, Norbert. The unreliable intuitions objection against reflective equilibrium. *The Journal of Ethics*, 24:3 2020, p. 349.

[45] Walker, Margaret Urban. (1997). *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics.* Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 70-71.

[46] Brun, Georg. Reflective equilibrium without intuitions? *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 17:2 2013, p. 238.

[47] Hedrick, Todd. Rawls and Habermas: *Reason, Pluralism, and the Claims of Political Philosophy*. Stanford University Press, 2008, p. 90.

[48] Walker, Margaret Urban. (1997). *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics.* Oxford University Press, 1997.

of race, gender, caste, and class, certain moral perspectives gain epistemic privilege not due to coherence but through institutional reinforcement and cognitive normalization. In such a context, RE's claim of neutrality collapses into complicity with dominant normative frameworks.

While John Rawls champions the equal standing of moral convictions, the actual practice of RE betrays an asymmetry in how these convictions are treated. Important to note that, we are not putting any allegation on John Rawls, but trying to set a future direction with his discussion. Some intuitions which often aligned with dominant cultural narratives, are tacitly valorised. Others, particularly those emerging from marginalized experiences, are side-lined as anomalies or inconsistencies. This privileging is not merely an epistemic error but reflects an underlying political economy of knowledge. The concept of relational autonomy thus becomes essential to our analysis: it acknowledges that moral convictions do not arise in isolation but in webs of intersubjective relations shaped by power and social hierarchy.

Samuel Freeman, a leading Rawlsian interpreter, reinforces this point. Samuel Freeman acknowledges that John Rawls does not maintain—contra Kant—that moral autonomy can be realized irrespective of external conditions.[49] Instead, moral autonomy is profoundly shaped by one's social environment. This conviction further challenges the notion that RE can serve as a universally applicable methodology. His reading opens the possibility for a more context-sensitive and historically grounded application of RE, though even this may fall short of addressing the full complexity of cross-cultural moral reasoning.

The culmination of these critiques leads us to propose the notion of *reflective disequilibrium* as a more accurate representation of our moral landscape.[50] Rather than viewing inconsistency and incoherence as failures to be eliminated, reflective disequilibrium acknowledges them as constitutive features of moral life of a person and political community. The multiplicity of conflicting intuitions, principles, and background theories reflects the diverse cultural and historical trajectories that shape moral agents.

This notion differs importantly from John Rawls's distinction between *resting points* and *end-points*. For John Rawls, a resting point marks a provisional stage in RE—sufficient coherence to guide action and confer legitimacy, yet always open to future revision—whereas an end-point represents the ideal of perfect coherence, in which all judgments, principles, and background theories are in complete alignment. Reflective disequilibrium denies that either the provisional harmony of a resting point or the idealized closure of an end-point captures the actual moral condition of agents. Instead, it emphasizes the structural and enduring nature of tensions in moral reasoning, arguing that such tensions are not temporary obstacles but the very substance of ethical life in conditions of plurality.

This disequilibrium is enduring condition of moral plurality. The aim, therefore, is not to achieve a final state of harmony but to engage in sustained, critical reflection that remains open to ongoing revision. In embracing reflective disequilibrium, we resist the temptation to impose premature resolutions on moral disagreements. We recognize that coherence, while valuable, may be achieved at the cost of erasing moral particularities. Instead, we advocate for a model of moral reasoning that is dialogical, pluralistic, and

[49] Freeman, Samuel. *Justice and The Social Contract: Essays on Rawlsian Political Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 43.

[50] We are using this terminology to represent our discussed condition. Please do not understand that we are proposing an alternative to RE.

reflexive—one that takes seriously the cultural contingency of moral intuitions and the socio-political contexts in which they arise. Ultimately, this reconceptualization enriches the moral philosophical project by revealing the limitations of abstract methods and emphasizing the significance of historically and culturally situated reasoning. The pursuit of justice and ethical understanding, in such a framework, becomes not a matter of arriving at equilibrium but of navigating the tensions and contestations that define our shared moral lives.

RE presupposes the possibility of reconciliation: it conceives moral justification as the regulative pursuit of coherence among judgments, principles, and background theories. Even if such coherence is only provisional, the method remains aspirational and teleological, oriented toward integration and harmony. Reflective disequilibrium foregrounds the irreducibility of conflict. It treats dissonance not as a flaw to be eliminated. Flaw is constitutive and enduring dimension of moral life under conditions of plurality. On this view, ethical reasoning is diagnostic and critical, directed not toward final reconciliation but toward the ongoing navigation of tensions and contestations. Whereas equilibrium imagines ethics as the achievement of harmony, disequilibrium reconceives it as the practice of engaging productively with persistent dissonance.

The Circularity and Endless Iteration in Reflective Equilibrium

In this section, we turn our attention to the iterative nature of the RE and risks it entails. The central problem lies in the way judgments and principles are adjusted to fit one another without any external validation. The danger is that RE can become an unending, circular process—one that may be theoretically appealing but practically insubstantial. Particularly when it is used to navigate moral dilemmas in the real world. The promise of RE lies in its ability to reconcile conflicting principles and moral convictions. But its iterative process risks becoming a ceaseless cycle. This raises questions about whether RE can genuinely resolve incommensurability in ethical judgments.

While John Rawls himself emphasized that this back-and-forth dynamic facilitates coherence between specific moral beliefs and overarching principles, we contend that the very nature of this iterative process can undermine its pragmatic efficacy. The key limitation lies in the absence of external validation. Without some form of external verification or anchor point, RE runs the risk of becoming a closed system in which moral convictions are adjusted solely in relation to one another, rather than in response to broader moral frameworks. This lack of external validation risks devolving into a circular reasoning loop that is disconnected from the actual ethical problems it seeks to address. By external normative validation, we refer to the process through which a moral theory's claims are assessed against normative and empirical reference points that can lie outside the internal coherence of RE (even beyond the background theories). External validation tests whether the results of this process hold when confronted with independent sources of moral insight, experience, and intersubjective evaluation.

As Norman Daniels reminds us, one possible form of such validation is empirical moral inquiry, which examines how moral principles correspond to lived experience, social practices, and the moral understandings of diverse groups.[51] His perspective helps ensure that ethical justification is not detached from the realities of life. A second form is

[51] Daniels, Norman. *Justice and Justification: Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.

deliberative-democratic validation, rooted in Jürgen Habermas's conception of communicative rationality.[52] Here, moral claims gain legitimacy through public reasoning and inclusive dialogue conducted under conditions of equality and reciprocity. In a way subjecting coherence-based judgments to intersubjective scrutiny. A third form is cross-cultural convergence, as suggested by David Wong, which can serve as a meta-ethical indicator of plausibility: when distinct moral traditions, shaped by different histories and worldviews, converge on similar principles, this convergence provides partial external support for their normative validity.[53] When we take together, these mechanisms extend RE beyond its self-referential limits. They provide epistemic and practical anchors that test the moral theory's coherence against the plural, dialogical, and empirical dimensions of human experience.

While WRE extends the justificatory reach of John Rawls's original model by incorporating background theories, it may still lack the epistemic resources to provide genuine external validation for moral justification. Norman Daniels attempts to strengthen WRE's justification by introducing background theories but admits that this remains "an internal expansion of coherence" rather than an external validation.[54] Principally, considered judgments, moral principles, and background theories perform mutual adjustment in a closed justificatory circular. In this way, its coherence-based structure remains internally referential. This internalism makes WRE vulnerable to the charge of epistemic circularity. And this charge is not unimportant also. The problem is refining coherence among beliefs without demonstrating why those beliefs should track anything normatively independent of the system itself. Kevin Helms emphasizes methodological inconsistency and lack of external standards for assessing equilibrium, suggesting that WRE functions "more as a metaphor than a standardized method".[55] Consequently, WRE risks collapsing into what critics describe as methodological insularity, where justification becomes an exercise in self-consistency rather than responsiveness to lived moral experience or objective moral truth. In theoretical terms, this reveals a structural limit of coherentism which is without a non-coherentist constraint, be it realist, empirical, or procedural, WRE cannot decisively bridge the gap between internal justification and external validity.

Circular reasoning in RE stems from its self-referential justification system. In this model, moral convictions and general principles are justified by referring only to one another, creating a closed loop of reasoning. When inconsistencies emerge between these judgments and principles, the method calls for an adjustment—either revising the judgments to fit the principles or modifying the principles to accommodate the judgments. As each revision introduces new inconsistencies, the method becomes stuck in a never-ending cycle of re-evaluation. The process itself becomes the focal point, and the original goal of arriving at a stable moral judgment or principle remains elusive.

The problem with this is not merely academic—it has real-world implications. In a practical context, when moral agents face pressing ethical dilemmas, they often need timely guidance to make decisions. With its constant adjustments and revisions, iterative nature of RE, risks delaying the formulation of actionable ethical responses. For example, consider the urgency of contemporary moral questions. The ongoing conflict between

[52] Habermas, Jürgen. *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action.* MIT Press, 1990.
[53] Wong, David. *Natural Moralities: A Defence of Pluralistic Relativism.* Oxford University Press, 2006.
[54] Daniels, Norman. *Justice and Justification: Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice.* Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 21-25.
[55] Helms, Kevin. Applications of the Wide Reflective Equilibrium. *J Ethics* 28:0 2024, pp. 230–233.

Ukraine and Russia demands an immediate ethical response from the world society. Similarly, the commercialization of education presents a moral crisis that demands swift and definitive action to ensure equal access to quality education for all citizens. In both cases, a decision-making framework that is tied to endless iteration and constant re-evaluation may prove inadequate, as it lacks the ability to provide clear and immediate moral guidance. The iterative nature of RE is epistemically valuable but in applied ethical or policy contexts, agents often require provisional but operational conclusions. Endless iteration, while theoretically coherent, risks undermining the practical function of moral reasoning, which is to orient judgment and guide choice under conditions of uncertainty. Thus, the argument is not against moral reasoning itself, but against a form of procedural open-endedness that offers no normative thresholds for sufficient justification.

The problem of endless iteration and circular reasoning in RE can be further understood through the lens of Woods Jack's 'oscillation problem,' as identified in his 2019 work. Woods Jack describes the oscillation problem as a moral agent's difficulty in maintaining a stable moral stance when confronted with competing ethical theories. This occurs when a moral agent shifts back and forth between different justifications, unable to reach a stable, consistent conclusion. In the case of RE, this oscillation manifests itself as the continual back-and-forth between adjusting moral convictions and principles.

Epistemic Privilege and the Exclusion of Marginalised Perspectives

The method of RE harbours a deep epistemological limitation which is its overreliance on *considered judgments* as the principal source of moral input in the process of moral reasoning. This dependency, often lauded as democratic and flexible. But it conceals a more troubling consequence. Which is, namely, the systematic privileging of epistemic agents who possess the social, educational, and cognitive resources to participate in such reflective processes. This epistemic asymmetry can marginalise those whose voices are formed in structurally disadvantaged contexts. Our critical intervention lies in revealing that this overreliance is not merely a technical problem of method. But an ontological and epistemological one—a concern rooted in the very conditions under which knowledge, moral conviction, and reasoning are constituted.

Drawing on Miranda Fricker's seminal work on *epistemic injustice*, we can deepen our understanding of how power relations infiltrate the epistemic domain.[56] Miranda Fricker identifies how structural inequalities lead to *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical marginalisation*. In these phenomenon individuals from subordinate groups are either not heard or not intelligible within dominant discourses. This framework is profoundly relevant to RE, which assumes that considered judgments are not only accessible but also normatively equivalent across socio-political contexts. Miranda Fricker argues that social systems and practices are not neutral but favour the powerful.[57] Ontologically, these dominant agents shape the very structure of the social world. The dominant actors determine which moral concerns appear urgent, which narratives are intelligible, and which forms of reasoning are acceptable. Epistemologically, this dominance permits the shaping of collective understandings in ways that reinforce and reproduce elite-centric perspectives, sidelining those of the marginalised.

[56] Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing.* Oxford University Press, 2007.
[57] Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing.* Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 147.

This dual reading of power—as ontologically constitutive and epistemologically structuring—problematizes RE's starting point. Considered judgments, far from being foundationally secure or universally available, are often shaped by embedded normativities that exclude the experiences and insights of subaltern groups. Norman Daniels anticipated this issue, observing that considered judgments are not foundational enough to ground moral theory reliably.[58] What is taken to be "considered" is already the product of socio-epistemic filtration. In this sense, it is a curated form of intuition, framed by dominant sensibilities of society. Thus, the justificatory framework of RE, which aspires to impartiality and inclusivity can reinforce epistemic privilege under the guise of coherence and rationality.

This vulnerability becomes particularly salient when RE is used to adjudicate moral disagreements in pluralistic societies. In the pursuit of internal consistency, RE may actively filter out judgments that deviate from the dominant liberal-democratic paradigm. Such paradigms include indigenous cosmologies, feminist ethics, or postcolonial critiques. These perspectives often challenge the epistemic assumptions underpinning liberal political morality itself, thus appearing "incoherent" or "inconsistent" when measured against dominant principles. However, we need to understand their very incoherence within the liberal framework is a function of their epistemic exteriority, not their moral inferiority. To ignore such perspectives is to fall into what Miranda Fricker would call a form of hermeneutical injustice, which is a failure of the moral community to provide interpretive resources adequate for all its members.

Michael DePaul's intervention is particularly relevant here. He argues that the radical potential of RE has been underexplored. He suggests that RE can function as a genuinely subversive methodology in moral inquiry when genuinely reoriented toward pluralism.[59] Michael Huemer (2008) complements this concern by identifying a parallel obstacle to RE's liberatory potential. He challenges the assumption that moral theory must preserve common-sense morality. Against this, Michael Huemer contends that intuitionism should be revisionary rather than preservative, rejecting the view.[60] Many ordinary intuitions, he extends, are distorted by cultural indoctrination, evolutionary bias, and emotional conditioning.[61] To counter this, he proposes a critical and self-corrective methodology that discounts intuitions most susceptible to distortion and accords greater weight to abstract, reflective, and formally coherent intuitions. In this revisionary form, intuitionism becomes a progressive epistemology capable of transforming rather than reproducing inherited moral frameworks. We argue building on this insight that RE must evolve beyond its conventional liberal structure if it is to remain normatively viable in moral and political communication. A radically pluralistic RE should not merely tolerate but actively integrate contestatory moral traditions and the lived experiences of those historically excluded from moral deliberation. This requires the development of procedural mechanisms that elevate marginalized moral reasoning and counteract the epistemic asymmetries embedded in current reflective practices.

Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit attempted to address this concern through their notion of *dynamic public reflective equilibrium*. We believe that they were partially successful in their attempt. They advocate beginning moral inquiry from the concrete

[58] Daniels, Norman. Wide reflective equilibrium and theory acceptance in ethics. *The Journal of Philosophy,* 76:5 1979, p. 268.
[59] Depaul, Michael. Two conceptions of coherence methods in Ethics. *Mind*, XCVI:384 1987, p. 463.
[60] Huemer, Michael. *Revisionary intuitionism. Social Philosophy & Policy,* 25:1 2008, p. 369.
[61] Huemer, Michael. *Revisionary intuitionism. Social Philosophy & Policy,* 25:1 2008, pp. 373–376.

experiences of the public, especially those engaged in activism and social struggle.[62] It means moral inquiry must not begin from the philosopher's reading desk. Their view foregrounds the necessity of cultural, historical, and social specificity in moral reasoning. However, while their account gestures toward inclusivity, it does not fully grapple with the circularity and potential infinitude of RE's justificatory loops. In the absence of such criteria, the issue of epistemic privilege persists—albeit mitigated, to some extent, by contextual sensitivity.

Recent scholarship has sought to reform RE by addressing its epistemic insularity and limited inclusivity. Julian Savulescu, Christopher Gyngell, and Guy Kahane's model of *Collective Reflective Equilibrium in Practice* (CREP) expands RE beyond individual moral reasoning by integrating empirical data on public moral attitudes into expert ethical deliberation.[63] They developed very important scholarship in this regard. CREP emphasizes a collective and participatory process. It filters public preferences to exclude dominant biases and aligning them with established normative theories to generate policies. These policies are both ethically justified and democratically legitimate. This embedded approach aims to counter the epistemic privilege inherent in traditional deliberative models. Alice Baderin similarly critiques individual reflective equilibrium. She argues that reliance on philosophers' considered judgments reproduces elite and socially exclusive perspectives.[64] She proposes a modestly public RE that incorporates diverse moral viewpoints as epistemic correctives to professional bias.[65] This intervention widens somehow Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit's line of argument. Building in this direction, Borgar Jølstad et al. (2024) contend that while including popular views can democratize moral justification, such inputs must approximate considered judgments in the form of inclusion of deliberated and informed beliefs rather than raw intuitions.[66] Together, these arguments elucidate that epistemic privilege in RE arises from methodological asymmetry. Because marginalized perspectives remain mediated through expert reasoning. A way to remove this is to prepare structures of deliberation in such way that can grant them direct justificatory authority.

The absence of an explicit criterion for holding the deliberative process in RE has implications for epistemic privilege because it leaves open, in practice, *who* exercises judgment about *when* coherence is sufficient for action.[67] In idealized terms, RE assumes that all agents can engage in sustained, open-ended moral reflection. However, in real-world contexts, only certain epistemic agents—typically those with social, educational, and material advantages—possess the time, resources, and institutional legitimacy to sustain such deliberation. This asymmetry means that the power to determine when deliberation ends, and whose judgments count as "reflectively adequate," is itself unequally distributed. Those with epistemic privilege can indefinitely defer action under the guise of reflective revision, while marginalized agents—whose moral knowledge is often grounded

[62] Wolff, Jonathan. & De-Shalit, Avnir. *Disagreement*. Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 41.
[63] Savulescu, Julian., Gyngell, Christopher., & Kahane, Guy. *Collective reflective equilibrium in practice (CREP) and controversial novel technologies*. *Bioethics, 35:6 2021*, pp. 652–663.
[64] Baderin, Alice. Reflective Equilibrium: Individual or Public? *Social Theory and Practice,* 43:1 2017, p. 8.
[65] Baderin, Alice. Reflective Equilibrium: Individual or Public? *Social Theory and Practice,* 43:1 2017, pp. 15-17.
[66] Jølstad, Borgar., et al. Reflective Equilibrium and Public Moral Disagreement. *Synthese,* 203:11 2024, pp. 2285–2287.
[67] Reviewer has raised a crucial question that "how the problem of not having a criterion for terminating the process in favor of practical action has anything to do with the problem of epistemic privilege?". We are grateful for suggesting this line of argument.

in lived experience rather than theoretical reflection—lack comparable authority in defining closure. Thus, the absence of termination criteria indirectly perpetuates epistemic exclusion, privileging those already positioned to control the boundaries of deliberation. In this sense, the two issues are intertwined: the indeterminacy of RE enables the reproduction of epistemic hierarchies, because the open-ended process tacitly assumes that all participants have equal capacity to deliberate, when in fact deliberative endurance is a form of epistemic power.

Conclusion

We do not claim to present an alternative to RE, but to seek to improve this method through three critical fronts. Positioned as a non-foundationalist methodology, RE's procedural model—characterised by iterative calibration between moral principles and considered judgments—sought coherence over hierarchy, promising a deliberative and egalitarian framework of normative justification. The epistemic and normative architecture of RE shows its internal fragilities, when interrogated through a critical lens. The method's reliance on considered judgments presumes a level of epistemic neutrality. In practice this is embedded within and shaped by structures of cultural memory, discursive power, and ideological hegemony. To resolve this entanglement is necessary. RE risks reifying the convictions of dominant agents as rational while disqualifying subaltern or counter-hegemonic claims as incoherent or unreasoned. In effect, its coherence-driven model inadvertently can function as a mechanism of epistemic exclusion. Whereby dissenting worldviews are filtered out under the guise of reflective dissonance. The justificatory logic of RE, by virtue of its self-referentiality, flirts with circularity. Lacking any external normative criterion, RE becomes susceptible to perpetual revision without resolution. This undermines its efficacy in contexts of deep moral conflict and crisis. Its procedural inclusivity proves illusory when access to reflective participation is predicated on the possession of specific cognitive, linguistic, and cultural capital. These are resources disproportionately held by epistemic elites. Thus, while RE aspires to democratic legitimacy and pluralistic engagement, its current formulation entrenches consensus among the already privileged. A genuine democratization of RE demands its radical reconstitution. This process of reconstitution will generate the kind of way(s) that centers epistemic multiplicity, restores moral agency to marginalised voices, and treats contestatory traditions not as anomalies to be reconciled, but as constitutive sites of normative innovation. Only by embracing such an epistemically decentered model can Reflective Equilibrium evolve from a method of theoretical coherence into a praxis of political justice.

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