1 Considered Common-Sense Beliefs (See T. Regan The Case for Animal Rights ch.4)

What can we do to try to justify practical moral beliefs, e.g. concerning the morality of abortion? There is quite a lot we can do before considerations of moral theory are introduced.

(a) Try to ensure clarity in our thought, so that our views are not based upon muddles, or on failure to draw relevant distinctions.

(E.g. failure to distinguish between involuntary euthanasia – the Nazi programme – and voluntary, leading to condemnation of all euthanasia.)

(b) Try to base moral beliefs on accurate information, trying to eradicate false non-moral beliefs.

(E.g. about the supposed inferior mental powers of members of other races.)

(c) Test our moral beliefs for consistency, and try to eradicate inconsistencies. (E.g. – maybe – thinking abortion wrong because involving killing of innocents, but thinking war-time bombing of cities permissible.)

(d) Ensure that our moral beliefs are arrived at impartially, not selected just because they serve our own interests. (E.g. don't believe in the legitimacy of private property merely because I am rich.)

(e) Ensure that moral beliefs are arrived at coolly – reaching moral decisions in a state of high emotion is likely to produce muddle, inconsistency, and partiality.

If is part of common-sense that these procedures are helpful. The idea of following them gives us a notion of considered common-sense belief.

2 Reflective Equilibrium (Narrow Sense) (See J. Rawls Theory of Justice I.4, I.9)

To try to justify our moral beliefs further, we can try to find general principles which will explain and unify a maximal proportion of our considered common-sense beliefs.

Justification here is a two-way process, designed to reach a position of equilibrium.

(1) Starting with considered common-sense, propose some general principles.

(2) Test those by their consequences for common-sense.

(3) Where necessary make adjustments, either to the principles, or to our common-sense beliefs, until reaching a position of mutual harmony.

Moral thinking, on this view, is a matter of moving backwards and forwards between general moral principles and considered common-sense beliefs, making mutual adjustments in search of equilibrium.

But: it is important to distinguish –

- intra-theoretical equilibrium
  (working within a particular sort of approach or set of principles, e.g. a Utilitarian framework),

- inter-theoretical equilibrium
  (comparing one theoretical approach with another, e.g. contrasting Utilitarianism with Contractualism).

The latter may de-stabilise the former, and is the more fundamental.
3 Reflective Equilibrium (Wide Sense) (See Carruthers The Animals Issue ch. 1)

*Thesis:* much more is required of a moral theory than merely (!) the ability to *explain* considered common-sense beliefs better than any rival theory.

A theory must also give a plausible account of:

- the origins of moral notions
- the sources of moral knowledge
- the basis of moral motivation

Call this the **governing conception** of morality provided by a moral theory, as opposed to the theory’s **basic normative principles** (or basic *rules for action*).

Any adequate theory needs to give a plausible account of what morality is, how we know it, and why we should *care about* it (why it should make such powerful claims upon us).

E.g., the rejection of Intuitionism (see handout 1) is an application of reflective equilibrium in this wide sense. Although Intuitionism is *guaranteed* to deliver *all* of considered common-sense, it contains a *wildly implausible* theory of the nature of morality and of moral knowledge, and should be rejected on that basis.

So of any moral theory we should ask just how plausible a *governing conception* it can provide, as well asking about the intuitive appeal of its *normative output* (what it tells us to do).

4. Utilitarianism and Contractualism again

*The basic normative principles* –

- Utilitarianism – the principle of utility – ‘maximise happiness’
- Contractualism – principle of respect for autonomy – ‘don’t interfere with people’s freedom except to prevent like interference in the freedom of others’

*The governing conceptions* –

- Utilitarianism – universalised sympathy – Morality grounded in natural *sympathy* and human *rationality*
- Contractualism – no simple answer – a sense of fairness?
  More anon

5 Concluding remarks

*Note:* on the approach taken here, there are no unique and provable solutions to moral problems. Moral thinking (like almost all other thinking) is a process of continual debate and adjustment.

*Addendum:* instead of considered common-sense *beliefs* one can speak equally of common-sense *intuitions*.

But if ethics has to start with, and be grounded in, intuitions, then how does the position defended here differ from Intuitionism?

*Answer:* there is no presupposition here of quasi-perceptual access to an independent moral reality. These intuitions are simply the (considered) pre-theoretical beliefs we find ourselves with.

In ethics, as in every other area of belief, we have to *start from where we already are.*