

Is reflective equilibrium a philosophical method? Is it a problem, if not?

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. I consider Timothy Williamson's objection that we do not have any reason to regard reflective equilibrium as a philosophical method. I present what I think a Rawlsian advocate of the method would say, or could say.

Draft version: Version 2 (July 3rd 2022, two references added).

Reflective equilibrium is a method for developing and justifying moral philosophies, or so it seems! Here is a preliminary sketch of the method, which will suffice for our purposes. A person makes moral judgments in response to actual and hypothetical situations, such as "That school was wrong to expel that child for swearing," and "If that party's policy is to not tax wealthy Russians, I cannot vote for them – that taxation policy is wrong." To use the method, one tries to formulate a few general principles which entail these specific judgments – one or two or three, probably not more than four. From these general principles combined with facts about a situation, one is supposed to be able to deduce these specific judgments. But what if the principles do not entail most of these specific judgments? Then one has to change the principles somehow, such as replacing a principle with a new principle. What if the principles entail most of the judgments? Then one can get rid of an isolated specific judgment that does not fit. The aim is to achieve a perfect fit – general principles entailing all specific judgments, or intuitions, as they are called – and neither principles nor judgments has absolute priority when using the method, such that when there is a lack of fit alterations must always be made on the other side. But Timothy Williamson objects that this

is not a philosophical method at all. The aim of this paper is to introduce Williamson's objection and a reply I anticipate to it.

Williamson's objection. In relation to a method description like the one above, Williamson writes:

But a prior question is whether such descriptions of the process yield an adequate conception of a philosophical method, good or bad... A process generally acknowledged as at least superficially analogous to the attainment of reflective equilibrium in philosophy is the mutual adjustment of theory and observation in natural science. Imagine a description of it in which the word "observation" is used simply as a label for judgments with non-general content, irrespective of origin; it ignores the perceptual process. Such a description misses the point of the natural scientific enterprise. It provides no basis for an epistemological assessment. The nature of scientists' evidence has been left unspecified. Similarly, one has no basis for an epistemological assessment of the method of reflective equilibrium without more information about the epistemological status of the "intuitions." In particular, it matters what kind of evidence "intuitions" provide. (2022: 246)

There is a person who thinks, "Our moral judgments about specific situations are quite likely to be false and so reflective equilibrium is a bad method." But Williamson does not say that, though he seems to be grouped with people who do (see Knight 2017: 52). Williamson thinks that unless certain questions are answered, such as what sort of evidence the judgments referred to provide and how they manage to provide such evidence, then this is not a description of a philosophical method at all, even a bad one. His objection can be represented as deduced from two premises:

- (1) If a description of reflective equilibrium describes a method, then it answers the questions of what sort of evidence moral judgments provide and how they provide it, even giving false answers.
- (2) No description of reflective equilibrium answers these questions.

Therefore:

- (3) No description of reflective equilibrium describes a method.

I shall present a response to this argument, which I do not endorse. (I reject the first premise. See Edward 2022.)

A response. Most people rely on their moral judgments about specific situations at least sometimes – “The police in this city should take threats more seriously,” etc. – but people may differ amongst themselves as to why such reliance is good practice. Reflective equilibrium is supposed to be available to people with different theories on this issue. A person with a theory can use their theory to answer Williamson’s questions. It would be against the aim of making reflective equilibrium widely available for answers to come with the description of reflective equilibrium. The response then is “We think Williamson’s questions need to be answered but not by the description of the method, rather by the person who is adding reflective equilibrium to their overall set of philosophical tools.” (One can say that it is an incomplete description of a method, which different people complete in different ways. “We agree, or we can agree, with Williamson’s argument, as reconstructed above. We don’t regard the argument as a problem for us, but for convenience we still refer to this as a description of a method, in chapter headings and the like.”)

For example, one person thinks, “Just as we have sensory faculties which enable us to observe physical features of the world, so we have a faculty of moral intuition, which enables us to observe moral qualities, such as the quality of being a morally bad action. There is no

reason to think that the faculties of a sane person are generally unreliable. But occasionally our sensory faculties can mislead us and likewise our faculty of moral intuition. We use coherence with other judgments to set aside a sensory judgment as misleading, for example the judgment that a ghost was spotted over there.¹ The judgment does not fit with other sensory judgments, made after investigating the supposed ghost. It is just a pale sheet over part of a hedge. Similarly, we can use coherence to set aside some moral judgments as misleading. The description of reflective equilibrium explains how to use considerations of coherence in the moral case.” Other users of reflective equilibrium need not share this person’s theory of why we can rely on our specific moral judgments: they are produced by a faculty of moral intuition, comparable to sensory faculties, which we use to observe moral qualities – the faculty provides observational evidence – and there is no reason to regard it as generally unreliable in sane persons.

References

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¹ The example is from towards the end of Descartes’ sixth meditation, with my elaboration.