

On a Rawls specialist's review of T.H. Irwin's history of Western ethics

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Abstract. Should one read T.H. Irwin's three volume history of Western ethics, or parts of it? Here one might turn to reviews. The journal *The Philosophical Forum* uses the sensible strategy of getting different specialists to review different parts of the book. There are two chapters on Rawls, each one reviewed by a Rawlsian. I wish to register discontent with Steven Ross's review.

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T.H. Irwin has written a three volume history of Western ethics. You are contemplating reading some of this, let us imagine. But, of course, there are questions in your mind. One such question is "Should I bother, because there are so many other things which also seem worth reading?" You allocate a portion of your timetable to reading each day, but there is a lot of competition for that space! A second question is "Should I bother, because Irwin is not a specialist in some of these areas? He is a specialist in ancient philosophy. What does Irwin know about John Rawls, say?"

At this point, you might turn to reviews. The journal *The Philosophical Forum* has adopted a sensible strategy of getting a number of specialists to review different parts. But if you rely on the reviews by Rawls specialists, then you are not reading the chapters on Rawls. "But hey wait minute: there is someone who keeps engaging with one of the Rawls chapters." Well, you did not presuppose otherwise, but what if anything does he know?

The person who keeps engaging is me, of course, or one of them is (Edward 2022a and 2022b). I shall examine Steven Ross's review for *The Philosophical Forum* in more detail, because I think it is not suitable for relying on in this way. Ross thinks there are two things which Irwin needs to keep in mind: one is the extent to which Rawls has refined his theory within the 30 years since the publication of *A Theory of Justice*; the other, put briefly, is Rawls's complicated relationship to moral philosophy. Rawls, or the later Rawls, is offering a political theory tailored to our circumstances at this point in history. These two points provide the backdrop for Ross's criticisms. I wish to register discontent about one of the criticisms. (Other points of discontent probably require a subtler response.)

This is the criticism:

There is a truly remarkable amount of time spent on reflective equilibrium, a feature of the argument that is all but abandoned in the course of Rawls's refinements to the theory... (2011)

But some Rawls specialists accord a large status to reflective equilibrium. For example, this is Thomas Scanlon in his entry on reflective equilibrium in *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*:

...the process of seeking reflective equilibrium is something we each must carry out for ourselves, and it is a process of deciding what to think, not merely one of describing what we do think. This is in my view the best interpretation of Rawls's sometimes seemingly conflicting remarks about the method of reflective equilibrium. (2003: 149)

And here is Jonathan Quong, one of the most influential of Rawls interpreters, extending the method of reflective equilibrium:

Here, as in other areas of moral and political theory, I think we do best by adopting the method of reflective equilibrium: going back and forth between our more abstract theories or principles, and our considered convictions about individual cases with the aim of achieving a reasonably coherent fit between them. I am suggesting it is not only normative moral and political theories that require the method of reflective equilibrium, but also our theories of normative concepts. (2013)

So the discontent is because the review is saying that Irwin has given too much space to reflective equilibrium as if this were obviously wrong from the Rawls specialist's point of view, but some notable specialists accord importance to it.¹

There are various reactions to these quotations along with the Ross review, of which I shall introduce four. (1) "Reflective equilibrium is not as marginal in Rawls's final theory as Ross says, and so his review is unfair on Irwin." (2) "It is marginal but that was a mistake by Rawls; and for a history of Western ethics books it is a good idea to ignore some of Rawls's later revisions." (3) "It is marginal in Rawls's final theory, as Ross says, but Irwin's chapter raises the question of whether it should be there at all, so we cannot ignore it." By the way, there is a puzzle for me over how you incorporate reflective equilibrium in a way that prevents it from becoming the main method. (4) "The historical circumstances have changed and we cannot get

¹ Also, my friend Carl Knight has written a very useful text on reflective equilibrium in political philosophy, but it does not register Rawls's modifications to it or its place within his overall theory. And there are various things to "pick on," such as the definition of principles in the second sentence, which makes them sound like rules for study. But the crucial point is that Irwin's attention to reflective equilibrium is not out of step with specialists on Rawls or contemporary analytic political philosophy.

away with reviews like this!” Ross’s review provides an interesting perspective on Rawls, which I at least needed to know, but I think it cannot function as a reliable review.

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