

Problems start with the preface! Are fair equality of opportunity and Quine consistent?

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Abstract. The preface to *A Theory of Justice* includes the interesting suggestion that John Rawls's system is consistent with W.V. Quine's system. I raise a problem for achieving fair equality of opportunity granting Quine's system: that one does not have to respond to apparent evidence that two candidates are equally suitable for a job in the desired way. There does not appear to be a logical inconsistency between the systems at this point, but in practice regular positive discrimination schemes are probably required.

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Prefaces famously give rise to questions and puzzles (e.g. Makinson 1965). Here I focus on one particular preface. The preface to John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* suggests that the system he is offering is consistent with the system offered by W.V. Quine:

I have learned from Burton Dreben, who made W. V. Quine's view clear to me and persuaded me that the notions of meaning and analyticity play no essential role in moral theory as I conceive of it. Their relevance for other philosophical questions need not be disputed here one way or the other; but I have tried to make the theory of justice independent of them. (1971: xi)

I think if we turn to Quine's famous paper on analytic truths and meaning, there are problems with reconciling Rawls and Quine.

Rawls recommends a principle that ensures that every adult citizen has a set of basic liberties, such as freedom of speech and freedom of movement, and that they all have an equal amount of basic liberty. Then he recommends a complicated principle, part of which involves ensuring that there is what he calls “fair equality of opportunity” (1999: 63). What is that? Here is a *preliminary* definition in relation to jobs.

(Fair e.o.p. in employment) There is fair equality of opportunity in relation to a certain advertised job within a certain country if and only if:

- (i) Anyone in that country who can possibly do that job is entitled to apply for it and have their application considered.
- (ii) If person A and person B are both capable of doing the job and there is no good reason to think A would be worse than B and both apply, then they both stand an equal chance of getting the job.

Regarding (ii), the fact that A is of a different sex than B or a different class than B or ethnic group, etc., should not make any difference, should the conditions specified be met.

Now a problem you are going to run into with reconciling Rawls with Quine, regarding fair equality of opportunity, is this thesis from Quine:

(Recalcitrant underdeterminism) Evidence that challenges an individual’s beliefs requires a change somewhere within their total system of beliefs, but the evidence does not determine where – it does not force one particular change and there is always the option of coping with the evidence by making the change elsewhere (see 1951: 40).

I am going to skip past how this thesis relates to meaning and analyticity. Applying the thesis, if you give me evidence in the hope of persuading me that persons A and B are both capable of

doing the job and have equal talent and desire for doing the job and this evidence is incompatible with my total system of beliefs, I might not revise my beliefs in the way that you have in mind and there is nothing epistemically irrational about that – nothing irrational given the aim of knowledge. For example, I might come to the conclusion that circumstances are abnormal, leading A to perform worse than usual, but in normal circumstances A will be better than B. A peculiar fashion caused a skateboarder to underperform, say. Below is a longer example, to illustrate the problems in more detail.

Example: underdeterminism meets under-representation. Imagine a situation in which you have been getting good grades in political philosophy and you undertake a postgraduate degree in the politics department, where it is taught. It is a large department and you are grouped with the other political philosophers, or political theorists as they are referred to there. They are all white, English and posh, though some of them act in a way which might lead you to suspect otherwise. You, on the other hand, are an ethnic minority. You cannot see any ethnic minority lecturers or other postgraduates in this field. You are the exception (or the exception regarding whatever other type of discrimination you care about). In neighbouring fields, such as economics and law, there are ethnic minority postgraduates and lecturers. What is going on here? The question crosses your mind briefly but you are confident. “Maybe the previous ethnic minorities who tried their luck here were not talented enough, but I certainly am!” Now consider the question: what combination of qualities must you have so people committed to fair equality of opportunity cannot say, “No.” For example, how talented do you have to be? How talented do you have to be at formulating definitions, devising examples, communicating advanced philosophy, building systems, and more? Given Quine, the answer to

this question is that you cannot provide evidence which forces evaluators to say, “Yes,” to publishing your work, giving you a job, etc. Even evaluators who accept fair equality of opportunity can always revise their beliefs in other ways than whatever way you are hoping for.

Quinean evaluators can all accept fair equality of opportunity – there does not appear to be a logical inconsistency when considering the systems in abstract at this point – but why think the principle would be realized in actual cases, given Quine on how evidence can be legitimately coped with? In our historical circumstances, Rawls and Quine are plausibly only consistent when positive discrimination schemes are in place¹ and these are likely to be accompanied by remarks such as “You only get in because of this scheme” and “We are being discriminated against.” This is a difficult marriage of systems! **End of example.** (Note: no appeal to unconscious bias here.)

Now Quine does say that some ways of coping with challenging evidence are against pragmatic rationality (1951: 42-43).² For example, there is an obvious revision which leads to a belief system that copes and there is at least one other revision, but one has to make several and core changes to one’s system of beliefs to avoid the obvious revision. I am only going to touch on this aspect of Quine’s philosophy here. It could actually add to the problems. For some pairs of candidates, accepting that the other candidate has equal talent and desire might involve much larger revisions to an evaluator’s system of beliefs than an option which does not interpret the evidence in that way. The amount of evidence needed for it to be not-so-unpragmatic for evaluators to revise their belief systems in a way that genuinely leads to fair equality of

¹ There might be small breaks when they are not used, before they are needed again. Soon enough the principle is not really implemented, because of Quinean responses to evidence, though it is said to be. The thought of positive discrimination schemes as a step towards countering historical discrimination before being totally abandoned seems unrealistic in Rawls-Quine world.

² By “pragmatic rationality,” Quine seems to have in mind rationality concerning the time and effort involved, or utility values in a more technical sense.

opportunity is potentially massive and it is a Herculean task providing it! Various people of suitable talent would not trouble themselves with giving all the evidence required before you realize, “My initial assessment may well have been wrong.” (The task might be easier if more was known about the components of your belief system, e.g. what preconceptions you have.³)

References

Makinson, D. 1965. The Paradox of the Preface. *Analysis* 25 (6): 205-207.

Quine, W.V. 1951. Two Dogmas of Empiricism. *The Philosophical Review* 60 (1): 20-43.

Rawls, J. 1999 (revised edition). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press.

³ Perhaps there should be an official system of beliefs one has to work within, whatever people’s private beliefs are. That system does not include certain preconceptions.