

Reflective equilibrium, literary canons, and the very idea of literature

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. We associate the method of reflective equilibrium with developing principles of social justice, but it can also be used on a literary canon, with the aim of identifying principles of inclusion and exclusion. But I note three risks of doing so, using the American literary canon as an example.

Draft version: Version 3 (2nd January 2023, minor edits).

Reflective equilibrium is a method which is associated with the philosophy of social justice (e.g. Rawls 1999: 42). However, this association is potentially misleading. It can be used elsewhere. The purpose of this paper is to consider one topic where it can be used, but one which is not totally separate from the philosophy of social justice. However, I do not see reflective equilibrium applied to it. Perhaps the application is somewhere, for it is not an especially ingenious move.

Consider a literary canon such as the American literary canon. There are (or is) a set of works which you judge to be part of it, such as novels by Henry James and Nathaniel Hawthorne and poetry by Edgar Allan Poe and Emily Dickenson. Using this list, you try to work out principles for inclusion and exclusion. An obvious proposal is that you need to be an American. That is a necessary condition. Imitations of American writers by others do not count! Then there are other conditions.

What happens if your principles for inclusion entail the inclusion of most of the works on the list but not all and include some other works instead? Then there are two options, or these are the obvious two anyway. One is to stick with the list and look for more fitting principles. The other is to stick with the principles and change

the list. The reflective equilibrium procedure does not force upon you an initial data set come what may, so that your principles must fit with that! But a risk with the former option is that you would get a more multicultural canon if you changed the list; you are so racist that you keep searching for more fitting principles when few others would. And a risk with the latter option is that you get strange inclusions.

Whichever approach one takes, with this canon-specific analysis there is a risk that there is no such thing as literature in general. There are just different literary canons with their different principles of inclusion. It is not that the concept AMERICAN LITERATURE is composed of the concepts AMERICAN and LITERATURE, so that if you understand those separate concepts you can just combine them to understand what American literature is. At present I favour that compositional approach.

Reference

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