

Against evil reflective equilibrium: a response to Thomas Kelly and Sarah McGrath

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Abstract. This paper responds to Thomas Kelly and Sarah McGrath's worry that there can be evil reflective equilibrium. I propose that some of John Rawls's restrictions on moral judgments we can enter into the procedure serve to protect against evil reflective equilibrium.

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"There's an atmosphere of film noir

In this paper by Kelly and McGrath"

Presumably, as long as the method of reflective equilibrium has been known, it has been charged with leading to moral relativism. One person develops general principles which entail their moral judgments about specific situations, thereby reaching reflective equilibrium, and so does another, but their moral judgments are different. If reflective equilibrium is how we justify moral principles, then it seems there can be significantly different but equally justified moral outlooks. But I suppose one can accept this point while assuming that all the principles justified by reflective equilibrium are within a pleasant range. However, Thomas Kelly and Sarah McGrath raise the worry that there can be evil reflective equilibriums. I flesh out the worry slightly differently to how they do, before proposing a solution.

Consider a person in a crowded situation, who strangely judges, "I am morally required to kill a few random people here," and also in another situation and a third situation. They devise a general principle that entails these judgments: "In any crowded situation, one is morally

required to kill a few random people.” And they achieve reflective equilibrium with this principle in place.

Kelly and McGrath think that there is nothing in reflective equilibrium, as presented by John Rawls, which blocks the possibility of such evil reflective equilibrium (2010: 347). But presumably a person who uses the method thinks, “One ought to use it.” Now Rawls argues that when using the method, some moral judgments are to be left aside. He writes:

For example, we may discard those judgments made with hesitation, or in which we have little confidence. Similarly, those given when we are upset or frightened, or when we stand to gain one way or the other can be left aside. (1999: 42)

The combination of “One ought to use the method” and “Judgments made while upset or frightened ought to be left aside” should lead someone trying to reach reflective equilibrium away from recommending an excess of situations of being upset or frightened, because then the method cannot be used, or can only very rarely be used. And that will hopefully prevent the formation of evil reflective equilibriums.¹

The restrictions Rawls introduces on which judgments can be entered into the procedure, though I find them problematic, constrain the content of a coherent moral system reached by this method: for it must allow for using the method itself. Kelly and McGrath overlook this point, when imagining evil reflective equilibriums.

References

Kelly, T. and McGrath, S. 2010. Is Reflective Equilibrium Enough? *Philosophical Perspectives* 24: 325-359.

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

¹ Are there some evil principles which apply in highly peculiar contexts which can still get in though?