

Reflective equilibrium and ruthless surgery

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Abstract. T.H. Irwin characterizes the reflective equilibrium procedure as one which should not involve ruthless surgery, in a metaphorical sense. I argue that many people will find avoiding this difficult, because they do not conceive or go in for subtle options.

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This is an initial sketch of the reflective equilibrium procedure. A person has moral judgments about specific situations, such as “Ann has to pay for dinner as well.” They try to systematize their judgments, to form a set of general principles which entails these specific judgments. If their principles entail the judgments, all well and good. Reflective equilibrium has been achieved. If they entail hardly any, time to look for new general principles. If they entail most, then things become more complicated. One can keep looking for better principles, in terms of entailment levels, but also one can abandon judgments which are not entailed. The procedure does not accord absolute priority to specific judgments, so that in a conflict better general principles must always be sought. Now T.H. Irwin says that reflective equilibrium is not meant to be like ruthless surgery (2009: 902). You are not meant to abandon half your judgments about specific situations and replace them with ones entailed by your principles, say.

I think you can run into difficulties avoiding what is metaphorically described as ruthless surgery. One is a failure of creativity. A person only sees two options: extremely liberal principles, say, which involve giving up half their specific moral judgments to achieve reflective

equilibrium, and extremely nationalist principles, which involve giving up even more specific moral judgments. The subtler options do not occur to them.

Also there is “I don’t do that. It is too much work for me,” “It’s too unhealthy,” “It lacks a clear identity,” etc., in response to subtler options. What to say to such a person? There are a lot of projects in this country in relation to which there must have been similar people, lots of them even, but the projects felt too important to fail. (Consider the famous literary figure in this town/city and how you would have reacted once upon a time. YOU: “Not good enough.” OPPONENT: “But this town needs a novelist.” What happened to people like you, who regarded that project as not good enough, or not good enough to enable pursuit within healthy limits?)

Reference

Irwin, T.H. 2009. *The Development of Ethics: A Historical and Critical Study. Volume III: From Kant to Rawls*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.