Justification in moral and political theory: reflective equilibrium and its discontents

Guest speaker: Robert Heeger, Utrecht University

Organised by R. Bauböck, Rutger Birnie and Bouke de Vries

Monday, 18 April 2016 (13:00-15:30 and 16:00-18.30)
Tuesday, 19 April 2016 (10:00-12:30 and 14:00-16:30)

Sala del Capitolo, Badia Fiesolana

Please register online

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Description

What does it mean to say that a claim in moral or political theory is 'true' or 'justified'? In the sciences, we seem to have a reasonably clear idea: a claim there is likely to be true or justified if it best explains the available data. Yet moral and political theorists cannot rely on empirical data in the same way – as David Hume already observed, merely having data about how the world is does not tell one how it should be.

In contemporary ethics and normative political theory, the so-called method of 'reflective equilibrium' is arguably the most influential way of justifying moral propositions. This method consists in working back and forth among our considered judgements (some call them 'intuitions') about particular cases and more general principles which we believe should govern them, revising either the former or the latter when they conflict to achieve an acceptable coherence among them: a reflective equilibrium. To some extent, this method seems to simply mirror everyday moral thinking: most of us examine our moral judgements about particular issues (e.g. torturing prisoners is immoral, harvesting the organs of one person to save five is wrong, allowing Jews and Christians but not Muslims to establish their own school is impermissible) by looking for their coherence with our beliefs about moral principles (e.g. the belief that one should never treat humans as mere means, the notion that one should treat like cases alike).

But more than just a narrow 'coherentist' approach to one's own moral reasoning, many believe reflective equilibrium can be used in a broader way to judge the relative strengths and weaknesses of alternative sets of moral principles, of competing moral conceptions.

This workshop will examine the method of reflective equilibrium, the criticisms levelled against it, its practical applications in moral and political theory, and its relevance for those of us whose research involves normative questions. Its aim is to clarify how the process of reflective equilibrium works and examine whether it is a plausible method of justification. Questions we will address include: what if this method produces no equilibrium or several equilibria? Why should we care about our considered convictions or intuitions about cases (in particular, what if those convictions are biased)? What are the alternative methods of justification? The workshop should be of interest to everyone who addresses normative questions in their research or is interested in normative theory, including legal theorists.

Structure

Session 1: An introduction (Monday 18 April 13:00-15:30)

This session will serve to introduce the idea of reflective equilibrium. It will outline the basic operation of the method. It will also focus on its history as a justificatory method in philosophy, and on the main proponents of the method: John Rawls and Norman Daniels.

Readings:

Sayre-McCord, Geoffrey. Coherentist Epistemology and Moral Theory. In: Walter Sinnott-Armstrong/Mark Timmons (ed.): Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press 1996, 137-189.

Levey, Sanford. Lecture 10: Foundationalism, Coherentism and Reflective Equilibrium Theory. http://www.philosopherstoolkit.com/metaethics.php (Montana State University)

Session 2: Narrow and wide reflective equilibrium (Monday 18 April 16:00-18:30)

In this session we will discuss the difference between 'narrow' and 'wide' reflective equilibrium. We will discuss to what extent reflective equilibrium is not just useful to bring coherence into one's own moral thinking, but can also be employed to justify broader sets of moral principles against competing moral conceptions.

Readings:

Daniels, Norman. Wide reflective equilibrium and theory acceptance in ethics. Journal of Philosophy 76 (1979), 256-282.

Holmgren, Margaret. The Wide and Narrow of Reflective Equilibrium. Canadian Journal of Philosophy 19/1 (1989), 43-60.

Session 3: Critiques and alternatives (Tuesday 19 April 10.00-12.30)

This session will focus on the criticisms that have been leveled against reflective equilibrium, including challenges to the idea that moral intuitions carry weight, to the desire for coherence between different moral beliefs, and to the method's idealization of human rationality. We will also discuss alternative accounts of justification, such as foundationalism.

Readings:

Haslett, D.W.. What is Wrong with Reflective Equilibria? Philosophical Quarterly 37, no. 148 (1987), 305-311.

Kappel, Klemens. The Meta-Justification of Reflective Equilibrium. Ethical Theory and Moral Practice 9/2 (2006), 131-147.

Session 4: Applications (Tuesday 19 April 14.00-16.30)

In this session we will discuss some practical applications of the method of reflective equilibrium, with examples either suggested by participants drawing from their own work or taken from the literature.

Readings:

Ghislaine J.M.W. van Thiel/Johannes J.M. van Delden. Reflective Equilibrium as a Normative Empirical Model. Ethical Perspectives 17 (2010), 183-202. www.ethical-perspectives.be/viewpic.php?TABLE=EP&ID=1241 .

Participation requirements

Participants are expected to do the assigned readings and participate in the discussion. To get credits for the workshop, you can either volunteer to introduce one of the readings in class, or write a short paper, which either responds to the readings of the workshop, or explains how the methodological discussion is relevant to your own research.