

Philosophy 427
Intuitions and Philosophy

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Class 10
Reflections On Reflective Equilibrium

The Epistemological Importance of Reflective Equilibrium

- Balancing general claims (theories) with particular ones
 - evidence
 - intuitions!
- We've seen a lot of:
 - Goodman on Deduction and Induction
 - Papineau on Scientific Methodology
- Today, more on:
 - Rawls on Ethics
 - Chomsky on Linguistics
 - Irrationality

Rawls's Importance

- Rawls's main concern in *A Theory of Justice* is to establish a theoretical framework in which to conduct first-order ethics.
 - Ethics: the quest for universal, or universalizable, prescriptions for action, ones which are public and practicable and which override other normative claims (like those of manners, aesthetics, grammar, or social convention).
 - Meta-ethics is the study of the possibility of ethics, including the study of the meanings of ethical terms.
- Rawls almost single-handedly returned the attention of vast numbers of philosophers from meta-ethics back to ethics.
- The key element in Rawls's revolution is his adoption of Goodman's method of reflective equilibrium.

The Entire History of Moral Philosophy from the Beginning of Time Until 1883

- Until the late nineteenth century, most work in ethics was first-order.
 - ▶ Pre-modern Western philosophers (e.g. Aristotle, Cicero, and Augustine) and eastern philosophers argued that people should adopt particular behaviors, practices, and virtues.
- An example
 - ▶ Aristotle defends moderateness in action as a route toward one's own happiness, which he takes as an unassailable goal.
 - ▶ One might call Aristotle a foundationalist in ethics.
 - ▶ All moral reasoning flows from, is derived from, first ethical principles: the quest for *eudaemonia*.
- In the modern period and into the nineteenth century, two dominant ethical approaches were developed.
 - ▶ Kant's deontological (or duty-based or backward-looking) ethics used our duties as first principles.
 - ▶ Utilitarianism (or consequentialist, or forward-looking) ethics used hedonism as a first principle.
- These theories are completely opposed in the justifications of their prescriptions.
 - ▶ They differ radically in their epistemic grounds.
- They are both first-order ethical theories.

Kant and Mill

- Kant's work in ethics starts with a very general claim that morality is possible.
 - ▶ an obvious and unassailable truth
 - ▶ If moral action is possible, then morality must be autonomous, rather than heterogeneous.
 - ▶ Moral theory must be a system of universal principles governing one's intentions, or duties, independent of the results of acting on those intentions.
- Mill relies on a basic, obvious assumption that everyone desires happiness.
 - ▶ The only defensible moral theory ties the permissibility of action to the increase or decrease of pleasure and pain, both in oneself and in others.
- Both philosophers derive their moral dictates from their first principles.
- The traditional first-order moral theorists are foundationalists.
 - ▶ They defend a principled standard for morality, developing a theory which regiments or embodies that standard, and then they derive all particular moral dictates from those general principles.
 - ▶ The religious moralist also follows this general procedure, arguing from first principles (the perfect goodness of God) to particular moral claims (say, the Ten Commandments).

The Birth of Meta-Ethics: A Tragedy

- In the late nineteenth century, standard approaches to morality came under severe attack.
- Nietzsche criticized the foundations of the standard ethical theories.
 - He denied Kant's basic claim that a universal moral theory was possible.
 - He derided Mill's concerns with the greatest good.
- Nietzsche was the first of the twentieth-century second-order moral theorists.
 - He does not present a moral theory.
 - He does not tell us how to behave or how to determine how to behave.
 - He argues (if what Nietzsche does can be called arguing) that moral theory is impossible.



Meta-Ethics

- 20th-century moral theorizing continued to turn from first-order to second-order.
 - ▶ from determining basic principles of morality and their applications
 - ▶ to the questions of what moral terms mean
 - ▶ whether first-order moral reasoning is possible
- G.E. Moore's open question test denied the possibility of any naturalist ethical theory.
 - ▶ The intuitionists who followed him claimed that our moral intuitions were just as secure as our empirical science.
- Other philosophers responded to Moore by investigating the meaning of 'good', and related moral terms.
- Non-cognitivists: moral claims were not factual at all.
- Emotivists: 'murder is wrong' is a (subjective) expression of distaste.
 - ▶ "Murder? -Yech!"
- Other non-cognitivists: moral claims are just all false.
 - ▶ Error theorists (e.g. John Mackie)
- First-order moral theorizing was seen as fundamentally flawed.
 - ▶ Foundational principles, like the categorical imperative and the greatest happiness principle, seemed to be unknowable and indefensible.
 - ▶ Without secure foundational principles, there seemed to be no way to justify particular beliefs.

Rawls and the Return of Ethics

- Rawls rescued traditional moral theorizing from the morass of abstract philosophizing.
- He did so by developing a decision procedure for moral reasoning.
 - ▶ “It is obviously impossible to develop a substantive theory of justice founded solely on truths of logic and definition. The analysis of moral concepts and the a priori, however traditionally understood, is too slender a basis” (51).
 - ▶ “A conception of justice cannot be deduced from self-evident premises or conditions on principles; instead, it is a matter of the mutual support of many considerations, of everything fitting together into one coherent view” (21).
- We can do ethics by starting with some intuitive ethical judgments and working toward substantial ethical theories.
 - ▶ intuitive judgments about what social arrangements are just
 - ▶ How should we distribute governing responsibilities?
 - ▶ What kinds of freedoms should we allow?
 - ▶ How do we determine tax rates, and other specific laws?

Rawls and Reflective Equilibrium

- Consider the original position, behind the veil of ignorance.
- We reason from our intuitions about justice to a full theory.
 - Our original intuitions are limited and incomplete.
 - They do not determine difficult cases.
 - The final theory we construct will determine those cases.
- Working backwards, from intuitive judgments to general theories, we establish a theory of justice that yields our intuitive claims and which allows us to evaluate new or controversial arrangements.
- We integrate new information, new data, by balancing our intuitive claims with our general theories of justice.
 - “In searching for the most favored description of this situation we work from both ends. We begin by describing it so that it represents generally shared and preferably weak conditions. We then see if these conditions are strong enough to yield a significant set of principles... We can either modify the account of the initial situation or we can revise our existing judgments, for even the judgments we take provisionally as fixed points are liable to revision. By going back and forth, sometimes altering the conditions of the contractual circumstances, at others withdrawing our judgments and conforming them to principle, I assume that eventually we shall find a description of the initial situation that both expresses reasonable conditions and yields principles which match our considered judgments duly pruned and adjusted. This state of affairs I refer to as reflective equilibrium” (20).

Rawls and Linguistics

- Rawls pursued reflective equilibrium for a theory of justice, balancing intuitions about fairness with more general, more abstract theories.
- He compares his method to that used by Chomsky.
 - “A useful comparison here is with the problem of describing the sense of grammaticality that we have for the sentences of our native language. In this case the aim is to characterize the ability to recognize well-formed sentences by formulating clearly expressed principles which make the same discriminations as the native speaker. This is a difficult undertaking which, although still unfinished, is known to require theoretical constructions that far outrun the ad hoc precepts of our explicit grammatical knowledge” (Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 47).
- The complete theory of justice, in reflective equilibrium, will outrun our initial intuitions about justice.
- Indeed, it will conflict with some of those initial intuitions.
- We want the theory to yield most of our pre-theoretic intuitions, but we also want the theory to be systematically pleasing, and predictive, and, most importantly, to help us settle the questions we do not know how to answer.
 - Immanent Virtues

Competence and Performance

- Chomsky posits a distinction between our competence with a language and performance with that language.
- People make grammatical errors, or have idiosyncratic ways of using a standard natural language.
- If our linguistic theories were required to account for all actual linguistic usage, if they were theories of actual performance, they would end up extremely messy and *ad hoc*.
- Instead, we take linguistics to be a theory of linguistic competence.
- We can abstract away from actual performance, and construct a neater theory of the language.
- Our linguistic theory is still a theory of the language we use, but it is a theory of an idealized version of the language.
- Similarly, Rawls's theory of justice is a theory of an idealized form of justice, one which may not match any one's intuitions precisely.
- That idealization does not denigrate the theory as a theory of justice.

Against Behaviorism in Linguistics

- Once we take language to be the study of competence, rather than performance, behaviorist analyses of languages seem extremely implausible.
- The behaviorist studies performance and tries (inductively) to construct a theory out of actual uses of language.
- A completely different methodology would have to govern the study of language as competence.
- Thus, Chomsky's revolutionary claims about nativism, UG, and competence lead directly to a methodology in linguistics similar to the one we see in Goodman and Rawls.
- In all three cases, we are pushed to constructing abstract, general theories on the basis of our intuitions.
- Then, we look to balance intuition and theory in reflective equilibrium.

Intuitions in Linguistics

- To specify the structure of UG, linguists rely on intuitions of ordinary folk regarding grammaticality.
 - ▶ “In actual practice, linguistics as a discipline is characterized by attention to certain kinds of evidence that are, for the moment, readily accessible and informative: largely, the judgments of native speakers. Each such judgment is, in fact, the result of an experiment, one that is poorly designed but rich in the evidence it provides” (36).
- These intuitions about grammaticality form the starting points of the theory.
 - ▶ as our intuitions (or considered judgments) about fairness and justice form the starting points of the theory of justice
 - ▶ and our intuitions about which deductions are acceptable form the starting points of logical theory
 - ▶ and our intuitions about confirmation (and the distinction between green and grue, perhaps) form the starting points of scientific theory
- We do not take these judgments to be unassailable foundations.
 - ▶ “In general, informant judgments do not reflect the structure of the language directly; judgments of acceptability, for example, may fail to provide direct evidence as to grammatical status because of the intrusion of numerous other factors. The same is true of other judgments concerning form and meaning...” (36).
 - ▶ “To be sure, the judgments of native speakers will always provide relevant evidence for the study of language, just as perceptual judgments will always provide relevant evidence for the study of human vision, although one would hope that such evidence will eventually lose its uniquely privileged status” (37).
- Our final theory will accommodate as many of our considered judgments as possible, balancing our desire to comprehend our intuitions with interests in theoretical simplicity, strength, and the other immanent virtues

Science and Philosophy

- The immanent virtues are not limited to philosophy of science.
 - Principles of rationality, generally
 - Every rational pursuit is science.
 - Including philosophy
- These principles are not merely methodological virtues for the scientists.
- They are guiding principles for philosophical theorizing.
- There is no difference, methodologically, between our philosophy and our science.
- All reasoning is governed by the same kinds of principles, the same scientific method, the same reflective equilibrium.
- The difference between reflective equilibrium in science and reflective equilibrium in philosophy concerns the nature of the particular claims we balance.
 - Science: balance general theories with claims referring to particular observations
 - Philosophy: particular intuitions, often modal intuitions, may take the place of observations
- Whether this difference yields a distinction between science and philosophy is the central question for this course.
 - Does reliance on intuition somehow de-legitimize philosophy?

Chomsky and Philosophical Methods

- There are two ways in which Chomsky's work in linguistics is relevant to our course.
- First, his program in linguistics uses and instantiates a more-general scientific methodology of seeking reflective equilibrium.
- Second, reflective equilibrium demands a balance between theory and evidence, but it does not itself determine the nature of that evidence.
 - ▶ In science, we take the evidence to be (at least partially) observational.
 - ▶ Chomsky's revolution in linguistics depends essentially on intuitive evidence.
 - ▶ Its enormous success is largely responsible for much of the philosophical community's interest in intuitions.

Reflective Equilibrium as a Methodology

- When we make inferences, we balance a variety of factors:
 - the strength of different beliefs
 - the veracity of testimony
 - environmental conditions during an observation
 - even our interests
- Because this process is so familiar, the claims we have examined in favor of reflective equilibrium may seem a bit like truisms.
- But, the method is not merely a description of our actual behavior.
- Normative claim: when one is in reflective equilibrium, according to defenders of SRE, one's beliefs are not merely described, but justified.

Russell Foreshadowing Goodman

When pure mathematics is organized as a deductive system - i.e. as the set of all those propositions that can be deduced from an assigned set of premises - it becomes obvious that, if we are to believe in the truth of pure mathematics, it cannot be solely because we believe in the truth of the set of premises. Some of the premises are much less obvious than some of their consequences and are believed chiefly because of their consequences. This will be found to be always the case when a science is arranged as a deductive system. It is not the logically simplest propositions of the system that are the most obvious, or that provide the chief part of our reasons for believing in the system. With the empirical sciences this is evident. Electro-dynamics, for example, can be concentrated into Maxwell's equations, but these equations are believed because of the observed truth of certain of their logical consequences. Exactly the same happens in the realm of pure logic (Russell, "Logical Atomism" p 325).

Russell and Goodman

- Our justification of the general principles derives from our belief in the particular statements they entail or imply, rather than from any immediate apprehension of those principles.
- Once we accept that neither our observations and intuitions about specific cases nor our apprehension of general principles are infallible, we have no choice but to pick (perhaps arbitrarily) some starting points and work toward a coherent theory.

SRE and Foundationalism

- In foundationalist approaches, we are given fundamental truths from which we derive all our knowledge.
- Our particular beliefs (our judgments about particular cases) are justified if they follow from these foundational truths.
 - In ethics, we took moral theories like those of Kant and Mill as our fundamental truths.
 - In epistemology, we took either the sense data of the logical empiricists or Descartes's postulates and axioms.
- The purported advantage of foundationalist justification would be that if one's starting principles were secure, and one's logic were secure, one could be quite certain about one's beliefs.
- Against foundationalism, Sellars and the holists argued that no claim wears its justification on its surface.
 - The given is a myth; there are no secure fundamental principles.
- Both foundational approaches and SRE rely, in some ways, on intuitions.
 - For the foundationalist, intuitions concern the certainty of fundamental principles.
 - One has to have reasons to take sense data as unassailable, or to adopt the Greatest Happiness Principle.
 - Spinoza: intuition is the highest form of knowledge.
- In SRE, intuitions are taken as fallible starting points.

SRE: An Illustration

- The average heights of adult males and females in the U.S. are, respectively, 5' 10" and 5' 4". Both distributions are approximately normal, with a standard deviation of about 2.5". An investigator has selected one population by chance and has drawn from it a random sample. What do you think are the odds that he has selected the male population if:
 - ▶ i. The sample consists of a single person whose height is 5' 10"?
 - ▶ ii. The sample consists of six persons whose average height is 5' 8"?
- Subjects: University of Michigan students who had completed a course in statistics.
 - ▶ Median odds (favoring the male population) of 8:1 for i, and 2.5:1 for ii.
 - ▶ The actual odds are 16:1 for i, and 29:1 for ii.
 - ▶ Not only did they underestimate the odds for i, they thought that the odds for ii were less likely than those for i.

The Challenge

- The defender of SRE concedes that when developing our statistical theories, we might start with errant intuitions.
- Further research into probabilities and the development and comprehension of a theory of probability could disabuse us of such errors.
- Eventually, our tutored judgments and our theory would be aligned, and we would have achieved reflective equilibrium.
- The challenge to the defender of SRE will be to show that reflective equilibrium provides us appropriate grounding, the legitimacy that we need for justifying our beliefs.