

Wisdom & Wide Reflective Equilibrium

a case study in methodology for normative theorizing

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Reflective equilibrium (RE), a kind of coherentism, has been the default method for philosophers working in ethics for decades, but it is not without problems. Concerns about the possibility of coherent but erroneous systems of moral judgments were raised early on. Recently, the concern that our intuitions are unreliable, unstable, and subject to manipulation has taken center stage. It has been suggested that to solve some of the problems for RE, we ought to seek a wide reflective equilibrium, that is, one that includes background theories in the mix. It may be true that paying attention to background theories (including empirical psychological theories) will help meet objections to reflective equilibrium, but as of yet little work has been done to show just how a truly wide reflective equilibrium (WRE) would work. The aim of this paper (co-authored with Jason Smartwood) is to articulate a specific version of WRE using the virtue of practical wisdom as a case study. In explicating this method, we aim to show that WRE helps to capture the normativity of ethical notions such as wisdom. This is so because our method connects the philosophical analysis of wisdom to norms and ideals that people already care about.

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