The Reflective Equilibrium in Rawls' Theory of Justice: The Perspective of Holistic Pragmatism

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Abstract

Interpreting John Rawls' 'reflective equilibrium' method from the perspective of Morton White's holistic pragmatism entails both an epistemological and a methodological dimension. In this article, I reconsider White's perspective regarding Rawls' 'reflective equilibrium'. This requires a critical examination of the method's origins and development, with an emphasis on Nelson Goodman's process of justification and the Duhem-Quine thesis. In order to examine the origins and development of the 'reflective equilibrium' method, I also draw upon the writings of Pierre Duhem, Willard Van Orman Quine, Nelson Goodman, Stephen P. Stich and Donald Gillies, among others. Subsequently, I interpret the criticisms that have been formulated against the process of justification elaborated by Goodman and adapted by Rawls. Afterwards, I explain the conceptual links between the 'Duhem-Quine thesis' and the 'reflective equilibrium' method. In the last chapter, I analyse White's assertion that Rawls' theory of justice is a variant of holistic pragmatism. I emphasize how White's holistic theses coincide to a significant extent with the ideas devised by Rawls regarding the method of 'reflective equilibrium' in social justice, and in a more general sense, in ethics. Also, I expound why White's doctrine is epistemologically holistic and methodologically monistic.

Keywords: reflective equilibrium, holistic pragmatism, considered judgment, principles of justice, conjunction of statements, Duhem-Quine thesis, Duhemian conjunction

1. Introduction

Interpreting John Rawls' 'reflective equilibrium' method from the perspective of holistic pragmatism entails both an epistemological and a methodological perspective. In this article, I approach the 'reflective equilibrium' using the doctrine developed by Morton White in the book entitled *A Philosophy of*

Culture: The Scope of Holistic Pragmatism. Moreover, I develop a thesis previously outlined in an excursus concerning the evolution of pragmatism in the philosophy of culture (Burlacu 2013, 123-132). White argues that holistic pragmatism should entail a monistic methodological approach (White 2002, 8-54). Essentially, White states that ethics is a 'cultural institution', just like logic, physics, aesthetics, religion etc. (White 2002, 44). By placing them at the same level, he rejects any strict epistemic distinction between ethics and the other 'cultural institutions'. In ethics, White's endeavour has a very ambitious goal: to prove that John Rawls' theory of justice represents a variant of holistic pragmatism.

The 'reflective equilibrium' represents, in a broad sense of the term, the end of a process through which a person can assess and adjust his convictions and/or judgments regarding a research field or a 'cultural institution' (White 2002, xii-xiii). The aspect that is approached may be a particular one, for example the logical question: "Is this syllogism correct?" Alternatively, it may be a question of an ethical nature: "What should I do in this case?" In social justice, the 'reflective equilibrium' could be used in order to address, for example, the issue of ethnic or religious positive discrimination in educational institutions. In scientific methodology, the 'reflective equilibrium' could be useful for ascertaining a methodological consideration that is founded "on the elementariness of the common grounds of research." (Klibansky 1967, 263) At a more general level, in epistemology, Ilie Pârvu reveals that the 'reflective equilibrium' between science and its epistemological reflection may allow the development of abstract ideas regarding the status of the theory of science. Thus, he considers the 'reflective equilibrium' to be inspired from the process of mutual justification of "the principles of logic and the deductive practice of particular inferences." (Pârvu 1984, 46) As a theory of scientific knowledge, epistemology reflects itself in science and vice versa. Therefore, the 'reflective equilibrium' entails a bidirectional relation, which has the role of autocorrecting both science and its epistemological reflection (Pârvu 1984, 47). The relationship between science and epistemology described by Pârvu entails a

systematic approach to knowledge. Thus, the 'reflective equilibrium' is considered to be a method of overcoming the inevitable impasse of infinite regress, which characterizes the epistemological foundational conceptions.

In the following chapters, I examine the origins of the 'reflective equilibrium' method in a reverse chronological order. I also express a series of considerations regarding the relevance of the Duhem-Quine thesis for Rawls' method. Afterwards, I emphasize how the theses of holistic pragmatism underlined by White coincide to a significant extent with the ideas devised by Rawls regarding the method of 'reflective equilibrium' in social justice, and in a more general sense, in ethics. Furthermore, I analyse White's assertion that Rawls is a holistic pragmatist.

2. The Origins of the Concept of 'Reflective Equilibrium'

The philosophical conception developed by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* is partially based on the theses of the social contract theory devised by John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but is also grounded on some of the ideas formulated by Immanuel Kant[1] in his 'critical period', especially on the 'categorical imperative'. Rawls puts his own conception in contrast with utilitarianism. The claimed 'superiority' of the Rawlsian theory, when it is compared with utilitarianism, does not lie in comparing observation sentences with the fundamental principles of his theory. Instead, Rawls argues that what he calls 'considered judgments' confirm the theory developed by him (Rawls 1971, ix, 20, 25).

The expression 'considered judgment' has a conceptual value in Rawls' conception. Thus, by 'considered judgments', Rawls understands a multitude of moral assessments that every person undertakes on a daily basis, regarding actions, politics, laws, customs, organizational and institutional practices etc. Essentially, the 'considered judgments' are not superficial evaluations. Instead, they are carefully reflected moral assessments that people make in circumstances "favourable to the exercise of the sense of justice", that entail impartiality and consistency (Rawls 1971, 47). Hence, for Rawls they are those judgments in which one's "moral capacities are

most likely to be displayed without distortion." (Rawls 1971, 47) By introducing the concept of 'considered judgment', Rawls suggests that one's moral intuitions can be analysed, in order to identify and remove the potential sources of error. Also, he suggests that one's moral assessments can be examined in order to verify their consistency.

At a first glance, it appears that Rawls has a dualistic approach to 'considered judgments' and the fundamental principles of his theory. However, the 'reflective equilibrium' method is much more subtle, entailing more than the simple summing of the 'considered judgments' at a given time, and their comparison with the fundamental principles. Thus, by 'reflective equilibrium' Rawls also understands a process of postulation and revision of theoretical models, ideas and principles, at all levels of generality. The holistic dimension of the 'reflective equilibrium' method is that *all* the judgments and the fundamental principles can be revised every time when changes are necessary for the development of a coherent and convincing conception.

The fact that both White and other pragmatists emphasize is that, in the development of the 'reflective equilibrium' method, Rawls[2] adopts and modifies a process described by Nelson Goodman in the book entitled *Fact, Fiction and Forecast* (1955) (White 2002, 170). Just like Rawls, Goodman claims that rules of inference and particular inferences alike "are justified by being brought into agreement with each other." (Goodman 1955, 64) Therefore, the process of justification entails a series of mutual adjustments between the rules of inference and the particular inferences[3]. A rule of inference would not be admitted as a logical principle if it had not been compatible with what 'we consider' to be accepted cases of inferential reasoning. The 'plural' used both by Goodman and Rawls, seems to suggest that, essentially, the judgments of every person regarding the acceptable rules of inference are limited. More specifically, the 'proofs' provided by that which 'we consider' to be correct examples of inferential reasoning limit one's judgments. Also, the judgments about certain particular inferences must be revised when these

inferences prove to be incompatible with the generally accepted rules of inference[4].

The process of bringing into agreement (1) *the judgments about particular inferences* and (2) *the judgments about general principles of inference* requires several additional explanations. Goodman claimed that in the "agreement achieved lies the only justification needed for either" (Goodman 1955, 64). Furthermore, Goodman attempts to demonstrate that the 'agreement achieved' is the only justification possible for the resulting principles of inference (Goodman 1955, 66-67). Stephen P. Stich approaches the theses of Goodman from a pragmatic point of view[5]. Stich indicates that, in the process described by Goodman and later adopted by Rawls, there are three aspects that must be detailed (Stich 1990, 76-79).

[I] Goodman asserts that he explains what justifies both deductive and inductive inferences. However, Stich emphasizes that it is not clear if what Goodman refers to by using the term 'inference' represents actually a cognitive process. Thus, Goodman's account could be interpreted as an attempt to explain the justification of rules of logic that could be used in order "to assess the steps in logical derivations." (Stich 1990, 78) Interpreted in this manner, the justification process described by Goodman would be useless in assessing cognitive processes, except if it was complemented with a suitable theory regarding the relation between logic and good reasoning. However, just like other authors[6], Stich reveals that this relation "is much less obvious than one might suppose." (Stich 1990, 78) Furthermore, Goodman's account could be considered a description of the justification of rules used for assessing cognitive processes. Thus, according to Stich, Goodman offers a direct answer to the question: How should we proceed in the process of reasoning (Stich 1990, 78)? Even though Stich does not clearly assert it, this also entails a semiotic dimension, which would be later hinted by White.

[II] The 'reflective equilibrium test' described by Goodman represents the second point elaborated by Stich from a 'thoroughgoing' pragmatic perspective. This perspective is actually very similar with the one expounded a decade later by White: the holistic pragmatism (White 2002, 109-125). In order

to expound this second point, Stich starts from the following question: "What status Goodman would claim for the 'reflective equilibrium test' he describes?" (Stich 1990, 78) Stich is certain that Goodman considers the following conclusion to be clear: "a system of inferential rules is justified if it passes the 'reflective equilibrium test.'" (Stich 1990, 78) However, it is by no means clear why Goodman thinks he can arrive at this conclusion. This issue has several potential responses. Stich summarizes them in two possible answers. (1) The first answer is that the 'reflective equilibrium test' is constitutive for justification. If this answer is admitted, then it is sufficient for the rules of an inferential system to be in 'reflective equilibrium' in order to justify that system. (2) If a set of inferential principles passes the 'reflective equilibrium test', then this represents a proof in itself for their justification or validity. But, regarding the second possible answer, Stich explains that "being in reflective equilibrium and being justified are quite different." (Stich 1990, 78) That is why the first answer better encapsulates Goodman's conception.

[III] The status of the claim that "reflective equilibrium is constitutive of justification" represents the final aspect that Stich explains (Stich 1990, 78). Of course, by using the conceptual expression "reflective equilibrium" Stich does not refer to the method expounded by Rawls, but to the process described by Goodman. Thus, Stich focuses on three relevant views:

(a) The claim represents a conceptual truth, namely it results from the meaning of the word 'justification' or from the analysis of the concept of 'justification'. I consider interesting the fact that Stich addresses an issue that has both a logic and semiotic facet. However, he avoids using a semiotic perspective. For his part, when referring to Goodman, White formulates considerations of a logical, semiotic and semantical nature (White 2002, 110-125). According to the first view, Stich states that like other conceptual truths, the aforementioned claim should be both necessarily true and knowable a priori. From this point of view, "the status of the claim that *reflective equilibrium is constitutive of justification* would be akin to the status of the claim that *being a closed, three-sided plane figure*

is constitutive of being a triangle." (Stich 1990, 79)
(b) The aforementioned claim represents a non-conceptual necessary truth that is knowable exclusively a posteriori. Adopting this view would result in equating the status of the aforementioned claim with that of the assertion that "water is H_2O" (Stich 1990, 79). This view also entails a semiotic facet that is not discerned by Stich, along the lines of Charles Sanders Peirce's 'original' pragmatism.
(c) The claim is formulated as a stipulative proposal. Namely, this claim does not reveal what exactly the pre-existent concept of 'justification' amounts to, nor does it reveal "what is essential to the referent of that concept." (Stich 1990, 79) The adoption of this last view involves proposing a new concept of 'justification'.

I consider that the three views highlighted by Stich are actually not so different. Thus, in examining the status of the claim expressed in Stich's third point of interpretation [III], one might start from an analysis of the original meaning of the concept of 'justification'. Subsequently, if ambiguities or difficulties are identified in its use, the concept can be readjusted. As changes are becoming increasingly significant, the explanation turns into stipulation. In Stich's terms, as long as the changes that an explanation determines in the initial concept are motivated by considerations of clarity and simplicity, without any radical departures from the pre-existing concept, that explanation represents "a kind of conceptual analysis." (Stich 1990, 79) Actually, Stich performs an in-depth analysis of the claim that "reflective equilibrium is constitutive of justification." (Stich 1990, 78) Stich's analysis is comparable by subject and content with the interpretations expressed afterwards by White. Namely, White develops an interpretation of Goodman's conception regarding the likeness of significance in a manner similar to Stich. Thus, White points out that (i) *the idea that synonymy and analyticity are determined empirically* was correlated with (ii) *the thesis that an important part of philosophy was empirical.* Furthermore, White linked these two points with (iii) *the belief that one should breach the epistemic obstacle* that was assumed to exist between (α) *the a priori philosophical analysis of both scientific and common-sense statements* and (β) *a posteriori investigations of art and other*

'cultural institutions' (White 2002, 110).

Following a detailed analysis of Goodman's theses, Stich emphasized that the justification of the rules of inductive logic via what he calls 'reflective equilibrium'[7] gives too much importance to the inductive practices that each of us are routinely performing. Of course, not all the elements of the everyday inferential practices of all individuals are justifiable. Thus, flawed reasoning can often be identified and attributed to numerous individuals, in a wide variety of contexts.

In the first decade of this century, Gilbert Harman and Sanjeev R. Kulkarni pointed out that the use of the 'reflective equilibrium' method as a way of inductive reasoning justification is problematic, because it allows certain features of people's convictions to trigger significant changes in the 'equilibrium' they achieve (Harman and Kulkarni 2006, 559-575). Both Goodman and Rawls argue that the method of adjusting a general principle to a particular judgment represents exactly the manner in which a person tests and justifies his or her convictions. Taking this thesis into account, Harman and Kulkarni ask themselves: "But why should we assume that our ordinary methods of justification show anything about reliability?" (Harman and Kulkarni 2006, 566) The two argue that debating the issue derived from this question inevitably leads them to the observations presented by Stephen P. Stich and Richard E. Nisbett regarding how biases can affect "ordinary reasoning practices." (Harman and Kulkarni 2006, 566) Harman and Kulkarni claim that Stich and Nisbett's observations are confirmed by ample evidence. However, Harman and Kulkarni do not conduct a thorough description of the evidence. After a careful examination, Stich and Nisbett's evidence indicates that a possible outcome of the process of justification elaborated by Goodman is that "patently invalid inferential rules turn out to be 'justified.'" (Stich and Nisbett 1980, 188) The conclusion reached by Stich and Nisbett is that Goodman's account is wrong. In order to correct Goodman's account, it is necessary to use the notion of 'epistemic authority'[8] and to reveal "the social aspect of justification." (Stich and Nisbett 1980, 188-202)

The critical comments formulated by Stich and Nisbett

are developed by Harman and Kulkarni. They point out that various errors (e.g. 'gambler's fallacy', regression errors, and the erroneous analysis of covariance[9]) might pass the exigencies of ordinary 'reflective equilibrium' (Harman and Kulkarni 2006, 566). Despite resorting to reification, the demonstrations expounded both by Stich and Nisbett and by Harman and Kulkarni, reveal the fact that to be in 'reflective equilibrium' with the inductive practice is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for justifying a rule of inductive inference. Fundamentally, the process of justification elaborated by Goodman and adapted by Rawls is characterized by a fragility which raises questions regarding the soundness of the judgments and the principles that are put into agreement.

3. The Duhem-Quine Thesis[10]

In the philosophical investigations dedicated to the 'reflective equilibrium' method, both Stich and Nisbett on the one hand, and Harman and Kulkarni on the other hand, do not mention the influence exercised by the conception developed at the beginning of the last century by Pierre Duhem. In the book entitled *La théorie physique: son objet et sa structure* (1906), Duhem states that: "An experiment in physics can never condemn an isolated hypostasis but only a whole theoretical group [...] The physicist who carries out an experiment, or gives a report of one, implicitly recognizes the accuracy of a whole group of theories (i.e. fr. 'ensemble de théories')[11] (Duhem 1906, 301). Essentially, Duhem thinks that a physicist carrying out or describing an experiment implicitly accepts the accuracy of a group of theories, consisting of a 'conjunction of statements'[12]. Thus, Duhem emphasizes the fact that a physicist never deduces a prediction of a phenomenon from an isolated statement. Therefore, if the anticipated phenomenon does not occur, then the entire 'conjunction of statements' that makes up the group of theories admitted by the physicist must be re-examined. Duhem's thesis is therefore holistic.

The experiment cannot invalidate an isolated sentence; it can only reveal that "among the propositions [i.e. sentences] used to predict the phenomenon and to establish whether it will be produced, there is at least one error; but where this error lies

is just what it does not tell us." (Duhem 1906, 303-304) Furthermore, Duhem argues that, when an entire theory or a 'conjunction of statements' is confronted with what Willard Van Orman Quine would later call a 'recalcitrant experience'[13], the physicist has no absolute principle to indicate how to review the conjunction. In some cases, the additional statements may increase the degree of complexity of a group of theories to such an extent that the physicist may decide to modify or even to give up one of his hypotheses.

Following a subtle analysis, White highlights the difference that Duhem makes between "statements of physics, the prescriptions of logic, and his reasons of good sense." (White 2002, 55) White claims that, insofar as Duhem made a clear distinction between logical-mathematical sentences and contingent assertions about nature, his philosophical conception has retained 'vestiges' of rationalism. However, insofar as Duhem "appealed to reasons that reason does not know", he actually resorted to what White calls "considerations having to do with the elegance or simplicity of a conjunction of statements." (White 2002, 56) White states that Duhem's perspective regarding groups of theories was later labelled "holistic or corporatistic." (White 2002, 54) Moreover, an evolutionist analysis of the conceptual change, carried out in a manner similar to the model elaborated by Stephen Toulmin[14], may easily reveal the influence manifested by the nineteenth century historicism and organicism on Duhem's holism.

Duhem's conception had a limited notoriety until the middle of the last century, when Quine mentions it in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951, 20-43). This article truly represents an 'evolutionary node' for the majority of the subsequent philosophical works. Hence, Goodman, Rawls and White have emphasized the role that Quine's article played in shaping their own theses. Remarkable due to the clarity and conciseness of his writing, Quine also has the merit of developing Duhem's ideas, extending their applicability in natural sciences, mathematics, logic etc. Particularly, Quine claimed that explaining every 'recalcitrant experience" may lead to the revision of any of the interconnected statements that constitutes "the totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs."

(Quine 1951, 39) Quine resembles this phrase with the 'total science', which "is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience." (Quine 1951, 39) Therefore, according to Duhem and Quine, the knowledge and the representation we have about the outside world consists of one or more groups of theories[15], 'conjunctions of statements'[16] or corporate bodies (Quine 1951, 38). The emergence of a 'recalcitrant experience' might determine me to revise any of the interconnected statements that form the ensemble of our knowledge or beliefs, either at individual or group level. From this point, Quine developed the idea that even the laws of logic can be modified, if it is demonstrated that their application causes problems (Quine 1951, 40).

The 'Duhem-Quine thesis' stipulates the impossibility of verifying an isolated scientific hypothesis, because testing a hypothesis requires at least another statement or an auxiliary hypothesis. Likewise, this thesis postulates the fact that no isolated hypothesis can be used for the development of predictions. The process of developing predictions from an isolated hypothesis entails the assumption that at least a few other correlated hypotheses are true. The 'Duhem-Quine thesis' represents a composite thesis, including only some of the elements from each of the two theses. As Donald Gillies amply illustrates, Duhem and Quine have developed two theses that include a number of significant differences (Gillies 1993, 98-112). However, it is possible and also useful to combine certain elements of the two theses. Like Gillies, in this article I use the phrase 'Duhem-Quine thesis' to designate the conjunction of the following two statements:

[A] The holistic thesis[17] applies to any high-level hypotheses, regardless of whether these belong to physics, mathematics, logic or to other sciences and/or disciplines[18] considered by White 'cultural institutions'.

[B] The conjunction of hypotheses under test in any given situation is in practice limited, namely it does not extend to the entirety of human knowledge. Quine's assertion that "Any statement can be held to be true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system" (1951, 43) is true from a purely logical standpoint. But, as

Gillies states; "scientific good sense concludes in many situations that it would perfectly unreasonable to hold on to particular statements." (Gillies 1993, 115) Gillies' assertion entails approaching the 'scientific good sense' in a manner similar to the way Duhem envisioned it in his thesis[19] (Duhem 1906, 356-359).

The 'Duhem-Quine thesis' can be approached, like the 'reflective equilibrium', from an epistemological standpoint. From this perspective, Gillies shows the utility of the 'Duhem-Quine thesis' for demonstrating that Karl Popper's 'falsifiability' is an inadequate demarcation criterion between science and metaphysics. Moreover, Gillies' examination of the consequences entailed by the 'Duhem-Quine thesis' for Popper's 'falsificationism' as a methodology, offers an original approach to Quine's holistic epistemological conception. Basically, this is how Gillies explains why Quine rejected the possibility of drawing any adequate demarcation between science and metaphysics (Gillies 1993, 205-230). From a methodological standpoint, the 'Duhem-Quine' thesis is interpretable as an application of the 'reflective equilibrium' method. However, in this case, the 'reflective equilibrium' is limited by: (a) the convictions determined by the 'scientific good sense'; (b) the logical inferential and scientific methods; (c) "the totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs" regarding the surrounding world (Quine 1951, 39). Thus, the components of the 'Duhem thesis' and those belonging to the 'Quine thesis' are adjusted and brought into agreement with each other by a process similar to the one first described by Goodman, adapted afterwards by Rawls and implemented by Gillies.

The 'Duhem thesis' has influenced Rawls indirectly, both via Goodman's conception and via the ideas proposed by Quine in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" and in the book entitled *Word and Object* (1960). Besides, the relevance of Quine's conception is admitted by Rawls on several occasions (Rawls 1971, xi, 111, 131, 579, footnote 33). In addition to the existing conceptual links between the 'Duhem-Quine thesis' and the 'reflective equilibrium' method, it is remarkable that the principles of justice[20] formulated by Rawls can be considered constituents of a 'Duhemian conjunction'. They differ from what Rawls calls 'considered judgments'. Rawls expounds his principles by using

a criterion similar to that used by Quine to describe his observation sentences. These are defined by Quine as the sentences which the fluent speakers of a language are willing either to accept or to reject, when they are given the same type of concurrent stimulation (Quine 1960, 36-46). In turn, Rawls describes his fundamental principles stating that they are accepted by a certain type of people, who are in a particular position or situation.

4. The 'Reflective Equilibrium' and Holistic Pragmatism

The implementation of the holistic pragmatism's theses in ethics represents one of White's most important philosophical contributions. He argues that Rawls' theory of justice is a version of holistic pragmatism. The 'keystone' of White's demonstration is Rawls' concept of 'reflective equilibrium'. White exposes in detail the manner in which Rawls adapted the process of justification proposed by Goodman. Besides, Rawls asserts that he was influenced by the conception of justification formulated by Quine in the book *Word and Object* (1960). A remarkable aspect is that Rawls points out the role that White had in the development of Quine's conception. In the book *Toward Reunion in Philosophy* (1956), White introduces elements of moral philosophy and social justice, from which Rawls suggests he was inspired (Rawls 1971, 579, footnote 33).

Like White, Rawls claims that a moral theory must be regarded just like any other theory. The acceptance of this idea allows Rawls (a) to avoid the difficulties associated with the issue of the significance of 'good' and 'justice' and (b) to devise a general theory of justice (Rawls 1971, 578-579). Rawls criticizes the Cartesian approach to moral theories. This approach asserts that the fundamental or 'first' principles are necessarily true, and the truth value is transferred from premises to conclusion (Rawls 1971, 578-579). In an exposition similar to the one later formulated by White, Rawls shows that there are a series of obstacles in considering the premises to be necessarily true or in explaining what this means. White and Rawls' conceptions are also convergent regarding the criticisms

formulated against the 'reductive naturalism' (Rawls 1971, 578; White 2002, 171-172). Reductive naturalists try to define moral concepts using non-moral ones. They also claim that affirmed moral statements are true if they are translated using non-moral definitions. Rawls emphasizes that the theses of 'reductive naturalism' are grounded on definitions that entail a clear theory of meaning which seems to be lacking. According to Rawls, the attempt to devise a theory of justice is similar to the attempts to develop theories in grammar, logic, mathematics or in other disciplines or fields of knowledge. As White stresses, this is a fundamental thesis of holistic pragmatism.

In Rawls' conception, the principles of justice are those that would be accepted by free and rational persons in an "initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association." (Rawls 1971, 11, 17-22) The initial position is essential for what Rawls calls "the original agreement." (Rawls 1971, 11) White states that, unlike Locke, Rawls makes no reference to the speed with which free and rational persons would accept his principles in the initial position (White 2002, 172). Rawls' principles are also meant to regulate all further agreements, specifying "the kinds of social cooperation that can be entered into and the forms of government that can be established." (Rawls 1971, 11) This original position of the free and rational persons who accept the principles formulated by Rawls, is such "that no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status […] his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like." (Rawls 1971, 12) Those persons do not even know their conceptions of good or their particular psychological predilections. Fundamentally, the principles of justice are chosen behind what Rawls calls "a veil of ignorance" (Rawls 1971, 12). When these principles are combined with personal beliefs and knowledge of the circumstances, they lead to people's ordinary 'considered judgements'.

Rawls' principles can be regarded as the components of a 'Duhemian conjunction' that leads by logic to 'considered moral judgments'. White reveals the fact that these judgments "support the conjunction from the bottom up" (White 2002, 173). Rawls claims that "we may want to change our present

considered judgments once their regulative principles are brought to light." (Rawls 1971, 49) Hence, the 'considered judgments' are either adjusted or abandoned in relation to the relevant principles. In turn, the regulatory principles are either revised or abandoned in relation to the 'considered judgments'. Thus, the fundamental principles and the 'considered judgments' are mutually adjustable, in order to maintain the theoretical ensemble.

I consider that testing the 'Duhemian conjunction' comprised of Rawls' principles is contextually limited in practice. This aspect is omitted by White. From a gnosiological point of view, the 'considered judgments' are limited: people rarely have an exhaustive knowledge of circumstances, and people's beliefs and convictions can often be an impediment in the acquisition of such knowledge. I think that Rawls' principles of justice are interpretable via the 'Duhem-Quine thesis'. However, it should be stated that ultimately, this thesis is monistic.

From an epistemological point of view, White considers that Rawls has a holistic approach to ethics and social justice. Rawls uses in his theory not only concepts of logic and mathematics, but also of psychology and economy (White 2002, 171). In White's terms, in the development of a general theory of justice, Rawls draws upon other 'cultural institutions' besides ethics: "our scientific heritage" includes elements of logic and natural science and also moral beliefs. Therefore, White claims that any 'moral judge tries to organize a flux consisting of feelings of moral obligation as well as of sensory experiences." (White 2002, 3) Although I consider that the reification to which White resorts must be eliminated, I note the ingenious way in which he expounds the fact that Rawls adopts a similar perspective in order to outline his own theory.

White's methodological monism results from the thesis that the different disciplines associated with various aspects of culture can be distinguished on the basis of their specific terminology and fundamental statements. However, White denies the possibility of distinguishing disciplines on the basis of using fundamentally different methods in supporting those statements (White 2002, 3). It is remarkable that Rawls makes a number of claims that bring him closer to White's doctrine.

My statement is based on Rawls' considerations regarding both the origin of the 'reflective equilibrium' method and the 'conception of justification'. The latter was proposed by Quine and developed by White (Rawls 1971, xi, 20, 111, 131, 579, footnote 33).

Essentially, in demonstrating the statement that Rawls applied the theses of holistic pragmatism in his theory of justice, White goes through five steps:

(1) White begins by correlating the 'reflective equilibrium' with the process of justification described by Goodman, with the perspective expounded by Quine in the book *Word and Object* (1960) and with his own theses from the book *Toward Reunion in Philosophy* (1956).

(2) Presenting Rawls' criticisms concerning both the 'Cartesian method of justification' and the 'reductive naturalism' is the second step undertaken by White.

(3) Revealing the monistic methodological character of Rawls' conception represents the third step in White's demonstration. Thus, he stresses the similarities noted by Rawls to exist between testing the logical inferences, the statements of natural science and moral judgments (White 2002, 173).

(4) Comparing the two principles of justice, which were formulated by Rawls, with the components of a 'Duhemian conjunction' is the penultimate step in White's demonstration.

(5) White ends his demonstration by emphasizing the fact that the principles of justice are characterized by Rawls using a criterion similar to the one used by Quine in order to describe the observation sentences.

NOTES

[1] Rawls considered several books as defining the social contract theory tradition. The most important were John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* and Immanuel Kant's ethical writings, starting with *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (Rawls 1971, 11, footnote 4).

2 Rawls states that the process of mutual adjustment of fundamental principles and 'considered judgments' is not peculiar to moral philosophy. Rawls attributes to Goodman a process of justification of the principles of deductive and inductive inference, which anticipates the 'reflective equilibrium' method (Goodman 1955, 65-68; Rawls 1971, 20, footnote 7).

3 Goodman states that: "Principles of deductive inference are justified by their conformity with accepted deductive practice. Their validity depends upon the accordance with the particular deductive inferences we actually make and sanction" (Goodman 1955, 63). In turn, Rawls asserts the following: "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." (Rawls 1971, 20)

4 These are rules that offer the best description of a wide range of acceptable inferences.

5 In the introduction of his book, entitled *The Fragmentation of Reason* (1990), Stich states: "If the argument about the value of truth could be sustained, the natural upshot for the normative theory of cognition would be a thoroughgoing pragmatism which holds that all cognitive value is instrumental or pragmatic – that there are no intrinsic, uniquely cognitive values. And this, indeed, is the position I finally came to defend." (Stich 1990, 21)

6 Relevant considerations regarding the relation between logic and good reasoning were made by: Christopher Cherniak in *Minimal Rationality* (Cherniak 1986, 75-99), Gilbert Harman in *Change in View* (Harman 1986, 11-20), and Alvin I. Goldman in *Epistemology and Cognition* (Goldman 1986, 81-121).

7 Stich uses the expression as such, although Goodman does not use anywhere in his writings the phrase 'reflective equilibrium'.

8 Stich and Nisbett suggest that, once an individual or 'subject' has established that his/her own inductive practice is in 'reflective equilibrium' with a rule, "the subject has done everything he/[she] can do." (Stich and Nisbett 1980, 198) But the 'subject' might invoke without knowing an unjustified rule. In order to avoid this mistake, it is necessary to appeal to a higher court than the subject's 'reflective equilibrium'. In any society there are people who are recognized as 'authorities' (i.e. experts) 'not only in assessing inference, but on factual questions as well, in medicine, science, history, and many other areas." (Stich and Nisbett 1980, 199) Essentially, Stich and

Nisbett develop a normative approach. This approach is clearly avoided by Goodman in books like *Ways of Worldmaking* (Goodman 1976, 109).

[9] Stich and Nisbett examine in detail each of these 'examples' of error that pass the 'reflective equilibrium test' (Stich and Nisbett 1980, 192-195).

[10] In the works of philosophy of science from the last four decades references are often made to the 'Duhem-Quine thesis'. Actually, this is something of a misnomer, because the 'Duhem thesis' differs in certain important respects from the 'Quine thesis'. The phrase 'Duhem-Quine thesis' could be used only to designate a 'conjunction of statements' that combines elements from the two theses. In this article, I have combined elements from the two theses in a manner expounded by Donald Gillies in the book entitled *Philosophy of Science in the Twentieth Century* (Gillies 1993, 98-230).

[11] This thesis would be later modified by Alfred Tarski and Willard Van Orman Quine.

[12] White explains in detail Duhem's perspective. White equates the expression 'group of theories' from Duhem's book with the phrases 'conjunction of hypotheses', 'conjunction of statements' and 'Duhemian conjunction' (White 2002, 54-66, 80, 154-168). In this article, I put them between simple quotation marks in order to emphasize the fact that I use these phrases with the meaning assigned by White.

[13] Quine actually hints the Duhem thesis, when he states: "our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body" (Quine 1951, 38). Relevant for this point are also Quine's considerations regarding the 'recalcitrant experience' from the article "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (Quine 1951, 40).

[14] Toulmin explains his epistemological model in the book entitled *Human Understanding: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts* (1972).

[15] I use the English translation of the original phrase 'ensemble de théories' from Philip P. Wiener's translation of Duhem's *La théorie physique: son objet et sa structure* (1906). However, as it is obvious from White's books, there are several alternative English translations of this phrase.

[16] I use this expression according to the terminology used by White in order to explain what Gillies calls the 'Duhem-Quine thesis'.

[17] Formulated by Duhem and developed by Quine, the holistic thesis can be thus summarized: No hypothesis can be treated separately, but only in conjunction with other hypotheses, in 'theoretical groups' or 'corporate bodies' (Duhem 1906, 301; Quine 1951, 38).

[18] As one can notice, the [A] statement incorporates ideas from "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951).

[19] The [B] statement is more consistent with the 'Duhem thesis' rather than the 'Quine thesis'.

[20] The principles of justice postulated by Rawls "are the principles that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association" (Rawls 1971, 11). Rawls enunciates his principles in several chapter of the book *A Theory of Justice* (1971), in a manner similar to the one postulated in the 'Duhem-Quine' thesis. The two principles are initially outlined in the first chapter (Rawls 1971, 14-15). Afterwards, Rawls expounds a first statement of the two principles in the second chapter, using phrases like 'everyone's advantage' and 'open to all'. These phrases are considered to be ambiguous by Rawls (Rawls 1971, 60-61). That is why Rawls elaborates a final version of the two principles in the fifth chapter (Rawls 1971, 302).

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