

If a methodological background in normative ethics is named at all, it is often reflective equilibrium (RE). Its basic idea – that we should start from our existing judgements about relevant cases and bring them into equilibrium with systematic principles – is readily recited, but beyond that, conceptions of RE typically stay sketchy. RE is seldom explicitly implemented, which makes it difficult to critically evaluate the method and to assess its potential.

To close this gap, I use RE to reconstruct the arguments in Thomson's 2008 paper "Turning the Trolley". I adopt an RE conception that builds on the work of Goodman and Elgin and reconstruct Thomson's argument step-by-step. I demonstrate how she goes back and forth between her initial commitments and principles, until ultimately rejecting a commitment to reach equilibrium. The reconstruction has two main goals:

- (1) To demonstrate the potential of a specific RE conception for the clarification of positions and the justification of (moral) principles.
- (2) To show which insights can be gained from reconstructing Thomson's argument systematically as an RE process.

I show (a) that the RE conception is sufficiently fleshed out to be applicable, its elements being readily identifiable, and (b) that the criteria for justification provided by RE put real constraints on the process. Furthermore, the detailed case study has epistemic merit of its own and does not merely fulfill an illustrative role, as it contributes to the understanding and further development of the method by (c) concretizing aspects of RE for the purpose of a practical application and thereby providing further distinctions and criteria, and (d) revealing desiderata for further research.

Furthermore, by reconstructing Thomson as having conducted an RE process, I can show the value of using RE explicitly. RE proves to be fruitful because its application reveals inferential relations and the need for additional principles or background information that were not made explicit before in Thomson's arguments. Thereby, it contributes to the clarity and plausibility of her arguments while at the same time making them more accessible for scrutiny.