

## **Incentives to scan complex wholes?**

*Author:* Terence Rajivan Edward

*Abstract.* Robert Nozick declares that scanning complex wholes is not easy. Presumably few people exhibited the skill before Nozick, but I propose another explanation for why few people exhibit it than difficulty. Focusing specifically on scanning for inconsistencies, papers conveying them won't look impressive to certain evaluators.

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*They call that the Spanish crown*

*But everyone wears it in this town*

When evaluating John Rawls's liberal philosophy, which calls for redistributing wealth, Robert Nozick tells us:

There are special disadvantages to proceeding by focusing only on the intuitive justice of described complex wholes. For complex wholes are not easily scanned; we cannot keep track of everything that is relevant. (1974: 205)

I presume few people exhibited the skill before Nozick and that is part of his justification for thinking that complex wholes are not easily scanned. "I've rarely seen them scanned: scanned well anyway." But there is another explanation for why there is little evidence of the skill.

Let's imagine you are scanning the complex whole that is John Rawls's philosophy for inconsistencies. You notice an inconsistency between his two notable contributions to method: his rational actor model, the original position, and his coherentist theory of moral knowledge, reflective equilibrium. You then write a paper revealing this inconsistency. What

does such a paper look like? It is unlikely to be a several volume affair! It is probably just a few pages long. What about the reference list? It may well consist in no more than a reference to Rawls's book presenting the methods. Nobody else has spotted the inconsistency, from your researches. What is the value of referring to others who did not? (Perhaps there is some mockery value: "All these citations and all these specialists: they still could not spot it and I did!" More pleasantly, if others have spotted inconsistencies, you could inform readers of this: "I am not the first to detect an inconsistency, but the one below is not in the literature already." But what if you are the first?) Now there are evaluators who may not appreciate this work in comparison to other works. One evaluator thinks, "Look at the labour that has gone into this other work." Another evaluator thinks, "Look how few references there are in yours." If your evaluators are like this, you lack an incentive for pointing to the inconsistency compared to pursuing other kinds of work. Contemplating this, we arrive at a rival explanation for why there is little evidence of the skill of scanning larger wholes, in some societies anyway. There are low incentives to exhibit the skill, given the criteria used by evaluators, for instance to apply it to publicly reveal inconsistencies. (Low incentives can also discourage development of the skill.)

It is an interesting question the extent to which research done is affected by faulty evaluators, most obviously ones moved by displays of academic muscularity: length, number of references, flashy jargon, use of mathematical symbolism. "My father struggled in that direction and failed. This is what we think is going to work for this evaluator." There is, unfortunately, also a question of whether the cost of removing some blind spots in evaluators is higher than having them: a number of authors try their luck with poorly researched works, say. **Reference.** Nozick, R. 1974. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books.