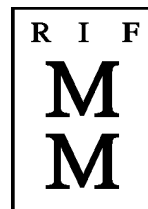


Epistemology and Social Theory: Internal and External Questions

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show how Rudolf Carnap's distinction between internal and external questions might be extended and applied to social theory. Following Carnap, I argue that a question is *internal* to a framework if it can be answered within the given framework; on the other side, a question is *external* to a framework if it calls into question the framework itself. Here, I discuss this distinction and its consequences for the social theory through an analysis focused on the "*Constitution of the Italian Republic*" framework and on the notion of justice.

Keywords

Internal/external distinction, framework, social theory, comparison

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and “(partially) inconsistent” frameworks. In the fourth section, I show the differences between internal and external changes, focusing on the (possible) answers to external questions and their legitimacy.

1. Carnap’s distinction between internal and external questions

In 1950 Carnap’s paper *Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology* gets published on the philosophical journal *Revue internationale de philosophie*. The main goal of Carnap’s paper is to clarify the consequences of accepting a language that refers to abstract entities without implying their existence. In particular, Carnap shows that «using such a language does not imply embracing a Platonic ontology but is perfectly compatible with empiricism and strictly scientific thinking». In this article, Carnap also introduces the distinction between *internal* and *external* questions. According to Achille Varzi, such a distinction concerns with

the existence of certain entities within the framework, and questions concerning the acceptability of the framework itself. In accordance with mathematical language, for example, the existence of a certain function is an internal question, resolvable by resources within the language of mathematics, whereas to ask if functions exist is an external question, concerning the reality of the world presupposed by that language.³

In the years following the publication of Carnap’s article, such a distinction does not go unnoticed among his critics. In 1951, Willard Van Orman Quine points out that the hidden element of Carnap’s proposal is the distinction between matters of language and matters of fact: yet – according to Quine – such a distinction is not a difference in kind, but rather a difference in degree between analytic and synthetic⁴. Susan Haack, in *Some Preliminaries to Ontology*⁵, asserts the validity of Carnap’s argument, although she reinterprets his distinction in terms of *straight-forward* questions, for which answers are offered within a specific language, and *hard* questions, concerning what it is to be an item of a certain kind and whether such items really exist.

2. An external application to Carnap’s distinction

Let us leave aside Carnap’s critics and focus on his distinction between external and internal questions: as we said above, the distinction has been introduced to discuss the existence of certain entities in a given framework – in particular in a

2 Rudolf Carnap, «Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology», *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 1950, 4, pp. 20-40.

3 Achille Varzi, eds., *Metafisica. Classici contemporanei*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2008, p. 6.

4 W.V.O. Quine, «On Carnap’s Views of Ontology», *Philosophical Studies*, 1951, 2, pp. 65-72.

5 Susan Haack, «Some Preliminaries to Ontology», *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 1976, 5, pp. 457-74.

system of linguistic expressions – and the acceptability of the framework itself. To be more precise, according to Carnap questions are *internal* if they are formulated, evaluated and resolved within a given framework, whereas questions are *external* if they call into question the framework itself and the «reality of the system of entities as a whole»⁶. Here I want to abstract from the specificity of Carnap's distinction – running the risk of distorting his words – in order to extend its applicability.

Specifically, I argue that, given *any* kind of framework (not only a linguistic one), a question can be considered internal if it is evaluated and resolved within the framework, whereas a question is external if it concerns and calls into question the framework itself.

Let us take, for instance, the “*Constitution of the Italian Republic*” as a framework, and ask the question: “Is it right not to grant adoption to same-sex couples?”. This question can be regarded as internal if we formulate it this way: “Is it right, according to the *Constitution of the Italian Republic*, not to grant adoption to same-sex couples?”. In this case the question is both evaluable and resolvable within the “*Constitution of the Italian Republic*” framework. The framework is not called into question; on the contrary, it is possible to recognize its authority in answering this question. Let us now formulate the question differently: “Is it right that the *Constitution of the Italian Republic* does not grant adoption to same-sex couples?”. In this case the question concerns the “*Constitution of the Italian Republic*” framework; it is actually a question *about* the framework itself. This question cannot be answered within the framework because it calls into question the framework itself and its validity, appealing to something (in this case, a notion of “justice”) that does not belong to the framework. This is why we can consider this question as external with respect to the given framework.

From such a distinction we can infer two considerations: first, if we take a framework and an external question it is possible to formulate a more general or different framework that transforms the external question into an internal one. Consequently, if we take a framework and an internal question it is possible to identify or formulate a less general framework that changes the internal question into an external one. So, if we take the “*Constitution of the Italian Republic*” framework and the external question: “Is it right that the *Constitution of the Italian Republic* does not grant adoption to same-sex couples?” we can transform it into an internal one taking a more general framework – such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Obviously, the framework's reversal would allow to change the question from internal to external. Second, it is not always easy to distinguish between external and internal questions since they might exhibit some degree of continuity. For instance, the framework can be complex, (partially) inconsistent, vague or indeterminate, forcing internal questions to be resolved only with the help of external elements.

3. Frameworks: a further specification

Talking about “not only linguistic”, “complex”, “indeterminate”, “vague” and “(par-

tially) inconsistent” frameworks requires to specify the meaning of these expressions. A “not only linguistic” framework is a factual framework (e.g. the set of objects in this room) or a framework in which facts and linguistic expressions are intertwined (e.g. the Italian Legal Order includes the Civil Code and the Penal Code, i.e., written bodies of law used to regulate certain factual behaviors). A framework is “complex” if it includes several sub-frameworks connected to each other: e.g. in the nation-state framework, the fight against tax evasion (justice framework) can lead to better financial liquidity (economical framework); such a better financial liquidity can then be reinvested in the education framework. In this case, the nation-state framework includes justice, economics and education sub-frameworks, and these sub-frameworks appear to be connected to each other. By “indeterminate” framework I mean a framework that is not supporting any specific thesis and thus remains open to a plurality of alternative solutions (e.g. a legislative void). A “vague” framework is a framework without “a sharp boundary-line”: for instance, what is the “*Economy of the European Union*” framework? What does it include? Are there also non-economic aspects of European Union included in this framework? Does this framework include also the economies of the nations outside European Union? Finally, a “partially inconsistent” framework would contain, at least, a (partial) contradiction. The already mentioned “*Constitution of the Italian Republic*” framework (Title VI, Constitutional Guarantees, Section II, Amendments to the Constitution. Constitutional Laws, Article 138) says:

Laws amending the Constitution and other constitutional laws shall be adopted by each House after two successive debates at intervals of at least three months, and shall be approved by an absolute majority of the members of each House in the second voting. Such laws are submitted to a popular referendum when, within three months from their publication, such request is made either by one-fifth of the members of a House or by five hundred thousand voters or by five Regional Councils. The law submitted to referendum shall not be promulgated if not approved by a majority of valid votes. A referendum shall not be held if the law has been approved in the second voting by each of the Houses by a majority of two-thirds of the members.

Yet, Article 139 says: “The Republican form shall not be subject to constitutional amendment”. However, nothing in principle prevents Article 139 from being modified, according to the procedures specified by Article 138. This way, also the Republican form of the Italian State could be revised, although this would explicitly contradict Article 139. The “*Constitution of the Italian Republic*” framework is (partially) inconsistent because, although Article 139 prohibits a specific constitutional amendment, nothing specifies that Article 139 itself may be subject to modification⁸.

7 Cfr. Gottlob Frege. *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*, II. Pohle, Jena 1903, §56.

8 It is true that the possibility to review the Republican form – even through a special referendum (such as the one held on June 2, 1946) – is admitted by the Constitution’s early years, but now doctrines and practices supporting Article 139 and other Constitutional limits prevail. However, such a possibility of revision allows to consider the “*Constitution of the Italian Republic*” framework as an example of a (partially) inconsistent framework.

4. External and internal questions: a comparison

Finally, we can go back to the external-internal distinction. Given *any* framework, we have defined a question as internal if it can be evaluated and resolved within the framework. This means that an internal question can be answered within the given framework through the rules expressed by the framework itself. Consequently, an internal change modifies the framework appealing to rules defined by the framework itself. For example, taking the “Italian Legal Order” framework and knowing that the Italian law recognizes (through the Constitution, Article 71) that people may initiate legislation by proposing a bill signed by at least fifty thousand voters, it is possible to change the “Italian Legal Order” framework internally, appealing to the rules admitted by the framework itself. The situation is different for external questions: as we have already said, external questions concern and call into question the framework itself and its presuppositions. Hence external questions cannot be answered within the framework, because they call it and its foundations into question. Consequently, in this case an external change purports to modify the framework, independently of the framework’s rules. But, then, where can an external question get an answer? Simply, we should look for a more general, or different, framework – the choice here is completely arbitrary – in which the external question becomes internal. Let’s now go back to our initial example: the “*Constitution of the Italian Republic*” framework and the external question “Is it right that the Constitution of the Italian Republic does not grant adoption to same-sex couples?”⁹.

We have said that this question is external because it calls into question the framework itself: it cannot be answered within the framework because it calls into question the framework and its foundations, appealing to something (in this case a notion of “justice”) that does not concern the initial framework. But nothing, in principle, prevents us from asking and trying to answer to this kind of question. It is legitimate to ask whether it is right that the Constitution of the Italian Republic does not grant adoption to same-sex couples, and it is possible to answer this question taking *any* more general, or different, framework (e.g. Universal Declaration of Human Rights) in which the framework is not called into question, but – on the contrary – the question can be answered within the given framework appealing to the new framework’s own rules. Obviously, given a new framework, it will always be possible to ask a new external question, which would be answered in a more general, or different, framework, thereby transforming this new external question into an internal one

Someone could ask whether it is permissible to answer an external question appealing to a more general or different framework. So, let us take two different frameworks (*framework*₁, *framework*₂) that define, respectively, two different notions of justice (*justice*₁, *justice*₂). Both frameworks can be regarded as right, be-

9 In this sense, external changes might qualify as changes that eliminate the framework or refuse to acknowledge it, or even appeal to a different framework in order to find a suitable answer to the question without rejecting the rules expressed by the first framework.

10 Obviously, external questions can be extended to more radical issues that challenge the assumptions of the relevant framework.

cause both are consistent with their own notion of justice. However, given these two frameworks and their respective notions of justice, is it permissible to ask if *framework*₁ is *right*₂? Such a question applies an external notion (*justice*₂) to a framework (*framework*₁), more precisely a notion that does not belong to the framework in question. But if *framework*₁ does not include the notion of *justice*₂, then *framework*₁ does not seem evaluable through the appeal to this notion and, consequently, through *framework*₂ and *vice versa*. Therefore, external questions could be considered illegitimate.

Here, I do not intend to take a stance on the permissibility of external questions: such an example underlines the absence of *any* privileged framework¹¹ and of *any* criterion allowing us to favor a framework over the other. Indeed, it is always possible to re-apply an external question to any criterion, and the answer to this legitimate or illegitimate question does not allow to favor a criterion over another. Along the same lines, there is no external criterion allowing us to prefer one internal answer over *any* other answer.

11 In fact, if these questions are not permissible, then the two frameworks are incomparable. Otherwise, if external questions are permissible, then it is always possible to formulate a new framework (*framework*₃) and to question (externally) 'is *right*₃ *framework*₂?' or 'is *right*₃ *framework*₁?' and so on, with any kind of framework in an infinite multiplication of frameworks and possible comparisons.