Mark Siebel: "I strive for theories that are empirically informed."

From the Armchair to the Street

Can empirical methods be applied to philosophical questions? Mark Siebel is convinced they can. He compares his thought experiments with people's intuitive common sense

The armchair philosopher gains his insights through a process both conscious and rational. He arrives at his conclusions "a priori", independently of experience – having posed questions to himself or grappled with the positions of other philosophers. Thought experiments are another proven method of his: "The old-school philosopher thinks up a situation that might be very difficult to recreate in reality. He then considers how to assess the situation 'intuitively', and what happens when the theory is applied to this situation. All of this takes place exclusively in his head," Mark Siebel explains. Siebel (52), a professor at the University of Oldenburg's Institute for Philosophy, knows what he is talking about. But he does not spend all of his time in his armchair. He is interested in what reality makes of his thought experiments: "In the end philosophy is also about ideas for a better world, ideas you want to share. But when these are deduced on a level that goes completely over the head of the average person on the street, you don't get very far."

Mark Siebel's passion is precision. As a distinguished representative of "analytical philosophy" it is important to him to formulate philosophical problems as clearly as possible. "In our discipline terminology is paramount. Only when the language is precise, can we assess things clearly and develop new theories that go on to gain greater scholarly importance," the philosopher says. If need be, he can reach into his methodological portfolio for instruments from other disciplines. "Mathematics helps me to describe theoretical situations as precisely as possible." The "fact checking" is then performed empirically. "I strive for theories that are empirically informed." The aim, Siebel says, is to take into consideration people's everyday lives – also in order to identify consequences for philosophical concepts and theories.

Academically, Siebel is moving between two worlds here – something he refers to as "interplay". On the one hand he sits in the philosopher's armchair, on the other he regularly gets out of it to address people's actual convictions. This approach is known as "experimental philosophy" and it is not uncontroversial. People's intuitive common sense, critics say, may suffice to cope with local, familiar problems, but when it comes to fundamental theoretical and societal challenges, the intuitions of ordinary people are too limited.

And yet the findings of "experimental philosophy", which is also gaining popularity, can be astonishing. Siebel is currently involved in two policy-related research units funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). In both research designs, test persons are asked questions in "vignette experiments". These centre around short stories, descriptions of situations and people from everyday life – so-called vignettes. The participants in the experiment are asked to give their opinion on a hypothetical situation using a set rating scale. To avoid distorting their "pure opinions" Siebel and his research team do not offer participants financial incentives. The vignette opinions are then subjected to a more exact statistical analysis.

In one of the research units Siebel works alongside psychologists, social scientists, and economists, researching questions related to need-based justice and distribution procedures. Specifically his research deals with "Measures of Need-Based Justice, Expertise and Coherence". Siebel says: "In simple terms need-based justice means that each person gets what they

How fair was the distribution of the lemons?

need. But since things are not always available in sufficient quantities, we are looking at what should happen with a commodity that is in short supply." The researchers are examining the question of how to determine the degree of need-based justice provided by a particular distribution. "Take the example of how to allocate a limited amount of lemons in order to cover certain vitamin C requirements. We are interested in determining to what extent different ways of distributing the lemons are perceived in the end as fair," Siebel continues.

The armchair philosopher already has some ideas on the theory. His team's thought experiments focus primarily on normative axioms – in other words, the question of which basic properties a measure for need-based justice should have. One of these properties, Siebel says, is monotony. "We work on the premise that the more the resources in the described scenario are allocated in line with actual needs, the more just the participants in our experiment will perceive the situation to be," explains the Oldenburg professor.

Practice follows theory. The survey involving a total of 174 or so test subjects has yet to be analysed in detail – but initial findings are already available. The test survey has shown that the monotony correlation indeed holds. Siebel gives an example from the vignette survey: "A family of three is allotted a 100-square-metre apartment by the state, a second family of three receives an 80-square-metre apartment, and a third a 40-square-metre apartment. As expected, the less a family's needs are catered for, the greater the unease." But there were also surprises. The so-called „monotony sensitivity", for example, was not confirmed. The researchers had assumed that the perceived injustice would increase overproportionally the greater the gap was between what an individual in the scenario needs and what they actually get. The opposite was the case. "The resulting policy recommendation would be: Take from the poorest and give to those whose needs are almost fulfilled! This, of course, puts us in a difficult situation. We now need to find out how these findings can be explained. Perhaps the test subjects are missing some important information," the philosopher observes.

Information is another key factor in this project's underlying hypothesis. The researchers are examining the so-called "expert hypothesis". This centres around the question of how expertise affects the test subjects' ratings on justice. "We assume that greater expertise will lead to greater coherence in the justice ratings," Siebel explains. To test this, the test subjects are provided with information that elevates them to the status of experts on the one hand, and the recommendations of experts are integrated into the vignettes on the other. "We expect that in both cases overall there will be less divergence in the opinions, or in other words, more consistency. Naturally it makes a difference whether the scenario features a well-known expert expressing his opinion or a fortune-teller looking into a crystal ball," Siebel comments with a smile.

The second research unit in which Mark Siebel is currently involved with a team of two assistants also uses me-

thods from "experimental philosophy". Under the heading "New Frameworks of Rationality" psychologists, philosophers and computer scientists are studying the way people make decisions and what actually constitutes a rational decision in the context of wars, climate change and other disasters. In their subproject the Oldenburg researchers are examining the aspect of coherence. "One of the things we are looking at is the extent to which statements from different witnesses which are similar and therefore fit together are more reliable."

Here, too, the philosophers first apply mathematical logic then empirical testing – "although the empirical comparison is on a much smaller scale in this case," Siebel adds. The first step is to develop so-called probabilistic measures of coherence – measures which, on the basis of the probabilities of the given statements, calculate how well they fit together. In a second step the researchers "confront" their own

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measurements and competing measurements with reality, again using vignette surveys. "For example we presented the test subjects with witness statements from different people on identical situations," says Siebel. The test subjects were then asked to rate how well the various statements fitted together. The result: "Our theory was confirmed empirically. The coherence measure that we brought into play corresponds most closely with the results of the survey. Therefore the rational assessment is consistent with the verdict of lay persons."

Mark Siebel is a man of numbers – mathematics comes naturally to him. Which is why the philosopher so enjoyed the "Introduction to Logic" course at the start of his studies. "I felt I was in good hands because I realised that here I could attain the precision I was striving for in my statements," Siebel says. Yet he would never claim that this is the only way to go about philosophy. "Sometimes being imprecise is just what you need. It encourages creativity!" (vs)

In the Oldenburg philosopher's research designs test persons give their verdict on a hypothetical situation. Siebel and his team then subject these lay verdicts to statistical analysis.