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. His research work is a means of his: “The old-school armchair 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 says. The armchair philosopher does 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, sociologists, 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 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 the potassium requirements,” Siebel continues. “We are interested in determining to what extent different ways of distributing the lemons are perceived in the end as fair,” Siebel says. “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 analyzed 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. “How fair was the distribution of the lemons?”

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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!”

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