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What is a Feminist to do with Rational Choice?

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Around me bags of skin are draped over chairs, and stuffed into pieces of cloth: they shift and protrude in unexpected ways... two dark spots near the top of them swivel restlessly back and forth. A hole beneath the spots fills with food and from it comes a stream of noises. (Gopnik and Meltzoff 1997: 31)

Introduction

Plato and Descartes, each in his own way, bequeathed to us a certain two-edged legacy: a methodology of withdrawal from all the influences of an unpredictable world of purportedly deceptive and corrupting appearances, in pursuit of first principles for every major intellectual and moral enterprise. Now familiar under the label of rationalism, this methodology commends a swift retreat to the safe haven of Reason, as the only worthy shore and soil for all that is reliable, good, and worthy of affirmation. Reason in this tradition is conceived, not as an aspect of physical or embodied functioning – a facet of so-called cognition, whose exploits include the processing of numerous varieties of sensory stimuli. It is conceived, rather, in terms that contrast with such functioning. In this tradition, Reason is a realm unto itself, a realm of both inquiry and value. Rationalism treats the world of experience as a realm of bondage, where one is subject to forces one can neither know straightforwardly nor control; starkly contrasting with the life of the mind as a realm of freedom, wherein everything is transparently known and where the human being – and being human – really comes into its own. The rationalist therefore diagnoses a tension between what we see and experience, on the one hand, and on the other hand what things – including ourselves – really are, fundamentally, in a truer realm. Furthermore, the rationalist bids us, like the prophets, retreat from the world of superficial appearances, nevermore to return to that unworthy place out of which Reason calls us. The true human realm is a transcendental realm. To the rationalist, consequently, theories of human agency and moral behavior in terms of principles of reason and reasoning are quite natural, because to the rationalist there is nothing more central to being human than founding action upon Reason.

To be sure, appeals to Reason for purposes of moral or political theory are attractive: this route keeps us having to appeal to authorities, especially divine authorities, for moral and political imperatives. From the beginning, Western moral philosophy has
appealed to a deliberative human nature as grounding the dictates of morality. Reason, as the refrain goes, calls us out of a “state of nature” into a state of civilization. Reason, acting among us, is the agent that transforms our formerly grisly lives, famously “nasty, brutish and short” and tantamount to a condition of war of all against all. Hobbes and Locke, no more and no less than the scores of our own contemporaries wearing contractarian badges, appealed to the transformative powers of reason (and more recently also discourse).

Some feminist moral philosophers have recently joined the ranks of those who appreciate the force of these appeals for the purposes of moral and political philosophy. Some feminists – for example, Jean Hampton (1993) – are attracted to contractarian approaches. Other feminists (see, for example, a number of papers in Brennan 2002) extract philosophical resources from certain rationalist, and specifically Kantian, frameworks – resources that enable them to articulate feminist criticisms of contemporary culture; we thus have our rationalist heritage to thank for the concepts of objectification and commodification. And yet other feminists (perhaps most prominently, Martha Nussbaum) appeal to conceptions of human capacities rooted in Reason to secure an account of human flourishing for the sake of feminist goals. “I take it to be feminism’s position,” writes Louise Antony, “that women under patriarchy are systematically dehumanized – treated in ways that prevent or impede the full development of the human capacities” (Antony 1998: 85).

The “realms of Reason” approach to “matters distinctively human” springs out of a conception of philosophical inquiry – or at any rate the philosophical part of philosophical inquiry – as an armchair business (a priori, in technical jargon) concerned with topics to which there is no routine scientific access. This conception of philosophy owes us an account of why the methodology has any validity. The answer typically ready to hand is that philosophy deals with concepts and first principles, and that there is no other form of direct access to these things. The trouble with this rationale is, of course, that it is difficult to support in light of controversies that swirl – with good reasons – around issues of articulating just what concepts and first principles are, how they originate, and how they make contact with objects and realities that antecedent them. The concepts and guiding principles in play at any given time and place stand de facto in important relations to the culture that cultivates and maintains them. Furthermore it is no small matter to justify the directions taken by a theoretical enterprise that purports to deal in a proprietary fashion with certain special concepts and principles of guidance, against a background of common knowledge of the checkered history that certain of those concepts (e.g., reason and human nature) have enjoyed, how certain factions have fought over control of them, and how they have played a role in social and intellectual history.

The retreat to reason therefore faces the problem of having to justify the use of the instruments (concepts, rules of argumentation, and principles of guidance) that reason respects and puts into motion. When it comes out – as eventually it does – that the social arrangements to which we have in this vale of tears become acculturated, and that subsequently appear natural to us, are to some extent arbitrary, because they are home-grown (or, as they now say, constructed) – indeed, negotiated through power struggles that could have turned out differently – it is often also contended that not only social arrangements, but also concepts, principles of guidance, and strategies of

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argumentation are the result of power struggles: those referring to persons of different genders, races, sexual orientations, and classes, to name just some of the most controversial. And so, continues the thought, these things appear appropriate in the exercise of reason, when they do, simply because they maintain existing social arrangements. And therefore, when we - on the outside - judge existing power arrangements undesirable, we ought to retreat to another realm - a realm of escape from these things, a realm where freedom and equality are possible. But retreat whither? And what resources shall we find there? Can reason itself, as such, shorn of tainted concepts and principles - and which ones are not? - be a site of genuine refuge? Is not the language and discourse of reason too closely associated with the corridors of power? And so what could the "realm of freedom" be for a liberationist seeking escape from routine exercises of power, and specifically for the feminist who despises disenfranchisement of women on grounds that they purportedly fail the test of Reason?

Two related strategies have been tried. The first retains the transcendental conception of Reason as withdrawal to a separate sphere, but enlarges the community of the reason-capable: membership in the club of those who exercise Reason becomes inclusive of women, mothers, the underclasses, aboriginals, and non-Europeans of every sort. The society of scholars who advance this strategy is centered upon Harvard: John Rawls, Robert Nozick, and Christine Korsgaard. The difficulties with articulation of this strategy lie in the production of criteria for demarcating between reasoners and non-reasoners - for there are obvious difficulties in extending membership to humans formerly excepted from full enjoyment of a deliberative nature: children, immatures, and individuals lacking or deviating from normal cognition (not to mention alien relatives) are not obviously full-fledged members of the Reason club. There can be no transcendental analysis of the qualifying physical markers or phenotypical manifestations of reasoners: armchair analysis cannot separate between them on the ground. And there is also the question of how to make sense of the idea that there are duties that reason-capable entities owe to those that are not.

The second strategy seeks to naturalize or reform the notion of reason, so that it refers to embodied cognition. The phenomenologists are perhaps best known for this style of analysis (see chapter 19). Mainstream philosophers who draw upon this strategy are Michael Bratman and John Doris. While this is a commendable strategy, its champions continue to adhere largely to aprioristic methods of analysis for much of their treatment. In particular, they rely upon aprioristic methodologies for answering such questions as: "What is practical reasoning good for?" "How are practical reasoning and moral reasoning related?" Champions of this strategy therefore continue to adhere to the conception of philosophy as a kind of service industry to transcendental philosophy, but still operating out of the armchair. Thus the strategy is shorn of its natural roots - roots that should reach into the soil of aprioristic analysis.

A third strategy - and the one I shall be commending - insists that retreat from so-called "appearances" is unworthy and does a disservice to human life as we experience it. We must defeat the forces against which we struggle for liberation within the one and only arena of reality there is: for if this realm of tears is not worth fighting for, what's the point of joining the battle? Retreat is therefore unthinkable. So, just as reason, conceived in the bare and disembodied sense old-style rationalists insisted upon, is no foundation for a science of the contingent world that presents itself to our senses, neither can it ser and deeply are. We ourselves and to camps. There are credo. And to m

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neither can it serve as the foundation for an understanding of ourselves, as we truly and deeply are. We humans, in our fullest humanity, are palpable, and so knowable to ourselves and to one another in the realm of the palpable, without the aid of refugee camps. There are no places of retreat, but also no need for them. This is an empiricist credo. And to my mind it is the only one worthy of a liberationist.

The epigraph to this chapter is extracted from a contemporary rationalistic manifesto, circa 1997. Its authors are intimating that our knowledge of what is distinctively human – namely, human minds – cannot be channeled directly through our senses: ordinary perceptual categories are inappropriate for systematizing knowledge about minds and agent. And so, since children become competent reasoners about the mental, they must come by this knowledge some other way. The plain fact is that we never, ever, not in our wildest dreams, experience other people as the passage suggests. The description in this passage is supposed to strike us as preposterous. The authors’ position is that we find the passage preposterous because we have a “theory of mind module” – essentially an organ, or sub-organ of our brains, that autonomously manages our affairs when it comes to dealing with minds. (Roughly, a module is a domain-specific, relatively autonomous piece of functional architecture, subject to a paced and distinctively arranged developmental sequence, and more susceptible to specific and characteristic forms of impairment.) A module simply develops in due time – ex nihilo, as it were; its functioning cannot be left up to a general learning process – for, as the argument goes, the contents and outputs cannot be secured through training upon multiple observations of the empirical world.)

But to my mind, the right explanation of the fact that we find the passage preposterous is that the so-called “realm of freedom” in which we experience other people as sources of behavior, as agents or sources of behavior rather than as patients only, is the world of experience itself, to which we are exquisitely attuned. All necessary cues signaling the fact that other organisms enjoy varieties of cognition are out there in the world. Minds are (among other things) tracking devices: tracking devices coordinate upon certain features of the world; and this reality – that minds track – is itself trackable by other tracking devices. And trainable upon this reality we are, provided we do not suffer cognitive deficits such as autism. The appropriate response to the rationalist contention that experience is impoverished, is therefore utter disbelief: “You’ve got to be kidding!” This is the empiricist manifesto, for which I shall not be mounting a full defense, but which I shall instead be applying. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating.

My plan in this chapter is as follows. I shall begin with a certain theory – specifically, rational choice theory – that purports to treat in a proprietary fashion with normative questions about how to proceed with making choices. The theory is founded upon axioms that have the status of first principles, although there are some disputations as to which of a variety of possible such axioms should be adopted. This arena of inquiry fails to overlap with arenas of philosophical inquiry on the subject of so-called “practical reason”: there is very little interaction between investigators in the different spheres. I shall be asking the philosophical question of what a normative theory of decision – such as rational choice theory – is good for. This is a question rarely raised explicitly in philosophical terms, even among philosophers. The philosophical investigations in this chapter will focus on that question. The mode of inquiry is
Rational Choice

Rational choice theory (RCT) presents the appearance of being a framework within which to answer the question: What is the correct principle upon which to model one's practical decision making? The theory of expected utility (EU) is one such principle or model. What the RCT framework does is make it possible to separate theoretical treatment of value (what is or should be sought, valued, or prioritized) from theoretical treatment of the means of realization of what is valued. And EU takes advantage of this opportunity for separation, to remain silent on the first question, while offering (in answer to the second) the familiar risk-weighted cost-benefit analysis. Here is how.

Suppose I have a choice between doing A and doing B. Suppose also that there are two possible states of nature r and s, which will affect the outcome of my chosen course of action in different ways. Suppose, finally, that between r and s I am unremittingly uncertain as to which will occur. Then my choice between A and B is a choice between two packages of potential outcomes. Suppose that if r is the case and I do A, then \( Q_{A,r} \) occurs; and that if r is the case and I do B, then \( Q_{B,r} \) occurs; and so on. To choose between A and B, I shall be weighing up the merits and demerits of \( Q_{A,r} \) and \( Q_{A,s} \), taken as a certain package, against those of \( Q_{B,r} \) and \( Q_{B,s} \) taken as an alternative package. We can think of these packages as the prospects attaching to single actions. They are "vectors" of different possible outcomes, for example \( \langle Q_{A,r}, Q_{A,s} \rangle \) and \( \langle Q_{B,r}, Q_{B,s} \rangle \), and it is not known which of the potential "loci" of a given prospect will materialize if the prospect is chosen. The vectors span full rows in the "matrices" that constitute our decision problems.

(If it weren't for uncertainty, decision would presumably be much simpler. These simpler cases of decision require purely instrumental reasoning, we might say. In such cases we'd simply choose the prospect that offered the best outcome. But since a preponderance of our deliberations takes place under uncertainty, we require a framework for handling that uncertainty. Once this is in place, we can maintain the idea that instrumental reasoning now directs us to choose the best prospect. This directive instructs us to rank prospects as wholes. And arranging for such rankings is rather more theoretical work than arranging for a ranking of simple outcomes -- the work of a theory of rational decision. One way of working this out is EU theory.)

The premise of such a theory as EU is that there is something deeper and more fundamental to mounting a choice than organizing, along a particular scale, a ranking of prospect wholes. In other words, that justification of any given choice must appeal to rankings of items that are themselves more fundamental to our preferences than packages of prospects. If there is to be sensible deliberation at all -- deliberation over prospects that proceeds at least part way through reasoning and analysis, and not entirely viscerally -- there must be a level of preferences ranging over a field of more fundamental commodities and more atomic goods, which justifies or at least
explains our preferences for the outcomes, \( Q_{A^r} \), \( Q_{B^r} \), and so on, in which the goods are enjoyed, and which in turn justify or at least explain our ranking of prospect wholes. This idea is the true cornerstone on which modern decision theory is founded. It is the doctrine that whatever is sought for its own sake must be located entirely in the outcome in which it is enjoyed, as a proprietary property of it.

But what exactly is something like EU seeking to model? What is the subject matter, or that domain of the universe, that it is attempting to mirror or cast some light upon? I think this is a critical question. The name of RCT reveals that it is engaged in modeling something entitled to the name of “rational choice.” But what is that? Do we actually see it on the ground? And when we do — assuming of course we do — do we recognize it for what it is? And if so, how so? These are non-trivial questions. Answering them amounts to answering the question of what is RCT good for, and in a way that no one to my knowledge has done satisfyingly thus far.

One natural and familiar way with this question proposes that RCT is one of possibly many ways of giving some specificity to the idea that the name of “rational choice” signifies choice of the right means to your ends. As Bertrand Russell used to say: rational choice has nothing whatever to do with the choice of ends themselves. So RCT comes out as a purely instrumental conception of practical reason. RCT is engaged in modeling rational choice, when rational choice is deployed purely instrumentally — which is to say it is modeling proper exercise of reason in pursuit of ends, while exercising maximum restraint in criticizing the ends to which the instruments are put.

Conceived this way. RCT says that the “realm of freedom” is strictly a calculus (or, perhaps, a menu of calculi) for determining which, of a predefined set of prospects, best advances a predefined set of aims. Nowhere in it is there evaluation of ends. Naturally there will be feminist concerns with such a proposal. Indeed it is of some substantial (and especially feminist) concern that the discipline studying practical reasoning should not waive the right to participate in theoretical evaluation of all the ingredients that go into producing action. If it turns out that the discipline that studies practical reasoning cannot engage in criticizing ends at all, then where will we find a discipline that engages in criticizing ends on practical grounds?

RCT’s straightforwardly computational way of conceptualizing practical reasoning — and instrumental reasoning generally — has certain failings. True, its aspirations are low, and so it has come in for some commendation by those who do not wish to venture too far into the realm of Reason, with a capital R. It has thus been seen as something of an empiricist halfway house. But once we appreciate the fact that an individual’s choice of ends is shaped in many hundreds and thousands of ways by their special circumstances, their local upbringing, and their society more broadly, it becomes more and more clear that leaving those matters outside the so-called realm of freedom leaves out too much. It would therefore appear that once we venture, even ever so slightly, into the realm of criticism, we end up having to venture much farther than modesty would dictate.

It might therefore seem to someone (as perhaps it did to Hume) that there can be no criticism of someone’s ends on practical grounds — that one has to occupy higher ground (moral ground) from which subsequently to criticize such things. This would seem to be a good reason to adopt the rationalists’ distinction between a realm of
bondage and a realm of freedom, and subsequently to divide (as Kant did) the realm of freedom into two: one that is concerned with hypothetical (purely instrumental) reasoning, and a second sub-realm that is concerned with categorical (moral) reasoning, where evaluation of ends has pride of place. Categorical reasoning supplies and occupies a transcendental perspective — a perspective that rises above how things are with us, here on the ground, and passes judgment from a self-conscious height upon what we ought to be doing or valuing or what-have-you. Categorical reasoning enjoys a much higher status than that enjoyed by the practical perspective envisioned by Russell (and perhaps also by Hume), which is much more like that lesser status enjoyed by a financial consultant on your payroll, whose job in your cognitive economy is simply to identify for you the best route to objectives that — as far as that hired gun is concerned — are completely non-negotiable.

But surely the doctrine that no criticism of ends can be made from a purely instrumental, purely hypothetical perspective requires some defense. It cannot be simply a matter of legislation that evaluation of ends can be made only from within a perspective that withdraps to a rarified height. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to arguing that criticism of ends does not require the sort of transcendental perspective envisioned by either Hume or Kant, or any of their followers. And it is much more congenial to feminist reservations about the transcendental. It offers a different vision of being grounded than does the rationalist conception.

Moral Philosophy

Moral philosophy has, at least since Kant, viewed moral questions as a subspecies of practical questions, because they deal with the question of "what shall we do?" under a special aspect: namely, "what does morality require us to do?" I propose this is a misdiagnosis of the matter.

What is practical reasoning, and what is it to engage in practical deliberation? These questions are, on their face, metaphysical in character: they are after characterization, in metaphysical terms, of that something, if there is something, as yet unknown how to conceive of it, that goes before archetypes of action, securing or preparing the way for those behaviors that are paragons of practical success. For the name of "reasoning" juxtaposed with "practical" signals a regulative conception. It signals commendation of certain performances, in comparison with certain others. And so a certain, traditionally empiricist strategy of answering the questions here posed suggests itself as highly eligible: why not approach the question by, first, identifying unimpeachable paradigms of action deserving of admiration on practical grounds; second, extracting an account of agency from them; and then, third, giving the same kind of attention to their precursors if there are any. This was Aristotle’s approach, and it led him — not to an account of principle-guided action, as the Kantians have now got in the space where one wants a general account of agency — but to an account of character-guided agency. Character is an embodied thing, or at least something requiring training into the organisms that manifest it.

However, Aristotle's approach has not been the standard since the modern era. Today's prominent conceptions of practical reasoning and engagement in it — Christine
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Korsgaard's, or J. David Velleman's, or Michael Bratman's -- are thoroughly procedural, algorithmic, and furthermore, intellectual: practical deliberation, as conceived today, is a process of intellection or cogitation, the application of a rule or algorithm in advance of action, concerning what to do in a select and often high-minded space of choice situations. There's nothing organic about it. Furthermore, such extant accounts as offer us a linking of practical reasoning to agency, proceed in a very counter-empirical fashion as well (Korsgaard 1996a, b; Velleman 2001): no empirical studies of agents are performed or surveyed; instead, intuitions are mined for philosophical treasure.

R. Jay Wallace opens his entry "Practical Reason" in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy as follows: "Practical reason is the general human capacity for resolving, through reflection, the question of what one is to do." This opening sentence is in no way marked as something that has been or even can be challenged, and certainly not open to empirical examination. But, pray tell, how does Wallace know that choice issues are to be resolved through reflection? Ironically, this definition of practical reason appears in the very same paragraph as this passage:

There are questions about how deliberation can succeed in being practical in its issue. What do we need to assume -- both about agents and about the processes of reasoning they engage in -- to make sense of the fact that deliberative reflection can directly give rise to action? Can we do justice to this dimension of practical reason while preserving the idea that practical deliberation is genuinely a form of reasoning? (Wallace 2003)

The point I'm trying to make is that if one simply assumes at the outset that issues of choice are solved through reflection, then one has created for oneself a problem -- truly an artifact of one's methodology -- the problem of showing how reflection can give rise to action. If deliberation comes first, as a matter of principle, by what further principle does deliberation result in action? The speculation that agentive choice is founded upon deliberation results in the doctrine that human behavior is totally and completely different from that of animals, unrelated to it even. But is this right?

Let's move from the realm of speculation to the realm of observation -- to science. The exercise will take us on a journey whose destination is articulation of a distinctively empiricist conception of practical reason. Two important conclusions will also emerge: (1) the conception so arrived at is rightly deserving of the name of an instrumental conception, but without being such as to forbid criticism of chosen ends; (2) this conception is very remote from RCT as we have known and grown to love it. Still, the conception we are left with is suggestive of what RCT can be a theory of.

Science of Human Behavior

Social psychology since the 1960s and 1970s has demonstrated nothing if not that human judgment and behavior are enormously sensitive to -- indeed, profoundly shaped and contoured by -- the presence of other people, who those people are in our social economy, and what they are doing and saying. For example, it should come as old news that people take cues from the behavior of others when taking stock of their circumstances (their “interpretations” of what they see are dependent upon how they...
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see other people as interpreting the situation), that the influence of women is subordinate to the influence of men (over both men and women), that men and women exert influence in different ways, and that their group behavior is different, among many other things. (Differences in group behavior between American men and American women are especially fascinating, but not the subject of this chapter.) What’s more, people’s behaviors vary quite predictably with circumstance: circumstance – and sometimes rather trivial circumstance – shapes behavior in ways unrecognized in common or folk psychology. (Nisbett and Ross, 1991, is one of the best treatments of a range of such facts. A more recent but also more contentious treatment is Doris 2002.)

On the very cutting edge of this research is the work of social psychologist Richard Nisbett and his many collaborators (Nisbett 2003). They are demonstrating in a wide range of studies how culture impacts how we judge, and even how we perceive. They are showing that differences in culture between East and West result in – and indeed are sustained by – differences in cognition. Importantly, they are demonstrating that there is nothing universal about the Western ways of categorizing objects, or engaging in debate over the worthiness of a hypothesis, in spite of the fact that Western categories and methods of intellectual engagement are more conducive to the production of good science.

What is perhaps less well known is that an individual’s behavior is also shaped by their level – and type – of attention to themselves, a factor often discussed in the field of social psychology as self-focus. For example, it is well known that the presence of a simple mirror enhances task performance. (Subjects are given, for example, a foreign-language text copying task; when there’s a mirror or camera in the room subjects produce better copies than when there’s not. Interestingly, a similar effect can be produced by giving the subject a minority status in a group; subjects with minority status perform better on neutral tasks than subjects who are not in the minority.) Why does attention to self produce better task performance? The standard answer among social psychologists is that self-focus produces better self-evaluation of one’s performance: it triggers on-line self-assessment.

A word of caution: the effects of self-focus are not simply that a personal standard of excellence comes into play when self-focus is brought to bear. It is rather that self-focus produces the application of some standard (or other) of assessment – and there are many forms of assessment that can be triggered by a mirror or a camera – and that this triggering has a profound effect on the control of behavior. So what is crucial is not that self-focus brings a proprietary standard (the “agent’s avowals”) into play (although it can do this) but, rather, that it triggers an evaluative form of executive control. (Which standard will be triggered by self-focus, of the many that might be available to an agent, is at this point in time unknown.) In summary: self-focus is a way of triggering a standard of evaluation, and can be such that subjects are not aware of this triggering. (For more on this, see the many interesting essays in Wegner and Vallacher (1980). And compare the role of self-focus in the account of executive control offered by Philip David Zelazo and his co-workers.)

That behavior has many such sources is not necessarily a good thing – though neither is it itself a bad thing. (Indeed, one should view the mirror as a very helpful – and extremely inexpensive – behavioral program for improving school performance, for example.) A theory of the regulation of executive function would (among other
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things) delineate cases where self-focus is good for performance from cases where it is
not. And this is what an empiricist account of practical reason can be good for: articu-
lating the principles that apply to regulation of executive function. This is enormously
relevant to an account of practical reason. And if it turns out that mirrors yield better
task performance, then a theory that tells you to put one in every room where prac-
tical endeavors take place is in no way a theory of how to perform better through
reflection (with apologies for the pun), contra the definition Wallace offers. I think it’s a
theory vis-à-vis the practical, all the same.

I therefore want to express these now well-worn results of social psychology as
follows: self-focus is a means of putting or shifting executive function into an evalu-
ative mode. And that this mode of operation in which executive function is functioning
evaluatively, is quite different from other modes of its operation. For example, it is
quite different from modes in which executive function is being exercised only pas-
sively or in a semi-automated or caretaker mode; this is a mode in which the executive
is not intervening but simply monitoring an automated (or over-learned) task in a
permissive manner. And furthermore I want to insist that the exercise of executive
function – whether in an evaluative or caretaker mode – is what practical reason
amounts to.

Now for a crucial philosophical point: executive function is just a function. It’s not a
principle of action: it is thoroughly contentless, and especially vis-à-vis what we should
do. It is the container, subject to being filled in any way an agent likes, or simply any
way whatever (whether the agent in question likes it or not). Here now is more on
what executive function is.

In articulating the nature of executive function, I will be following a lead discernible
There they are lobbying for what they refer to as a “new construct” in psychology, one
whose measurement will be a better predictor of success in life. They suggest calling it
personal navigation (PN), and note that in both fiction and true life we are familiar
with the idea: it is present in the notion of life as a voyage. I like the name. And I will
be lobbying for the same thing, in a distinctively philosophical way: I am lobbying for
philosophical conversations in which we conceptualize practical reasoning as an exer-
cise in navigation. While I take certain cues from Sternberg and Spear-Swerling, my
articulation of the notion is in service of a distinctively philosophical project: I want to
articulate a purely practical, counter-intellectual conception of the practical enter-
prise. Here goes.

It is quite well documented that some people experience serious difficulties in early
childhood, but nonetheless enjoy enviable success in adult life. Other youngsters enjoy
spectacular achievement in early childhood – often as a result of opportunities pro-
vided by parents – but then proceed to snatch failure out of the jaws of success. One
tempting conclusion is that there are no reliable predictors whatever of success – that
it’s all a matter of chance. But if there is anything at all in the idea that the successful
person possesses traits that enable success, one is obliged to say something, however
rough, about what the sorts of trait in question might be like. I want to do just that.
The analysis I am proposing is aimed at making sense of a trait that could function
as such a predictor: it is not so much a study of successful individuals, as it is a study
of what such individuals might be like; I’m now engaging in model construction.
empiricist style. Whether successful individuals are indeed as I’m modeling them is a matter for further empirical research to decide. But we make progress one step at a time. (First there is hypothesis; testing comes afterwards.)

Consider a trait that enables an agent to exercise control over his or her voyage through life. Such a trait might be implicated in the formulation of certain kinds of goals, plans, and beliefs. Not just any goals, plans, and beliefs, but specifically those that are involved in finding a direction in life, maintaining that direction (whether actively or passively), changing direction when appropriate, moving at such a speed as belits the circumstances and with an eye towards guarding against general fatigue vis-à-vis the overarching goal, using navigational aids when they are available, overcoming obstacles that prove easily surmountable, avoiding those that may not be. Now, the concept of direction is itself deserving of some analysis, but I shan’t provide such a thing here, as there is enough to do. I shall simply take it for our purposes that a life direction is a goal in the most macroscopic sense. Sternberg and Spear-Swerling talk about self-understanding in this connection, as well as the importance of fit between abilities, interests, personality characteristics, and goals in the attainment of success. And they strenuously resist the equation of the form of self-understanding that is at the heart of their would-be PN with a range of currently measurable intellectual functions (“constructs,” as psychologists have it), such as planning capacities, general intelligence, and even emotional intelligence. All these other functions, as Sternberg and Spear-Swerling argue, are much too intellectual for the purposes of navigation: they have much more to do with know-that than know-how; and PN is nothing if not pure know-how.

Now this conception admits of criticism of ends. The grounds for criticism, on this instrumental conception, are contentions to the effect that the chosen ends do not fit with the resources at the agent’s disposal. And these are fitting grounds for an instrumental conception, and quite different from grounds that moral rebukes can appeal to. What’s more, some of this sort of thing can sound distinctively feminist: to someone who has chosen to devote her life to sustaining her husband, a feminist criticism is that she should choose ends more fitting to the capacities she has, because she would otherwise be unhappy. And this has a distinctively instrumental ring, as contrasted with a moral one.

Back to Moral Philosophy

We now have a counter-rationalist – let’s call it empiricist – conception of practical reason. Can we, like the rationalists, think of moral reasoning as a species of this? In other words, is moral reasoning a special instance or form of PN? I think not. Here is why.

The idea that moral reasoning is a species of practical reasoning rests on (among other things) a presumption that morality is a personal affair – in other words, that moral imperatives are directed at individual persons in the first instance. And this, consequently, leads to the doctrine that political and legal philosophies have to be built upon moral theories in some way – that political and legal theories are founded upon certain principles that appeal to an independent moral realm. These doctrines
are grounded in instincts deeply rooted in armchair methodologies, because from the armchair all questions of what I should do have the ring of personal rather than political questions. And this is the dogma of the armchair. Indeed, it is in the very nature of the armchair – the armchair’s inferior grain.

We have here performed an articulation of a conception of personal navigation that bypasses the armchair. Might we not have a companion conception of moral and political realms that similarly bypass it? I think we can. We seek an articulation of the relationship between moral and practical realms, in which the latter is not more fundamental. It will turn out to be the conception on which communities also enjoy ontological status as targets of moral and political imperatives.

Traditionally, title to equal moral, social, or political standing, in philosophy, rests on something shared in the community of moral agents. Elsewhere (Thalos 2002), I argued that findings in the cognitive and clinical sciences, particularly the sciences of functional deficit, should incline us to the conclusion that there is no such thing as a universal human nature – at least not when it comes to behavior or even to a structure for controlling behavior. I argued also that this conclusion is no less forthcoming from the findings in evolutionary science. I won’t repeat the arguments here: I will simply take the conclusion as a premise.

This premise causes problems for those moral philosophies that insist upon moral claims and moral standings resting upon certain (shared) cognitive capacities or features, as for example Kantian theories do. (Perhaps it is to give voice to the idea that the “ought” implies the “can,” and possibly also to the idea that justice is between equals.) These moral philosophies contrast, on this matter, to those that conceive of moral standing as resting upon simple membership in a community that pools or utilizes a certain range of resources to some advantage, or simply upon relations of relatedness. Such theories, which include all varieties of consequentialism, do not require the presupposition of universals, and so are not troubled by the non-existence of universals. The trouble caused is especially acute for views of the moral or political that seek to ground the title to certain (moral or political) privileges or standings upon hypothetical agreements (or equivalents thereof) entered into by numerous parties, on the basis of some (possibly hypothetical) exercise of reason, under a veil of ignorance, or some such. For the question naturally arises: what do they look like who enter into such contracts? To achieve its results, the contractarian methodology strips away, or abstracts away from, a range of phenotypic specifics. This procedure is sure to strip individuals of some particular feature that is relevant to their governing of their behavior. For according to the premise we are now taking for granted, human agency is very different from the romantic, rationalistic image to which contractarian theories appeal: human behavior is sensitive to a very large number of factors specific to one’s own genetic endowment.

The solution, to my mind, is to say that moral and political imperatives are not addressed to individuals in the first instance, in virtue of a feature that settles the matter of their candidacy as targets of such directives. These imperatives are addressed to communities, in virtue of the fact that they exist. For their existence necessitates mechanisms of conflict resolution – whether conflict actually arises or not. The existence of communities necessitates norms by which systemic possibilities of conflict must be regulated. (There are parallel imperatives involving conflict resolution among the
subsystems of an individual organism – imperatives with which all biological organisms must comply or perish.) This is a fact well known to systems theorists.

The idea that moral and political imperatives are corporative in character taps a deeply feminist instinct. And so now, how are conflicts to be regulated? There is a very compelling framework for representing and thinking through the nature of conflict: rational choice theory.

Rational Choice, Finally

RCT is a framework for calculating something out. It is an intellectual exercise. But I’ve been saying that the practical enterprise, on the ground, is decisively not an intellectual exercise. I’ve been going on about the fact that intellecstion is precisely what the practical is to be contrasted with. So what is the RCT good for? Is it good for anything at all?

I think it’s good for a great deal. RCT has two (linked) features that mark it as distinct from PN. First, it is entirely transparent – and rendered so partly by the fact (discussed at the outset) that RCT separates the treatment of value from the treatment of choice among valued things in concrete circumstances, so as to allow disputations on each to proceed independently of one another. And so, far from foreclosing disputations on what is of value, it allows disputations of that question to proceed independently of disputations about how to achieve high-priority items, once identified. (Of course, the framework assumption is that these two dimensions of the choice process can be separated: and it is indeed a substantive assumption, but this is not now the place to worry about it.) Second, RCT is available to everybody, and indeed can be applied by one person in behalf of another. So we have the means of taking everybody’s perspective, when we try. (But, of course, we have to try.)

Both these features derive from the fact that RCT is top-to-bottom formulaic and universally available. These features suit it very well as a contrast with what is not formulaic and not available to everybody: PN. PN is exclusively an individual’s resource, where by contrast RCT can be a collective’s resource. And in an especially felicitous way: as an instrument for making decisions or crafting policy impacting a heterogeneous group, it is a way of securing transparency and objectivity. And so RCT can be to the community what PN can only be to an individual. RCT can be a community’s means of navigation, provided there is a culture that legitimizes its use in public settings. (Its legitimacy must be forged in the culture that puts it into action: this does not simply happen ex nihilo.) Its presence there fills a void: for there can be much less in the way of organic PN for collectivities (or at least, it seems to me, plausible to suppose). And so if you, as an individual, think (as I do) that RCT as a public policy can be desirable, you must work to make its legitimacy a reality, by advocating for it in your community.

Against Orthodoxy

The point of view we have thus far sketched strains mightily against orthodoxy when it comes to the topic of the nature of the practical. We have thus far marked a strong
WHAT IS A FEMINIST TO DO WITH RATIONAL CHOICE?

distinction between collective navigation and individual navigation, stressing the ineffability of the personal, and emphasizing the contrasting nature of that thing deserving of the name of collective navigation. We began at ground level, thereby allowing for the possibility of ineffability – and indeed found a need to postulate it at the organismic level. But then proceeding upwards we found space for the algorithmic or formulaic form of decision, as something quite distinct from the ineffable form one finds (or, more modestly, might find upon empirical inquiry) at the individual level. The orthodoxy against which this strays is Bayesian decision analysis, the mainstream of decision analysis. This mainstream simply assumes from the outset the propositional/algorithmic paradigms as central to the analysis of practical agency. Additionally, Bayesian analyses aim at treating cooperative endeavors, defined as ones in which exists a potential for enforceable agreements among the atomic individuals who enter into them, as they treat non-cooperative endeavors, which admit of no such agreements. And so Bayesians aim at representing collective decision making as a species of individual decision making, not as something different in kind. The goal is manifestly reductive, guided by the idea that the regime of the cooperative does not deserve a separate category of its own. It is to assimilate what may be called collective rationality, the process whereby coordination of action is achieved, to what may be called individual rationality, the process of achieving action as an (undistributed) individual. The general colonizing move is to handle the overt process of deliberations as a series of strategic bargaining steps, in a competitive game played out among the members of the coalition, within the boundaries of the larger game. The bargaining game is itself viewed as governed by independent rules of interaction among multiple players, and therefore clearly not as something which someone can undergo purely as a single, unified psyche. Under the Bayesian proposal, it thus becomes impossible to view the coordinative process (which we familiarly refer to as deliberation) as a means of bringing into being a single, multi-member decision-making body aiming at collective goals. Instead, deliberation with others comes to be viewed exclusively as a means for each participating individual to reach an individual end, within a purely competitive framework. This is, for example, a goal of Harsanyi and Selten’s (1988) monumental work on equilibrium selection, although as they themselves acknowledge, the goal is never reached.

The point I’m making now is that what Bayesians have thought is good enough for collectivities, because it’s good for individuals, isn’t always good for individuals at all. I have elsewhere argued that the reductive approach (which simply assumes at the outset a formulaic version of decision making for individuals) understates the human organism’s non-logical – and indeed very organic – resources, and in so doing willfully fails to treat with proper respect her capacity for forming true alliances. Human beings, like almost all organisms that provide for their young, have a capacity for bonding. This capacity goes above and beyond the capacity for personal navigation. It is something that transcends the personal. The thesis that humans have the capacity to transcend a personal, individual perspective is the only form of transcendentalism worthy of the name.

And so I commend RCT to feminists, particularly in cultures that value transparent decision making, equality, and collaboration. Seize it as an instrument for building coalitions and consensus. It can work to the powerful advantage of feminist goals. More importantly, nothing is gained in forsaking its use.

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I will close the section by displaying an application of RCT in service of a goal all feminists can endorse—an application for which we have the United Nations to thank, in the form of an agency called UNICEF. The United Nations’ Children’s Fund was founded to protect children around the world. One of their top five priorities today, under that broader mission, is the education of girls. UNICEF adopted in April 2004 the goal of gender equality in education. UNICEF’s aim now is to get more girls into school, to ensure that they stay in school, and that they are equipped with the basic tools they need to succeed in later life. The stated reasons for these goals are not purely feminist or egalitarian (though some of them are). The UN also notes that education of girls is the single most important correlate of economic development, improved public health, and poverty reduction in today’s world. This reality is described on their website as the “biggest lesson in history.” And so UNICEF presents itself as having performed something of a very rough cost-benefit analysis of educating girls, showing that education of girls very efficiently advances a number of important values. These values are cast as collective goals—goals that certain collectivities, and individuals in their capacities as members of these collectivities, are expected to endorse. UNICEF is trying to build a coalition behind its priority of educating girls. Feminists can be brought on board with UNICEF on grounds of equal rights for girls. Others can be brought on board in the name of economic development, or improved public health, or world poverty reduction. Some will climb aboard in the name of all those things. Educating girls is good for a lot of things. And by building a coalition around consensus based upon a pool of valued ends, we—as a collectivity, conceiving of ourselves as complying with an imperative directed at collectivities and sub-collectivities to which we severally belong—can improve the lives of women around the globe.

Public and Private

Feminists have traditionally been critical of the distinction between public and private, between the personal and the political, as independent and non-intersecting spheres. Indeed, a famous feminist slogan is that the personal is political. Ironically, the conceptions of navigation articulated here—with its strong contrasting of personal and collective forms—promise to serve feminist aims. We have identified at least two conceptions of navigation, one appropriate at the individual organism level of analysis, and another appropriate for collectivities. Once these are independently articulated—in other words, articulated from an empiricist stance, that does not stand off the ground—we can proceed to ask what implications this might have for moral and political theory. Right away a natural proposal suggests itself: imperatives (moral, political, or what have you) are directed toward entities with navigational powers. This leaves entirely open the question of whether there are relations of dependence among practical imperatives, moral imperatives, and political ones. And so within this framework, no reductive relationship between classes of imperatives is necessitated. Moreover, within this framework it’s more natural to think of political imperatives as directed in the first instance at collectivities, instead of indirectly to collectivities through individuals. Rather than having to postulate dependence relations, from a transcendental
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position, among the different varieties of imperatives, it becomes open to us to examine
the ways in which the different varieties of imperatives interact.

So it becomes possible to inquire – rather than simply to postulate – whether prac
tical imperatives, thought of in the first instance as personal, interact with imperatives
directed at collectivities. In other words, it becomes possible to raise, as an open ques
tion, the issue of whether corporate and private spheres are related. And once the
question is regarded as genuinely open, it becomes possible to explore – indeed, it
seems more fitting to seek – answers that spring from an empiricist methodology.
How to do that?

Empiricist methods are the most eligible methods for answering questions like: what
is such-and-such a function good for? Under what conditions does it produce such-
and-such desirable outcomes? It is once again time for conjectures – which are subject,
as always, to refutation by careful observations.

I conjecture that PN utilizes fast and frugal heuristics that are occasionally infelici
tous (and more infelicitous in our present age than they would have been under the
conditions in which they first evolved). And so it will probably turn out that rational
choice produces better results when considerably more is at stake and there is more
time to devote to the decision. And so it will turn out that there is a parallel with
theoretical reasoning – reasoning about how matters stand in the world. Here is what
I mean.

Organisms like ourselves have evolved fast and frugal theoretical heuristics – for
example, heuristics for computing the relative size and shape of an object in the visual
field. But some of these heuristics are subject to errors of various kinds, and even prone
to persistent illusions. In the face of this fact, we require more reliable means of ascer
aining the facts of relative size and shape, when enough is at stake. (Hence, various
methods of scientific inquiry, as well as a receptivity to correction, at least on the
appropriate occasions.) In parallel fashion, organisms like ourselves have evolved fast
and frugal practical heuristics for navigating in life – for example, some of us subscribe
to "Avoid long-term commitment." Some of these heuristics lead to unhappiness, or
underachievement, or simply to reduced forms of life. In the face of this fact, we re
quire more reliable means of making decisions, particularly when there is enough at
stake. (Hence, RCT.) But the more reliable means are also less cost-effective, for there is
typically a trade-off between economy and accuracy.

Those who agitate for accuracy, always and everywhere, as do the rationalists,
have left economy quite far behind. In agitating for high intellectual solutions to all
decision problems, rationalists are asking us to take discursive reasoning to choice
situations most economically handled in other ways – ways for which we have evolu
tion itself to thank. For the transcendentalists argue that we have no means of separat
ing among cases. Nor do they have means of applying considerations of economy. And yet, for
practical purposes, what considerations could be so important as to trump all consid
erations of economy in every case? No retreat to reason alone can profit us so well as
empiricist methods when it comes to matters to which economy is relevant. And cases
of decision fall under this category of matters. And for this reason, we must conclude
that transcendental methods of inquiry are blind to central realities that underlie the
exercise of practical intelligence, and its relations to the moral and political.
Notes

1 Shapin and Schaffer (1985) propose that this is true also of contemporary scientific methodology.

2 The doctrine of "massive modularity," as now it is called, is characteristic of the highly controversial research program now going under the label of Evolutionary Psychology. Peter Carruthers (2004) offers a recent defense of the doctrine, which is countered in Woodward and Cowie (2004).

3 Jean Hampton held a rather different – and less complimentary – opinion of EU. She thought that it is a theory divided against itself, and so cannot model anything. She wrote: "While it [EU] is supposed to permit our preferences over actions to be partly a function of attitudes toward risk, one of its central axioms requires that our preferences over actions be purely a function of our preferences over consequences" (Hampton 1994: 235). The point is simply that, whereas EU is prepared to render judgments utilizing any utilities you please to specify, whether you care about consequences only, or care also about the states in which you enjoy them, it nonetheless demands that your utilities for outcomes be state-independent at some level. According to Hampton, EU requests that, at some level, your preferences be purely over the outcomes, rather than also over the conditions in which the outcomes come out. These restrictions concern the metaphysics of your preferences, rather than their content. I am prepared to countenance that, while there is some tension, it is not so bad as a contradiction.

4 Jean Hampton, offering this very point as a criticism of the atomizing move, says succinctly: "While it [EU theory] is supposed to permit our preferences over actions to be partly a function of attitudes toward risk, one of its central axioms requires that our preferences over actions be purely a function of our preferences over consequences" (Hampton 1994: 235).

References and Further Reading


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A Companion to Rationalism

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