Rational choice theory is a theoretical strategy that emphasizes the role of deductive arguments based on premises that include some specification of the principle that individual
This provides the background for the third stage of Chai's overall argument and the major original theoretical component of the book. He constructs a general theoretical model that directly tackles the fundamental problem just described. It will function as an adjunct to, not a replacement for, the key optimization assumption of standard rational choice theory in the sense that where that theory takes beliefs and preferences as given, his "coherence model" aims to derive how these emerge and change. A great many intriguing ideas are introduced in a somewhat difficult presentation of a formal model. Even with proofs relegated to an appendix, the use of a formal notation that is likely to be unfamiliar to most readers may present a stumbling block in grasping the central argument embodied in the model, although most ideas are also conveyed discursively.

The basic principle is that the actor attempts to reduce doubt about a choice, either before or after a decision. "Coherence," a technical term, means that such doubt is reduced to zero through various subjective processes. The relation to dissonance theory is noted, as well as connections with other ideas in social psychology, but here the principle is specified in terms that coordinate it to rational choice theory. For instance, in the context of maximization of expected utility, the two given elements are subjective probabilities and utilities. Hence, the actor can reduce doubt, and thereby move toward coherence over time, by one or more alternations in either or both of these elements. Also introduced in this context are concepts such as "choice frame" and "identity frame," the latter making good on the promise of the title of the book. The chapter concludes with a section that draws out an implication of the coherence model in terms of "group altruism" in the sense that, under certain conditions, individuals will be rational optimizers whose utility functions include the welfare of specified others.

Having set out his model to address the fundamental problem of conventional rational choice theory, Chai is ready for his fourth and final stage of argumentation in three successive application chapters. The theme of each chapter is that the new framework—the coherence model plus rational optimization—enables the construction of a specific theory that improves over alternative theories that

actors make rational choices under given constraints. It deploys this principle as an analytical means to the theoretical goal of explanation of macro-social phenomena. The expansion of the program in the recent past, from its home base in economics to other social sciences has been accompanied by considerable controversy. In sociology, in particular, some critics interpret the approach as a regressive move back to individualistic rationalist presuppositions that writers such as Durkheim and Mead criticized. Other critics have argued that the approach cannot properly deal with such elements as affect, culture and identity. From within the tradition, a recognized limitation has been that the approach requires that beliefs and preferences be given before the rational choice can be derived.

The book under review, a revision of a dissertation written in the context of a political science department, is a noteworthy contribution from within the tradition that directly addresses these issues. It aims to recast the theory so as to deal with belief and preference formation while also aiming to show how culture, affect, and identity can be treated in its terms. Chai proceeds in a systematic manner in four stages.

First, the opening chapter sets out the assumptions of "conventional" rational choice theory, as Chai calls it, together with an assessment. The key idea is that the theory treats a decision as involving rational optimization, given the actor's beliefs and preferences. For instance, maximization of expected utility is a particular form of such optimization. In a lucid assessment of the theory, Chai notes weaknesses pointed out by critics—all relating to empirical adequacy in one way or another—but then specifies a number of considerable strengths of the approach, subsumed under the three categories of generality, parsimony, and "decisiveness" (meaning, essentially, predictive capacity).

Second, Chai presents an impressive summary and assessment of alternatives to conventional rational choice theory. These alternatives, he concludes, are unable to resolve the fundamental problem, namely: How do we preserve the strengths of the theory while overcoming its weaknesses? For instance, the well-known satisficing alternative, which drops optimization in favor of enhanced realism of assumptions, yields a loss in predictive capacity.

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have arisen in studies of economic development that pertain to economic ideology, ethnic identity, and long-term social change, respectively. For instance, in the first case study, the aim is to show how economic ideologies enter into policy choices by elites in developing countries. This takes the form of showing how, on the basis of their political experiences, members of elite groups are led to certain ideological beliefs and preferences that are the basis of rational policy choices when they gain control of the state. The chapter includes a statistical test of derived hypotheses using a dataset consisting of 74 countries. For instance, one such hypothesis is that “states in ex-Western colonies will be more interventionist in their economies than those in other countries even when structural, geographical, and year to year control variables are taken into account” (p. 169).

An integrative thrust, combining innovation and synthesis, with close attention to useful ideas put forward in the literature, is characteristic of this book, as is an impressive capacity for critical analysis of that literature. However, a less attractive feature of the book is that some of the arguments are dense and difficult. In addition, despite the rigorous logical argumentation in all chapters, the linkage of the basic theory to applications does not seem to be straightforward. It has been argued by theorists who have advocated the rational choice strategy in sociology—such as Lindenberg and Coleman—that as the actor level becomes more complex, it becomes more difficult to achieve explanatory leverage at the social system level. Chai argues that the additional assumptions he introduces into the choice process do not entail this sort of trade-off, but to make good on this claim he does find it necessary to use certain analytical strategies that some theorists may question. For instance, in constructing one specific theory, a “modal actor” is assumed where the actual situation seems to involve a set of heterogeneous actors. It will be interesting to see if other analysts will be able to make effective use of the coherence model in the treatment of analogous types of explanatory problems in comparative and historical sociology.

In addition, from the standpoint of many sociologists who focus on identity, affect and culture—key elements that Chai aims to fold under the umbrella of his extended rational choice approach—the treatment of these phenomena in the book may seem rather thin. For instance, in his discussion of ethnic identity, Chai apparently agrees with an author he quotes (p. 184) who criticizes the rational choice approach for its neglect of the “powerful emotion charge” often associated with ethnicity and who explicitly calls for the inclusion of the affective dimension in explanatory models. But it is difficult to see where emotion actually figures in the specific theory that is set forth to overcome such weaknesses of the rational choice approach in this area.

I recommend the book to anyone who is interested in the debate about rational choice theory in the social sciences. From that point of view, but beyond the scope of the applications in this book, it would be interesting to see how the coherence model might be employed in the context of the sociology of religion, an area of considerable controversy in regard to the application of the rational choice strategy. One wonders if the reduce-doubt process that is central to the model might have a particular relevance in the analysis of religious orientations to the world.