

The Many Flavors Of Rational Choice

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Biography

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The Many Flavors Of Rational Choice

*Abstract: This paper argues that it is premature to judge the weaknesses and strengths of the rational choice approach without more clearly defining what it means. Looking broadly across the social sciences, one finds that while rational choice is present all major disciplines, the forms that it takes across and within disciplines are various and often contradictory. In particular, these different versions can be contrasted along the following dimensions: (1) whether the purpose of rational choice models is viewed as primarily normative, predictive, or interpretive; (2) whether the approach is associated with formal, quantitative models or with informal, "common sense" models; (3) whether the approach is seen as depicting an optimizing or a heuristic procedure; and (4) whether it is "thick" in asserting certain preferences and beliefs or "thin" in leaving these unspecified. Examining these differences in turn helps us to identify what, if anything, is the essence of the rational choice approach. ** FIX FOR FIVE DIMENSIONS*

Keywords: Prediction, Formalization, Optimization, Preferences, Beliefs

Introduction : It is an understatement to say there has been heated debate within sociology, as well as within social science more generally, over the merits and shortcomings of the rational choice approach to human action. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, numerous major volumes and articles came out praising and / or attacking the approach.¹ Though the debate has become slightly less contentious in recent years, it remains in the forefront of intra- and inter-disciplinary controversy.

My intention in this article is not so much to recapitulate this debate, whose contours are by now well-known, as to place it in a wider context. Indeed, I will argue that, from a broader perspective, there is much less to the debate than meets the eye. Much of the emotional temperature is due to the common tendency by both advocates and critics to view rational choice as relatively monolithic compared to other theoretical approaches, with a relatively unified set of assumptions and methods. It is thus seen as a force for homogenizing social science theory and eliminating theoretical diversity. This purported unifying tendency is seen as a strength by its proponents, and a weakness by opponents.

In this paper, I will argue that the question of whether rational choice is a positive or negative force in the social sciences largely misses the point. Indeed, before we talk about the advantages and disadvantages of the approach, we need to be much more careful in defining what it is. In order to do so, we need to recognize the fact that rational choice modeling takes many contradictory forms and is justified or demonized in many contradictory ways in economics, sociology, political science, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and

¹ Within sociology, examples of the former include Friedman and Coleman 1986, Coleman 1990, Hechter 1990, and Hechter and Kanazawa 1997, while examples of the latter include Etzioni 1988, Cook and Levi 1990, Zey 1990, March 1992, Smelser 1992, Ferber and Nelson 1993, Smelser 1998, Zey 1999, and Zafirovsky 1999. "Even-handed" works include Swedberg 1990, Coleman and Fararo 1992, and Baron and Hannah 1994. The quantity of debate on this subject in social science more generally is too great to cite here, though some of this work will be referred to in the sections below.

linguistics. In fact, when one looks at it across the different social science disciplines, it becomes clear that rational choice is among the *least* unified among all “grand” theoretical approaches. One thing that I hope to show is that while the rational choice approach is a subject of controversy across all social science disciplines (even economics), the reasons for alarm in different disciplines are in often direct contradiction with one another, as are the portrayals of rational choice itself.

Dimensions of Variation among Rational Choice Models : This paper will argue that there are a five major independent dimensions along which varieties of rational choice can be differentiated. These are:

(1) whether the main purpose of the rational choice approach is seen as prediction, prescription, or interpretation

(2) whether rational choice theorizing is predominantly formal and quantitative, or informal and qualitative

(3) whether the rational choice model is “thick”, incorporating assumptions about preferences and beliefs, or “thin”, leaving these unspecified

(4) whether the concept of “rationality” in the rational choice model should be solely linked to optimization, or can also be viewed as a set of heuristics

(5) whether the primary unit of analysis for rational choice should be seen as the individuals, groups, or entire societies

(6) whether rational choice predictions are meant to be most valid on the micro or macro level

(6) whether rational choice is seen as a general model to be applied without modifications to all environments in which human action takes place, or the skeleton for numerous middle-range models that can be customized to fit each environmental context

For each dimension, there is among many social scientists a certain conventional wisdom about the nature of rational choice as predictive, formal, optimizing, “thick”, individual-level, and general theoretical approach. Most of these ideas come from the

adaption of the model from late 20th Century microeconomic theory. By drawing upon different versions of the model taken from philosophy, anthropology, and psychology; as well as counter-mainstream rational choice work in sociology, political science, and even economics, we can begin to see the great diversity that exists in rational choice theory, as well as great difficulty in pinning down what exactly rational choice means.

Each dimension will be covered in turn in the following sections, with a focus on the different positions taken on each dimension by the form of rational choice found in different disciplines. ²

After this survey, I will argue that the only thread tying these different forms of rational choice together is intentionality, the analysis of human action in terms of the preferences and beliefs that drive it. I will defend the usefulness of intentionality as the basis for a general theoretical approach, but also highlight the need to clearly acknowledge the diversity that exists within rational choice and actively integrate rational choice with other, complementary approaches. Finally, I will discuss the role that sociology can play in this integration.

Prediction, Prescription, or Interpretation : In economics, sociology, and political science, the main advantage of the rational choice approach is typically seen as its ability to aid in the prediction of individual behavior. Indeed, proponents typically justify its prominence on the basis of its deductive assumptions and the resulting ability to generate testable hypotheses, and goes back at least to Milton Friedman's famous

² This paper is not the first attempt to classify varieties of rational choice theory. See for instance Goldthorpe's (1998) classification of rational choices models according to the strength of their rationality requirements, situational vs. procedural rationality, and claims for generality, as well as a number of examinations of the difference between "thick" and "thin" views of rationality. However, this paper attempts to extend the scope of classification to wider set of views of rational choice outside of sociology, across all the major social sciences as well as philosophy.

presentation on the “methodology of positive economics”, in which he argued that “The ultimate goal of a positive science is the development of a ‘theory’ or, ‘hypothesis’ that yields valid and meaningful (i.e., not truistic) predictions about phenomena not yet observed” (Friedman 1953).

Subsequent work in these disciplines has built upon this view of the approach. Contemporary economics is of course in many ways defined by its adoption of a predictive form of rational choice as its dominant paradigm. While there are subfields of economics such as welfare economics and public choice that are centrally concerned with generating prescriptions, rational choice in these subfields is not itself used normatively. Rather than defining the goal to be pursued, it provides a predictive framework that can be used to determine the means to achieve the goals that are designated within each subfield.

The entry of rational choice into political science during the 1960s and 70s was marked by a rash of articles contrasting its ability to generate predictions from basic assumptions with the elaborate categorization schemes that were features of the cultural and systemic approaches popular at the time (Harsanyi 1969; Mitchell 1969; Holt and Turner 1975). In a famous work of metatheoretical advocacy, Barry referred to these two as the “economic” and “sociological” approaches to political science, preferring the former because it contains “a set of axioms from which deductions can be made” whereas in the latter “no claim is made for the development of a theory which will deduce propositions from premises” (Barry 1970, 166, 6). More recently, the rational choice approach in political science goes by synonyms such as “positive political economy” or “new political economy” (Alt and Shepsle 1990; Meier 1991), explicitly equating its mission to the goals that Friedman had originally set out. Given this, the main criticisms that have been directed at the approach in political science have focused on the predictive indeterminacies and anomalies that arise in specific action environments, such as voting and collective action (Green and Shapiro 1994; Friedman 1996).

Barry's labeling of their discipline notwithstanding,³ a number of sociologists have found rational choice very attractive. Furthermore, their attraction has in large part been linked to the issue of prediction, and it is widely accepted among both supporters and detractors that the fate of rational choice approach in sociology ought to depend on its usefulness in generating falsifiable hypotheses. In their broad defense of the role of rational choice in sociological theory, Hechter and Kanazawa argue that "theories ultimately are judged by their capacity to account for empirical observations", and that "the appeal of rational choice in sociology is unlikely to increase substantially until the approach provides demonstrable empirical payoffs in a wide variety of substantive areas".⁴

In philosophy, the rational choice approach's theoretical role is quite different. The standard rational choice model of decision-making, based upon expected utility maximization, is widely discussed and used, but the primary role has been as a normative model, a way of specifying of how individuals *ought* to behave, rather than how they actually behave.⁵ According to this view, just as rational beliefs ("theoretical reason") must follow the rules of logic in order to be valid, rational actions ("practical reason") must follow from the rules of utility maximization, which incorporate but go beyond the rules of logic, in order to be optimal. Rationality is idealized because because each action is fully justified by in light of desires and observations.

³ He himself acknowledged that much of sociological theory fell outside the confines of what he was dubbing the "sociological approach". See Barry 1970, 4,

⁴ Hechter and Kanazawa 1997, 195. See also Kiser and Hechter 1998, 789; Friedman and Hechter 1990, 214-15.

⁵ As Cherniak points out, "current philosophical conceptions of rationality inherit central features of models of rational agent propounded in microeconomic, game and decision theory", however such a conception requires "an ideal agent of great inferential insight". Hence, rather than discussing the verisimilitude of the model, "debate about the role of idealizations takes a central position in recent theorizing about rationality" (Cherniak 1995, 527).

The view of rational choice as an ideal has a much longer history than the view of rational choice as a predictor of outcomes. It dates at least back to the Enlightenment, and more specifically from rationalist philosophers such as Decartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, who argued that both actions and beliefs ought to be the result of a process of dispassionate reasoning and were equally adamant that ordinary human action usually failed to live up to this ideal. ⁶ Furthermore, such as Bentham and Mills developed the principles of utility maximization that are at the heart of the contemporary rational choice model, they clearly presented it as the basis for a normative model rather than a positive one.

Given this, philosophers are naturally less likely to be concerned than social scientists about whether the standard rational choice model is consistent with the behavior humans actually display. Cases in which actual humans seem to be diverging from expected utility maximization in their behavior can after all be seen evidence of the shortcomings of humans, rather than of the model. Thus, criticisms of the standard rational choice model and attempts to amend it tend to come from quite different sources in philosophy than they do in economics, sociology, and political science.

Perhaps the most common criticisms of the model as an ideal arise from the notion that following the model can lead to perverse consequences, either for the actor or for society as whole. ⁷ The exact nature of such consequences can be defined in different ways, but they all refer to a link that critics feel ought to exist between rational choice decision-making on the one hand and a common sense notion of “reasonableness” on the other. Hence the greatest challenges to the rational choice approach arise when the standard model generates outcomes that intuitively seem unreasonable to the outside observer. Perhaps the two most prominent of the challenges arise from cases when (1) individually

⁶ For broad coverage of recent debates on the rationalists, see Gennaro and Huenemann 2002.

⁷ See Rescher 1988, vii, 6; McClennen 1990, 4-5; Nathanson 1994, 226; Gauthier 1985b, 85-86.

rational actions apparently lead to collectively suboptimal outcomes or (2) preferences themselves seem destructive to the individual or to society.

Both social scientists and philosophers are concerned about collectively suboptimal equilibria,⁸ but for different reasons. Social dilemmas and their formal game theoretic representations, such as the prisoner's dilemma, do not typically, in and of themselves, cause social scientists to question the validity of the rational choice model. Instead, the tendency is to investigate the role the social environment plays in generating or preventing such suboptimal equilibria and to design institutional solutions that will make individual and collective rationality compatible with one another.

On the other hand, rational choice philosophers tend to view suboptimal equilibria as anomalous, since actions that all leave members of a group worse off than they could be do not seem to fit with a common sense notion of reasonable behavior. Hence, rather than searching for external solutions that will channel actors who follow the model into collectively better outcomes, philosophers typically use the existence of such equilibria as a reason to attack the rational choice model or to modify it so that it no longer generates such equilibria, regardless of the circumstances.⁹

⁸ The usual conceptualization of collective suboptimality that is used is the very strong Pareto criterion, for which there must exist another profile of choices by a set of individuals which provides equal or higher utility for all the individuals than the actions actually chosen.

⁹ Besides the prisoner's dilemma and other anomalies of collective suboptimality, philosophers also venture into surreal "thought experiments" where expected utility maximization may lead to even individually suboptimal outcomes. Such scenarios typically involve clairvoyant actors who make choices based upon the known future actions of others. If the rational choice model is taken as an ideal, after all, it should not generate anomalies even under conditions out of this world. However, since we are talking here about the intersection on philosophy and social science, these anomalies will not really concern us here. For more discussions, see Campbell and Sowden 1985.

Two major, and quite similar, revised models of rational choice decision-making have been devised to do away with collectively suboptimality outcomes. The first, variously known as the evidential logic or conditional expected utility model, is based on the loosening of expected utility's strict consequentialism, allowing individuals to take their own choice of actions as evidence about the nature of reality similar to Weber's Calvinists, who viewed their own work habits as evidence of their predestined salvation (Weber [1904] 1958; Jeffrey [1967] 1983; 1992; Eels 1982; Nozick 1990; Grafstein 1991; 1992; 1995). The second, the constrained maximization / resolute choice model, allows individuals to costlessly and credibly precommit themselves any future set of behaviors they wish. A group of individuals that agree to follow a cooperative strategy can do so in a way that none will ever be able to diverge from that strategy regardless of future incentives (Gauthier 1985; 1986; McClennen 1985; 1988; 1990).

In their purest form, both of these revised rational choice models can do away with the prisoner's dilemma. Evidential logic / conditional expected utility does so because individual will take their own strategies to be evidence of the kinds of strategies that others will play, hence making it optimal to play a cooperative strategy. Constrained maximization / resolute choice does so because groups of individuals will form a self-enforcing contract to play cooperative strategies, knowing that failure to do so will lead to a lower payoff for all.

The notion of "rational preferences" has a long history, going back at least to Plato's *Euthyphro*, whose protagonists attempt to debate in objective fashion over matters of life and death. While later work by Hume and Hobbes led to the widespread conceptual separation of fact and value, and to the instrumentalist notion that only beliefs and actions can be deemed rational or irrational,¹⁰ critics of normative rational choice have continued

¹⁰ To quote Hume's famous passage: "'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. 'Tis not contrary to reason for me to chuse my total ruin to prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian or person wholly

to examine this issue (Nathanson 1994, ch. 1; Hampton 1992, 219-20). In particular, it has been hard for these critics to accept that a course of action that involving the wanton destruction of self or others should be deemed “rational” simply because the the actor in question desired such an outcome. Nor has the conventional social science “thick” shortcut of equating rationality with self-regarding materialism (see discussion below) been very attractive either.

Instead, a number of the most notable contemporary philosophers have sought to put forward competing definitions of rational preferences. Among the most prominent recent versions are Hollis’ examination of metapreferences that based upon the mutual coherence between the utility function of all the individuals within a social group (Hollis 1987; 1996, chap. 2). Another is Rescher’s multifaceted ideal of a utility function that encompasses physical, social, and intellectual needs of the individual (Rescher 1998; 1993, chap. 3).

Both of these approaches, particular the second, have a relationship to theoretical work in the welfare and developmental economics that attempts to define alternatives to the Gross National Product for measuring national welfare. These include the Physical Quality of Life index and the United Nations’ Human Development Index (Morris 1979; ul Haq 1995), both of which arose out of a need to define goals for economic development policy that were morally and politically palatable. It is worth noting that this work has not been used as the basis for a revised utility function for the rational choice model, presumably because they were conceived of as normative, and hence are seen as irrelevant for a model that in economics is used exclusively as an empirical tool.

It is true, on the other hand, that the normative rational choice approach is not totally unconcerned with the verisimilitude of the classical model. Human rationality must at least be conceivable, lest the classical model become unusable even as an ideal. This requirement in turn generates debates that may seem obscure or irrelevant to the unknown to me.” See Hume 1940, book 3, part III, sec. 8.

social scientist., such as whether ample empirical evidence of human action to conform to the classical model is evidence of true irrationality or simply of “performance error”, the inability of human beings to successfully implement a system of rules that they nonetheless understand at some level. ¹¹ Hence, even where “real world” concerns encroach on the normative approach, they do in a descriptive fashion that is hardly predictive at all.

The third approach to

Finally, rational choice in anthropology is seen primarily as an interpretative strategy. Much of postwar cultural and social anthropology was predicated on the notion that researchers can enter the minds of their subjects by engaging in a kind of *verstehen* which seeks to view what sorts of rational justifications might be behind the subjects’ action, then analyzing what sorts of cultural attitudes might be behind such justifications (Wilson 1970; Horton and Finnegan 1973; Hollis and Lukes 1982; Urey 1984). More recently, this been the source of the biggest methodological controversy in cultural and social anthropology, over whether rational interpretation is an appropriate strategy for understanding. Critics from one side criticize rational interpretation for failing to recognize that subjects may fail to have *any* justification for their behavior, while critics from the other argue that imposing Western notions of justification on subjects is a kind of cultural imperialism.

¹¹ This argument is inspired by Chomsky’s famous linguistic competence-performance dichotomy. He distinguishes between what he feels are the deeply embedded, largely innate, knowledge that all humans have (“competence”) and the unpredictable and noise-ridden way in which such knowledge is expressed in speech. See Chomsky 1965. If failure to act in accordance to the rational choice model is result of performance error, it may safely be said that “empirical considerations would not be relevant to the question of human rationality because this interpretative strategy would discount any evidence in favour of human irrationality” (Stein 1996, 23)! See also Miscevic 1998, 8-10.

However, this model is used interpretively, because motives and beliefs are left thin.

. . .

** Sapir-Whorf

** Principle of Charity (see Stein chapter 4, notes)

Interpretive use only in philosophy. As Harrison argues rationality can either be seen as “explanatory” (prediction), “evaluative” (normative) in which particular actions are viewed as rational or irrational, or “descriptive” as universal assumption about all human behavior (Harrison 1979, intro.) In the latter case, it must be accompanied by thin assumptions.

Even in sociology and political science, there are those who dissent, at least partially, from this emphasis on prediction. In sociology, Boudon argues that rational choice theory can be useful if it “interprets any social phenomenon as the outcome of rational individual actions”.¹³ However, he is talking here only about forms of rational choice theory that do not invoke any psychological, biological, or cultural factors, i.e. conventional “thick” rational choice, the forms for which successful interpretation will typically generate predictions for future action.

In political science, Bates, Weingast, and their colleagues embrace interpretation less categorically, arguing that there is a complementarity between rational choice and interpretive historical methods (Bates, De Figueiredo, and Weingast 1998; Bates et al 1998; see also Ferejohn 1991). They argue that interpretive reconstruction is important for specifying the preferences and beliefs that underly action, particularly during times of

¹² A prominent survey of anthropological theory notes that, At the moment, the dominant theory of motivation in practice anthropology is derived from interest theory. The model is that of an essentially individualist, and somewhat aggressive actor, self-interested, rational, pragmatic, and perhaps with a maximizing orientation as well (Ortner 1984, 151).

¹³ Boudon 2003:2-3. See also Boudon 1998

structural transformation, when societal rules are unclear. While they do not explicitly argue that rational choice work in political science need not be predictive, this is clearly one implication of what they are saying.

Formal or Informal : It is taken for granted in sociology, economics, political science, and even psychology that the rational choice approach is inherently formal. Indeed, like predictive capability, this formality is seen by proponents of rational choice in these disciplines as another of its defining attributes and the source of much of its scientific rigor (Becker 1976; Hirschleifer 1985).

** That rational choice goes together with mathematical modeling is seen as self-evident - the proposal to join the rational choice and the mathematical sociological sections of the ASA, as well their holding of a joint mini-conference

** Some exceptions rational choice historical analysis in sociology (Hechter, Brustein) and political science (Bates, Ames)

** Has to do with origin in economics. . .

** Rational choice theory in Anthropology is always qualitative . . .

** On the other hand, in philosophy, the contrary notion that rational choice is particularly suited to informal, non quantitative

** Depending on which view you have, the desirable direction of that the approach should go is different.

It may very disorienting, then, for scholars in those disciplines to find out that in philosophy of mind, rational choice as an empirical model is largely viewed as a kind of "folk psychology" based upon informal intuition. As such, it is seen by many philosophers as an extremely unrigorous and unscientific form of empirical analysis. This lack of rigor is viewed as arising in part from the overreliance on natural human empathy, and the resulting reliance on unobservable concepts such as preferences and beliefs.¹⁴

** End of Folk psychology? Similarity to debate on behaviorism.

¹⁴ See Stich 1993, Nilsson 1991.

Its only perceived advantage is that its intuitiveness allows untrained individuals to use it as a way of "simulating" the thought process of others.¹⁵ Because of this, many philosophers believe that rational choice analysis will gradually be phased out of social science and replaced by more rigorous models, notably connectionist models based upon neuroscience.¹⁶

** Churchland

Optimization or Heuristics : Another contrast is between the notion of rationality as an optimizing procedure, or as a heuristic one. An optimizing procedure is one that is expected to generate the best feasible solution for the individual given the individual's utility function and the information available to him or her. A heuristic procedure, on the other hand, is one that simply provides a few "rules of thumb" for locating a solution to a problem, even if the solution is not necessarily the best one possible. As such, the notion of rationality as a heuristic procedure implicitly views humans as purposive, yet boundedly rational. Furthermore, the solutions they obtain are viewed as "satisficing" by the actors themselves.¹⁷

Traditionally, economics has viewed rational choice as a form of optimization, and political science has followed along the same route. Indeed, the conception of rational choice theory in these disciplines tends to put bounded rationality beyond the pale of rational choice. Hence many critiques of the approach in economics and political science focus on the unrealistic nature of the assumption that individuals can process all the information they have to make optimal choices.

***** Again Simon, but also schema people.

¹⁵ Gordon 1986, 1992, Goldman 1989, 1992

¹⁶ See Greenwood 1991.

¹⁷ For definitions of bounded rationality and satisficing, see the Gilad and Kaish 1986, as well the early work of Herbert Simon and James March e.g. Simon 1947, 1955, March and Simon 1958.

While bounded rationality models are increasingly finding their way into the mainstream of these two disciplines, they are generally viewed as an alternative to rational choice theory rather than a form of it.

*** South Indian Guy. Sniderman?

The situation is more ambiguous in other social sciences. Critiques of rational choice models in sociology also tend to focus on the unrealistic nature of optimization assumptions¹⁸ Nonetheless, most work that is classified as sociological rational choice does involve bounded rationality, as is exemplified by the widespread use of evolutionary models. Furthermore, this is also reflected by the fact that formal analysis in sociological rational choice tends to be based on computer simulations rather than on analytic mathematical solutions.

*** Bendor critique of Kollock?

There is a similar kind of ambiguity in psychology. Early postwar psychological adaptations of rational choice theory, such as Expectancy Value analysis and the Theory of Reasoned Behavior, assumed that individuals were able to calculate optimal choices based upon their preferences.

** Fishbein, Atzjen

More recently, however, these models have been overtaken by the decision theory approach, which explicitly looks for flaws in the optimization view, while retaining the notion of purposive action.

*** Kahneman, Tversky

Thick or Thin Preferences and Beliefs : Finally, varieties of rational choice can be distinguished by whether are "thick" or "thin" in their approach to preferences and beliefs. The terms "thick" and "thin" are merely the most popular terms to used to describe perhaps the most widely-recognized source of variation within rational choice models. These term were popularized by Ferejohn (1991, 282), and were similar is usage

¹⁸ Macy and Flache 1997.

to Rawl's earlier "thin theory of the good" (1971, 396). However, Elster (1983, 1-2) has used the terms "broad" and "narrow" to describe a similar distinction, while Opp (1999, 171) uses the terms "narrow" and "wide". Taylor (1999, 120) uses the terms "thick" and "thin" with exactly the opposite meaning to that used here.

Thick models of rationality impute specific preferences and beliefs to individuals, often through blanket assumptions, while thin models leave preferences and beliefs unspecified. It is well known that the predictive ability of rational choice for human behavior depends on having a unified, thick model rather than a thin one. From this, it might seem to follow that thick conceptions of preferences and beliefs will be found in disciplines that use rational choice in predictive models, while thin conceptions will be found in disciplines that use rational choice in normative or interpretive models. While this is largely the case, there are interesting complications to this pattern, particularly with regards to preferences, which further shed light on the role of rational choice in each discipline.

Both economics and political science rational choice largely adopt thick conceptions of preferences and beliefs. Furthermore, assumptions about preferences are largely unidimensional, self-regarding, and isomorphic, while assumptions about beliefs are based on perception and logical inference.¹⁹ Furthermore, preferences are largely viewed as materialistic. However, if one looks more closely, there is a great deal of variety within political science, in how an actor's material interests are defined. While political science largely rational choice largely adopts economics' assumptions of wealth-based utility functions at the individual level, its assumptions about preferences at aggregate levels are quite different and even contradictory to this. Most notably, political parties are assumed maximize votes, while states are assumed to maximize relative power.²⁰ It is quite easy to think of instances in which a party maximizing votes may fail to maximize wealth for its members, or states maximizing power may fail to maximize wealth for members of the

¹⁹ Chai 2001, chapter 1.

²⁰ Downs 1956, Waltz 1979.

state apparatus. Given these contradictory assumptions at different levels, each version of rational choice, while predictive in its own right, generates contradictory predictions when combined with the other approaches.

Sociological rational choice in its early days was based largely within exchange theory, and thus had a thick conception of preferences and beliefs. However, its conception of preferences was typically based on the notions that individuals were seeking to maximize social status rather than wealth.²¹ Early psychological rational choice theories adopted similarly socially-based assumptions, particularly the Theory of Reasoned Behavior, which assumes that individuals seek to comply with the preferences of other actors within their peer group.²²

More recently, both sociological and psychological rational choice have moved into the experimental laboratory, and in the case of sociology, into the world of computer-based simulations. In the laboratory, preference assumptions can be implicit rather than explicit, because the outcome space can be constricted so that there is only one or a few goods on offer that the subject might plausibly be assumed to desire. In the computer, things can be abstracted even further, with virtual actors seeking a "good" that need not be defined in terms of any real-world object. At least in the virtual world, then, thin conceptions of preferences can be consistent with prediction.

Finally, while philosophers rarely use rational choice to examine behavior empirically, much less predict it, their conception of preferences is often quite thick. This is because, as part of the enterprise to develop normative rational models of behavior, there is an attempt among theorists to develop concepts of "rational preferences". Rational preferences are viewed as those preferences which serve certain objective needs of every human being, such as self-preservation, or those that allow human being to play a constructive role in society.

²¹ Homans 1958, 1961

²² Fishbein and Ajzen 1975, Ajzen and Fishbein 1980.

What is Rational Choice? : Certain things go together -

Prediction needs thickness

Generality needs thickness and optimization

Qualitative tends to go with interpretation and thinness

*** Mid-range vs. general theory

*** Thickness must apply across contexts of it will lead to ad hoc-ness

It was noted at the beginning that this paper will not seek to recapitulate the debate on the whether the rational choice approach serves sociology for good or for evil. Nor do I seek to judge which of the different "flavors" of rational choice is the best. It goes without saying that each variety has its own advantages and disadvantages in terms of generality, decisiveness, and accuracy. ²³

Instead, to conclude, I would like to make some speculative remarks about what the term "rational choice" means, more generally, outside the particular forms it takes within the subliterations attached to each discipline. Given the great extent to which the meaning varies across these elements, it is far from trivial to determine whether the approach in fact has a "core". Indeed, contrary to the portrayal of many of the anti-economic imperialists, one of rational choice's notable characteristics as a theoretical approach across the social sciences is not so much its tendency to impose uniform assumptions on all actors, but rather its fragmentation. The characteristics of rational choice that are praised or cursed are for the most part accoutrements that have been attached to it within each discipline, not part of any core.

Given this, what, if anything, is rational choice in essence? Arguably there is only one thing that binds all these contradictory theories together. This is the sense that actions may be viewed as purposive, i.e. that they are the product of goal-oriented decision-making. As such, they all rational choice theories analyze action as intentional, i.e. an effect of the interaction of preferences and beliefs.

²³ Chai 2001, ch. 2.

Isolated from all the auxiliary assumptions, does this view of human action serve any useful theoretical purpose? If so, what? Without proposing a definitive answer to these questions, I would like to first propose that the ubiquity of this purposive, intentional view is largely due to its consistency with the way that humans tend to predict, predict, and interpret other people's action in everyday life.

Even when this type of analysis is obscured / enhanced by overlays such as a formal technical apparatus and / or assumptions about superhuman cognitive capabilities or narrow, materialistic goals, there is still something intuitive about this view of action. It is not "natural" to us as humans to look at other's behavior without invoking abstract entities such as preferences and beliefs.

Given this, any evaluation of the rational choice approach as an aggregate scholarly enterprise should center around the advantages or disadvantages of such "naturalness". Indeed, the overlays mentioned above, as different as they may be from ordinary human thinking, nonetheless seek only to refine the this natural of human nature in order to make the resulting theories more decisive,²⁴ rather than contradicting them altogether.

Getting back to the point, what is the theoretical usefulness of rational choice? For better or worse, I propose that the main advantage of rational choice as a general approach is the way that it attempts to bring together *verstehen* (empathetic understanding) and impartial social science analysis. While this may seem either like a contradiction in terms or folk psychology revisited, what is unique about the rational choice approach is the way in which it attempts to take the principles that operate in our empathy and to rework them, in various ways, into scientific language. In doing so, it attempts to give us the best of both worlds - an extremely rigorous, yet extremely human, way of thinking about ourselves and others.

Rational Choice and the Fate of Sociology : One corollary of this viewpoint is the notion that if rational choice is accepted as the dominant social science theoretical

²⁴ See Chai 2001, ch. 2

approach, it would threaten the position of sociology as an independent academic discipline.

Barry's notion that the sociological approach and rational choice diametrically opposed. . .

Indeed, the decade of the 1990s was notable for the closing or downsizing of several sociology departments, and the apparent declining prestige of the field in comparison with other social science disciplines (Flint 1990; Kantrowitz 1992; Coughlin 1992). Moreover, much of this decline was blamed on the encroachment of the rational choice approach throughout all parts of social science. Among other things, the largest universities where sociology departments were shut down, Washington University in St. Louis and the University of Rochester, are also among the country's preeminent hotbeds of interdisciplinary rational choice social science. In both such cases, the assumption by administrators seemed to be that if rational choice was the way to go, then sociology must have very little to contribute.

To a large extent, the contrasting fates of sociology vs. economics have been attributed to the presence of a core theoretical approach (rational choice) in economics and the lack of one in sociology (Crane and Small 1992). It is this core that is said to contribute a cumulation of mutually consistent findings, and thus to the greater prestige of economics. This prestige has led in turn to much heated argument between proponents and (mostly) opponents about whether rational choice in sociology serves to make sociological thinking more rigorous, or whether it is simply a trojan horse for economic imperialism and ultimate hegemony.²⁵

**** Even if rat choice continues to exist, sociology must exist to adjudicate the form of it.

²⁵ For advocacy of such imperialism, see chapters in the edited volumes Radnitsky 1987 and 1992. See also Becker 1976; Hirshleifer 1985.

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