

Rationality and the Ideology of Disconnection

Rationality and the Ideology of Disconnection is a powerful and provocative critique of the foundations of Rational Choice theory and the economic way of thinking about the world, written by a former leading practitioner. The target is a dehumanizing ideology that cannot properly recognize that normal people have attachments and commitments to other people and to practices, projects, principles, and places, which provide them with desire-independent reasons for action, and that they are reflective creatures who think about what they are and what they should be, with ideals that can shape and structure the way they see their choices. The author's views are brought to bear on the economic way of thinking about the natural environment and on how and when the norm of fair reciprocity motivates us to do our part in cooperative endeavors. Throughout, the argument is adorned by thought-provoking examples that keep what is at stake clearly before the reader's mind. To anyone who wishes to grasp what matters in the now highly charged debate about rational choice theory, this book is indispensable.

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Rationality and the Ideology of Disconnection

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Preface

I intend this book as a contribution to the overthrow of a radically reductive and dehumanizing but deeply entrenched way of thinking. It is entrenched most completely in the discipline of economics – it is part of what *defines* neoclassical economics – and because of this has come to have enormous influence on how public policies of all kinds are made, and in this way affects all our lives, especially here in the United States. It has also made roads into the thinking of people in a variety of other academic disciplines, especially political science, where it has, for example, largely framed the discussion of when and why people are disposed to do their part in promoting common interests – a subject that is of fundamental importance in the study of politics because a great deal of governmental and other political activity and organization would not be necessary if most people were generally willing to do their part in advancing shared interests, and because, at the same time, democratic governance would not work well if most people were *not* generally prepared, without being coerced, to do their part in certain cooperative endeavors. Some environmentalists, too, among them even some well-known biologists, have fallen under the sway of the economists' version of this way of thinking, or at least have become willing to make selective use of it when they believe it will serve their purposes in the short run: they say, for example, that we should preserve biodiversity because it *pays* to, and in general to save the environment we must appeal to the businessperson's bottom line and the consumer's famous pocketbook.

At the foundation of this way of thinking about the world – an ideology if ever there was one, as the whole of this book will make

plain – is the idea that human beings are moved only by desires, that their choices are to be understood always as being the resultant of weighing or trading off desires.

What is wrong with this? Human beings make promises and agreements, explicitly and tacitly, and generally they feel bound by them. They help to create or enter into or find themselves in certain relationships, with particular other individuals and with groups, and it would not occur to them to act except as required by such a relation, in ways that, in fact, are constitutive of the relation. They commit themselves to social practices and abide by the norms that define such practices, and again generally it would not occur to them to do otherwise. They make moral judgments, judgments of right and wrong, and then feel bound by them. Many people see (and many more in the past once saw) themselves as links between past and future generations or even as in part constituted by those links, and this may be bound up with a deep attachment to a particular place (for place – one to which humans can be attached – is never just a matter of physical location and physical objects, but is something made significant by human history, by events); and again, as a result of such attachments people can feel bound to act in certain ways.

In these and other ways we humans create for ourselves reasons for action that have force at the time of choice whether or not we want (in an ordinary nontautological sense of desire that I shall later try to make clear) to do that action. We create for ourselves what John Searle calls desire-independent reasons.

Human beings are conscious of themselves. They are self-reflective. They think about what they are: they have descriptive self-conceptions or self-understandings. They also think about what they *ought* to be – about the kind of person they should be, and how they should live their lives: they have *normative* self-understandings. They endorse or set for themselves *ideals* – moral ideals or the ideals (or standards) associated with and in part constitutive of the attachments and commitments to people, practices, projects, and places that I mentioned previously.

Although they may not be articulately held or consciously deployed or aimed at, these ideals directly provide us with motivating reasons to act. In some cases they also structure or frame the way we

see a choice situation and determine what other considerations in that situation provide reasons for action: they may totally silence or exclude some reasons (such as a generally operative desire for pecuniary gain) or they may diminish their reason-giving force. When a person's ideals structure or modulate her choices in these ways, I shall say that they form her *identity*. So a person's identity is the part of her normative self-understanding that structures and modulates her choices.

These connections we make to the world and their capacity to move us directly and to structure the way we see and make our choices are a large part of what makes us human. If economists and other Rational Choice theorists take account of them at all, they misrepresent them; they do not understand them for what they really are. In fact, they *cannot* accommodate them in their theories, because those theories are committed to understanding human action solely in terms of *desires* (or *preferences*). They take the idea of desire to be primitive and foundational; they lump together as “desires” several different sorts of things (or simply assume that if someone chose something he must have wanted it, that he must have been motivated by a desire); they take it for granted that these desires can be balanced or traded off against one another – that they are, as it were, all on the same level and can all be put into a single utility function to be maximized; and they assume (tacitly, because the possibility seems not even to occur to them) that there are no desire-independent reasons, hence nothing that can structure those desires, nothing that can silence or suppress them or diminish or qualify them in any way.

Thus, although economists and other Rational Choice theorists sometimes talk about altruism, commitment, community, social approval, and those self-assessing but highly social emotions, guilt and shame, the subjects of their theories are not truly social. Moved only by desire, by what they want or prefer, they also are not rational, for reason's only role in these theories is to guide people (not motivate them) as they try to get what they want. Rationality (I shall take it) requires at least the capacity to consider and be moved by reasons, including those provided by our ideals, by our normative self-understandings. (For this reason I shall capitalize the initials of Rational Choice whenever I am referring to the model of choice assumed

by Rational Choice theorists, whose practice *denies* rationality to its subjects.)

In these ways, Rational Choice theory denies its subjects capacities and dispositions that are an important part of what makes us human. It denies them also – and in many cases (as we shall see) denies much else besides – to real human beings when it is put into practice: when it advocates and legitimates public policies and projects that are predicated on the premise that humans are moved only by their wants, and especially when the further assumptions of the normative part of neoclassical economics (“welfare economics”) are added, assumptions that together imply that the value of anything to anybody is fully replaceable, so that anyone can be compensated for the loss of anything.

In Part One of the book I sketch (in Chapter 2) the general argument about ideals and identities, desires, and the structure of reasons, after first (in Chapter 1) trying to soften the reader up a little with some discussion of several examples of choices, made (with one exception) by real people, that cannot be explained or understood by the Rational Choice model without being radically misrepresented and trivialized. Some of these choices (involving, for example, the rejection by poor people of fabulous sums of money) are extraordinary, but I hope to convince the reader in the rest of the book that my argument applies to the more mundane choices we make every day.

Economists don’t just use the model of Rational Choice to explain social behavior; they *idealize* a world in which it holds, a world in which there are no desire-independent reasons, no framing or structuring ideals (provided, for example, by attachments or connections of the kind I discuss in Part One), no normativity, and no moral motivation. This is the world of the Market Ideal, the economist’s utopia, where anything people care about is a commodity, where everything of value is owned and consumed as a private good, where every “resource” is put to its “most productive” or “most highly valued” use, where all problems, including environmental problems, are *defined* as the failure of markets to produce efficient allocations of resources. In Part Two of the book I shall look at what happens in this world of the Market Ideal to the individual human being, her communities, and her natural environments.

Economists proudly proclaim their commitment to the principle of “consumer sovereignty” – the principle that people’s *wants* or *preferences*, as expressed by the choices they make in markets, must be respected; they must not be judged. But normal people certainly judge their *own* preferences, and economists are repeatedly told, when they conduct “contingent valuation” surveys, that social choices about public projects and policies should *not* be made on the basis of what individuals want (especially wants they express as isolated buyers in markets), and it would seem that the respondents who reject these surveys think that such decisions should take account of their *judgments*, their beliefs about what *ought* to be done, which perhaps they can discover or develop in a process of public *deliberation*. (Contingent valuation surveys are conducted when there is no market – as there is not for whooping cranes, Grand Canyons, or stratospheric ozone layers – in which people’s values can, so the economist claims, be inferred from the choices they make – from what they are willing to pay for things.) Economists reject this: consumers are sovereign but human beings apparently are not. Economists deny their subjects the distinctively human capacities and dispositions that I describe in Part One of the book – above all to endorse and be moved by ideals that determine the reason-giving force of other considerations – and insist instead that they think and choose according to the neoclassical version of the Rational Choice model. All this, as I hope to make clear, is far from being a merely academic matter.

In Part Three of the book, and with further help from T. M. Scanlon’s account of moral motivation and *What We Owe to Each Other*, I bring the general argument of Part One to bear on a topic that is fundamental for all the social sciences, namely whether, why, and when people will do their part in mutually advantageous cooperative endeavors. I believe the norm of fair reciprocity must play a central role in our understanding of these things, but not in the way proposed by economists and other Rational Choice theorists. They have recently come to recognize that people seem to cooperate more often than is predicted or explained on Rational Choice assumptions (in one-shot Prisoners’ Dilemma games, for example) and that people seem to be disposed to conform to a norm of fair reciprocity. But in trying to explain why this is so, they have once again resorted to

the standard model according to which choice is always, in effect, the outcome of a competition of unstructured, comparable desires. On the Rational Choice account, cooperation and noncooperation are *both* explained by the balance of benefits and costs; there is only one sort of motivation at work. If people are recognized as caring about the fairness of outcomes, this is represented as just another desire or preference, to be balanced against other desires in a utility function. Or it is assumed that the norm of reciprocity or fairness plays the role merely of a shared belief that enables people to coordinate their actions to select an equilibrium – helping each person to maximize his utility in the light of what he expects others to do. In either case, the norm has no motivating power of its own. The essential characteristic of a norm – its normativity – is therefore ignored or assumed away. I shall argue instead that, *first*, doing your part in a cooperative endeavor (from which you will benefit even if you do not contribute) is a part of most people’s normative self-understanding, and that the norm of fair reciprocity therefore provides, in the right conditions, a motivating reason to act, one that structures or modulates other reasons for or against doing your part in cooperative endeavors; but *second*, this moral motivation can be deactivated or demobilized and replaced by Rational Choosing when people are not recognized as fully human beings – beings with the capacities and dispositions I described in Part One – but are instead treated as if they were in fact specimens of *Homo economicus*, radically asocial animals manipulable or movable only by incentives. (In other words – I am not denying – people *sometimes* act like *Homo economicus*.)

Readers familiar with the work of the philosophers Thomas Nagel, Bernard Williams, Joseph Raz, Elizabeth Anderson, and T. M. Scanlon and the criminologist John Braithwaite will recognize my special debt to them. For many years I practiced what I here attack. But almost from the beginning I had my doubts. For a while my response to these doubts was a version of the argument that Rational Choice theory applied only in certain domains, or only to certain sorts of choices, essentially those in which a great deal – in terms of the benefits and costs specified in the explanation in question – turns on the individual’s choice. But, if it is not a tautology, this argument is shown to be wrong by examples of the kind I discuss in Part One, and

the general argument I make there implies that it is beside the point. For some years I spent much of my time seeking out and thinking about difficult cases for the Rational Choice approach, even while continuing to defend it (in a retrenched domain). It was not until, belatedly, I came to see the sometimes devastating consequences (for human lives, for communities and cultures, and for the natural environment) of government decisions made on the assumption that people think and choose in the way assumed by economists and other Rational Choice theorists that I decided I should write this book. But in finding my way out of the Rational Choice way of thinking, I was helped enormously by the work of the philosophers I have mentioned, and the form in which I now express my views derives largely from their work. (They are not, of course, to be blamed for anything here. Nor is anyone else mentioned in this Preface.) I was helped too, at an early stage, by another philosopher, Michael Smith, who kindly took some time, while I was a visitor at the Australian National University, to introduce me to the arguments for and against the (neo-) Humean theory of motivation, of which he is perhaps the most able defender.

Originally this book included a short essay on some novels of Patrick White, especially *The Solid Mandala*. His work has been important to me. I have learned as much about identity and integrity from his writings as from anyone's.

I have many other debts. It is a little embarrassing for me to realize that I first tried out an earlier and eventually rejected version of some of the arguments presented here in a public seminar on commitment, identity, and rationality that I gave at the University of Washington as long ago as early 1991. In the same year I had interesting discussions with several members of the Tribal Council of the Yakama Nation (in Washington State) and I am most grateful to them. (Those discussions left me uncertain about the motivations at work in the Council decision that I had gone to talk with them about, a decision of a kind I discuss in the first chapter that follows, and so I decided not to include any account of it here.) In the following school year, gratefully spent at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, I divided my time between doing Rational Choice explanation and thinking about what was wrong with it and whether I could go on defending it. Soon after that I had interesting and useful

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discussions with a group of people who were fighting to prevent the mountain they lived around – Buckhorn Mountain in north central Washington – from being taken apart by a multinational corporation bent on developing a cyanide leach-heap gold mine there; they were most hospitable and their company most enjoyable. Some of the arguments here I tried out at a conference in Stockholm and at a seminar in the sociology department at the University of Stockholm; at both of them I received useful comments, especially from Richard Swedberg. The argument I make here about cooperation in hierarchies and an earlier version of the argument about the activation and deactivation of the norm of fair reciprocity went into a paper entitled “Good Government: On Hierarchy, Social Capital, and the Limitations of Rational Choice Theory,” which was eventually published in the *Journal of Political Philosophy*, and I am grateful to the publisher of that journal for allowing me to use a few paragraphs of my article. A draft of that article was circulated at a conference on social capital convened at Cape Cod in 1994 by Robert Putnam; I had some useful discussions about it with several participants, particularly Jane Mansbridge. It was also presented around that time to a conference at the Center in Political Economy at Washington University.

I am grateful for their help to Julius Kincs and Xila MacLeod and to several other people in and around Alto in Portugal whose names I did not learn and especially to Robin Jenkins, who did the study of Alto that I discuss in the first chapter. I discussed my visit to Alto and made some of the arguments presented in this book at a seminar in the School of Economic and Social Studies at the University of East Anglia (at Norwich in England). I thank Edwin Lyon, archeologist at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ regional office in New Orleans (assertively built right on a levee of the Mississippi), and Kirsten Lahlum, Librarian at the Corps’ regional office in Portland, Oregon, for helpful discussions and for making documents available to me. I am grateful to the many people, not already mentioned, whose writings I have put to work (I hope without distortion) for my own purposes – especially John Berger, Boyce Richardson, Wendy Espeland, and Edward Lazarus. I hope I have made all due acknowledgments in my notes. And lastly, I thank the people who have discussed this work with me or commented on earlier versions of all

or parts of the book, especially John Braithwaite, Gardner Brown, Eugene Hunn, Jim Scott, Sara Singleton, Eric Alden Smith, and, most of all, Alan Carling. To Alan Carling I owe many improvements to my text, though I fear I have not adequately met all of his penetrating challenges to my argument. To Gardner Brown I would like to say that if the cost-benefit analyses that have been used to justify many of the large dams and other projects in the United States had been conducted by him, the world would be a better place. (See the chapter on him – “Dr. Brown Flies the Eel” – in Ted Simon’s book, *The River Stops Here*.)

I have learned from many people, and I thank them all.