

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-14202-2 - Sour Grapes: Studies in the subversion of rationality

Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## Sour Grapes

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-14202-2 - Sour Grapes: Studies in the subversion of rationality

Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-14202-2 - Sour Grapes: Studies in the subversion of rationality

Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

**Sour Grapes**  
Studies in the subversion of rationality



JON ELSTER



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-14202-2 - Sour Grapes: Studies in the subversion of rationality

Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781316507001](http://www.cambridge.org/9781316507001)

© Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and Cambridge University Press 1983

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1983

First paperback edition 1985

Reprinted 1987 (twice), 1991, 1993, 1996

Cambridge Philosophy Classics edition 2016

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data*

Names: Elster, Jon, 1940– author.

Title: Sour grapes: studies in the subversion of rationality / Jon Elster.

Description: New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. | Originally published: New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015048617 | ISBN 9781107142022 (Hardback: alk. paper) | ISBN 9781316507001 (Paperback: alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Irrationalism (Philosophy) | Rationalism.

Classification: LCC B824.2 .E45 2016 | DDC 128/.33–dc23 LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015048617>

ISBN 978-1-107-14202-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-316-50700-1 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

# Contents



<i>Preface to this edition</i> RICHARD HOLTON	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Preface and acknowledgements</i>	ix
I Rationality	1
I.1 Introduction	1
I.2 Individual rationality: the thin theory	2
I.3 Individual rationality: the broad theory	15
I.4 Collective rationality: the thin theory	26
I.5 Collective rationality: the broad theory	33
II States that are essentially by-products	43
II.1 Introduction	43
II.2 Willing what cannot be willed	44
II.3 Technologies for self-management	52
II.4 Commands	60
II.5 Trying to impress	66
II.6 Faking	71
II.7 Choice and intention in art	78
II.8 The impotence of power	86
II.9 Self-defeating political theories	91
II.10 The obsessional search for meaning	101
III Sour grapes	110
III.1 Introduction	110
III.2 A conceptual map	112
III.3 Power, freedom and welfare	126
III.4 Sour grapes and social choice	134
IV Belief, bias and ideology	142
IV.1 Introduction	142
IV.2 Situation-induced beliefs	144
IV.3 Interest-induced beliefs	149
IV.4 The benefits of bias	158
<i>References</i>	168
<i>Index</i>	179

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-14202-2 - Sour Grapes: Studies in the subversion of rationality

Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-14202-2 - Sour Grapes: Studies in the subversion of rationality

Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Preface to this edition

RICHARD HOLTON



On a familiar picture, you act rationally when you act to satisfy your desires. But sometimes the action and the desire interfere with each other in ways that make such a picture unstable. Presenting such problem cases is what *Sour Grapes* is about.

One problem arises when the desired end is something that cannot be aimed at without defeating that end. Stendhal wanted to be natural and the Dadaists wanted to be spontaneous, but one can't succeed in either by trying. Here the problem is conceptual. In other cases it is causal. We might have been the kind of creatures who could fall asleep by trying to do so, but for most of us, certainly for most insomniacs, trying makes things worse. Other cases live in some difficult in-between zone. Can one try to relax? Can one try to be modest?

Our problem is illustrated, though slightly inaccurately, by the title case. Desperately hungry, but unable to reach the grapes that hang above him, the fox declares them sour. They are not sour, so the fox is making a mistake. But he might instead have simply ceased to desire them, or, better still, have formed the positive desire not to eat them. Then he would be making no mistake, but his desire would be satisfied. We would have what Elster calls, in what has become the standard term, an *adaptive preference*: a desire that has adapted to what is available.

How should we think of such desires? If all that matters is satisfying one's desires, then changing the desire so that it fits the world should be just as good as changing the world so that it fits the desire. Perhaps sometimes it is. Stoic or Buddhist strategies that involve a meta-desire to have desires that fit the world seem to involve perfectly rational character planning. But the fox is no Buddhist. He simply has a blind causal mechanism – a *drive*, as Elster terms it, something that works 'behind his back' – that pulls his desires into accord with the world. In such a case rationality seems not to get a purchase. Moreover, Elster insists, the utilitarian theory that it's right to satisfy agents' desires fails here on two counts. First, it doesn't tell us what we should do, since if, at the limit, agents have infinitely adaptive preferences, then whatever we do will satisfy them. And, second, it just isn't intuitively right that satisfying an

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-14202-2 - *Sour Grapes: Studies in the subversion of rationality*

Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

adaptive preference is good enough; the fox would have done better if we'd given him the grapes, notwithstanding his ability to make the best of things.

All this is presented with a vast range of examples. In recent years it has become common for philosophers of action to know something of psychology. Elster was there many years ago, but the discussion draws equally on history, on economics and on literature. Despite the influence that it has had, *Sour Grapes* is a source book that is only beginning to be explored.



## Preface and acknowledgements



An action is the outcome of a choice within constraints. The choice, according to the orthodox view, embodies an element of freedom, the constraints one of necessity. In non-standard cases, however, these equations do not hold. The title of an earlier book on rational and irrational behaviour, *Ulysses and the Sirens*, is a reminder that men sometimes are free to choose their own constraints. *Sour Grapes* conversely reflects the idea that the preferences underlying a choice may be shaped by the constraints. Considered together, these two non-standard phenomena are sufficiently important to suggest that the orthodox theory is due for fundamental revision.

The present book, then, supplements my earlier work. To some extent it also corrects what I now see as an overly enthusiastic application of the idea that men can choose their own character. The chapter on states that are essentially by-products suggests that there are limits to what may be achieved by character planning. There is hubris in the view that one can be the master of one's soul – just as there is an intellectual fallacy in the view that everything that comes about by action can also be brought about by action.

The book is also an attempt to spell out some strands in the complex notions of rationality, intentionality and optimality. Some of the issues raised in this connection are more fully discussed in my *Explaining Technical Change*. This holds in particular for the analysis of functional explanation.

My first acknowledgement is to G. A. Cohen, who has commented extensively and intensively on successive drafts of Chapters II, III and IV. Without his ability to force me out of a congenial intellectual laziness, the level of argument would have been much lower. Next, I want to thank the members of a Working Group on Rationality, set up under the auspices of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, for helpful discussion and constant inspiration. In particular my gratitude goes to Brian Barry, Donald Davidson, Dagfinn Føllesdal, Robert Goodin, Serge Kolm, Amélie Rorty, Amos Tversky and Bernard Williams. Finally I should mention what will be obvious to any reader – my immense intellectual debt to

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-14202-2 - Sour Grapes: Studies in the subversion of rationality

Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

the outstanding work by Paul Veyne, *Le Pain et le Cirque*. In addition I want to make the following acknowledgements with regard to individual chapters. My ideas about collective rationality in Chapter I have been shaped in numerous discussions with Aanund Hylland, Rune Slagstad and the other participants in the project 'Democracy and Social Planning' set up by the Norwegian Research Council for the Humanities. An earlier, much briefer and somewhat confused version of Chapter II first appeared in *Social Sciences Information*, 1981. I am grateful to Elina Almasy for her editorial help, and to Wolf Lepenies for his useful comments. A slightly different version of Chapter III appeared in A. Sen and B. Williams (eds.), *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge University Press, 1982). I received valuable comments on drafts of that version from the editors of the volume; also from Herman van Gunsteren, Martin Hollis, John Roemer and Arthur Stinchcombe. Chapter IV appeared – also in a somewhat different form – in M. Hollis and S. Lukes (eds.), *Rationality and Relativism* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1982). I am grateful to Martin Hollis for his editorial suggestions.

The University of Oslo, the Norwegian Research Council for the Humanities, the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and All Souls College, Oxford have also contributed materially to the writing of the book.