

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

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