Rational and moral action: a critical survey of rational choice theory

de Jonge, J.P.R.

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PART III

HOW TO CHOOSE?
INTRODUCTION

In the Parts I and II I assumed that ends were given. I do not longer hold this assumption in Part III. This means they are no longer taken for granted. Why not?

When the actions of agents are firmly focused on the promotion of well-being, either their own or that of others, then those actions are justified and nothing needs to be said about them. But actions do not always promote the well-being of the agent and they can have negative effects on the well-being of other agents. In cases like this agents are challenged to reflect on their actions and to justify what they did. There are also situations in which the justifying question forces itself on the agent. Self-care, for instance, can confront an agent with a counter-preferential choice when his well-being on the long term conflicts with his present aims (the addicted smoker who knows he should stop). The agent may also be concerned about the way he realizes a particular state of affairs, which means that process and end or means and ends are intertwined. The agent has a process-nonseparable preference. Agents may, moreover, be sensitive to the normative expectations of other agents and feel that they have to conform to rules or moral norms.
The issues that are discussed in the first three chapters are all closely connected to the question: “can actions be justified in a somewhat objective way”. To answer this question we have to take a position concerning the authority of normative judgments and the objectivity of value judgments. Moreover we have to assume that reasons are substantiate judgments that can be motivating (though denying that they inevitably must be motivating). I discuss two opposing views concerning the authority of moral norms, moral subjectivism or skepticism and moral objectivism, in chapter XV. The issue is whether moral and non-moral ends are on equal footing; or, to put it differently, are moral norms categorical or only hypothetical imperatives for action. The arguments of subjectivists is a counterfactual one: were moral norms authoritative then obeying them would be a categorical imperative, but since most people do not obey them on every occasion, this shows that they are only hypothetical imperatives. The counterargument is that people are necessitated to act from moral reasons, not determined to act from them.

In chapter XVI the issue is how agents can justify their actions. There are two ways in which actions could be justified. First, an acquired object or a resulting state of affairs has properties that constitute reasons to value it. Second, the process to realize an outcome is what makes an action justified. The process is part of the consequences (or colours the consequences) that are ascribed to the state of affairs that result from the action. The action adds symbolic utility to the substantive utility that covers its consequences.

In the Humean theory of motivation only desires can motivate an agent to undertake an action. But desires, alone, cannot justify an action. The question to be discussed in chapter VII is the question whether the reasons that could justify an action, can also motivate the agent. This discussion brings us to two conceptions of reason. Were reason to be

243 In a desire- or preference-based approach justification derives from the fact that the agent wants something, but in a value-based approach from facts about what she wants.
understood as ‘cause’, then it would cause the action. Only internal reasons (i.e., desires) are reasons in this sense. External reasons, i.e., objective reasons, as if articulated by an outsider, are not. But they are reasons in a second sense; they have a recommending force. They may not necessarily be always motivating, but sometimes they will.

The essential difference between theories of practical reasoning is whether cognitive states are allowed next to connative states within the motivational set. What divides the Humean and the non-Humean approaches is, whether, given a wide scope of the subjective motivational set, the emergence of a reason for action that would justify the action must always be supported by a prior desire according to the 'desire out-desire in' principle. I suggest we adopt a more general approach of practical reason in which it is accepted that agents are motivated in different sorts of ways by different considerations in different circumstances. We should accept that desires sometimes are essential parts of the motivating state (unmotivated desires) and that desires sometimes only denote a state of being motivated (motivated desires).

My aim in chapter XVIII is to show that the concept of a moral preference is not tenable and that we should replace it by the concept of a (moral) meta-preference. For an action to count as 'moral' it is not just a question of "what to do' but also a matter of "how to do it", for instance, to act in a fair way, to be polite, to be generous and so on. One can only assess the moral quality of an action by comparing states of affairs including the action that led to the result. In other words, the characteristics of the process leading to the outcome have to be incorporated in the evaluation of the resulting state of affairs. This means that the moral character of an action cannot be consequentially assessed because this comparison over states of affairs violates the independence axiom. Taking the action into account conflicts also with consequentialism in another way, for consequences should only refer to what has happened not to what has been done.

In rational choice theory moral behavior is instrumental to non-moral ends. Instrumental moral behavior, like
prudential behavior, does not conflict with an agent's well-being. But a concern for a common cause or a principled preference can violate the relation between choice and well-being and the idea of self-goal choice. In terms of rational choice theory it must be irrational to commit oneself to a cause, how honorable it may seem when it does not further the agent interests. For this reason the concept of commitment that I discuss in chapter XIX cannot be accommodated in rational choice theory. The question that needs to be answered is in what way rational choice theory has to be modified in order that the concept of commitment can be incorporated. First, self-regard and rationality have to be disconnected. Furthermore, it must either be assumed that agents can act on external reasons or that they join forces and act as a collective. Collective agency is not allowed by methodological individualism, but within an institutional approach to rational choice theory it is admitted that agents frame their decisions in we-terms. I suggest, moreover, adopting Sen's proposal to distinguish between a well-being and an agency-aspect of choice when evaluating actions. This distinction is relevant because well-being does not cover anything that matters to the agent.

We need a more general approach to rational choice behavior, which combines desire-based and reason-based motivations, which accepts notions as 'collective agency' and 'collective intentions' and substitutes methodological individualism for institutional individualism. In chapter XX I summarize the modifications of traditional rational choice theory that are needed to enable it to accommodate a non-instrumental theory of moral action. This is a follow-up of the modifications I proposed in chapter XIV in order to turn rational choice theory into an institutional theory of choice behavior.