

Reason and Rationality

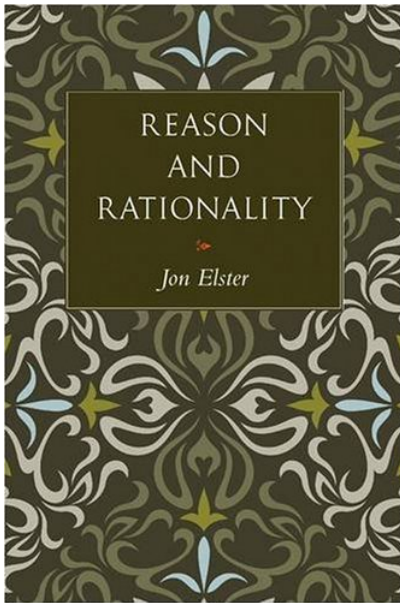
Elster, Jon

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Jon Elster, one of the foremost contemporary social scientists, over the past decades, has left his mark on the development of the 'grand theme' of human behaviour. *Reason and Rationality* offers a comprehensive but also frugal overview of his work. There is good reason to expect that the influence of the *Elsterian* programme (as it could be defined) continues to be significant, as its approach has become extremely useful within many social sciences, from sociology to social psychology. This short book, a translation from the French of Jon Elster's inaugural lecture at *Collège de France* (June, 1st, 2006), offers a synthesis of the main building blocks of his work, dating from *Logic and Society* (1978) to *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1979), *Sour Grapes* (1983), and *Ulysses Unbound* (2000).

In his typically straightforward style, Elster sums up the interplay of beliefs, desires, emotions and information processing. These are considered determinants of human action in an analysis that moves forward from the lack of predictiveness of rational choice in the standard *homo oeconomicus* version. His observation goes far beyond a mere critic of scarce realism.

Unreality could be the price to pay for a comprehensive deductive theoretical method. However, social sciences that go to the heart of human behaviour cannot embrace a standard rationale that has little or no empirical (or experimental) evidence to support it. Furthermore, according to Elster, rational choice has failed to explain the extremely relevant "reasons" behind the comprehension of human behaviour. In order to understand this notion, Elster uses a trans-disciplinary perspective that aims to fill this gap in the assumptions of standard rational choice.

Putting the concept of "reason" centre stage, leads us to consider desires and beliefs as the focal mental state of rational human action. This is because people try to satisfy their desires "as well as possible", as a result of their actions. The truth of the matter is that desires can be incoherent not only pragmatically but also intrinsically, which means that their inner constitution prevents them from being successful. In the case of inter-temporal choices for example, the way in which people discount time seems to be hyperbolic rather than simply exponential in that individuals chose an option as it becomes available even though they originally considered it less desirable than a more remote one with a higher expectational value.

Biases or heuristics involved can be related both to individuals' perception of an option's feasibility and to causal relationships made by people when assigning a value to a possible course of action. Moreover, more psychological explanations can be used to set the *phenomenon* straight, i.e., the so called "weakness of will", which affects behaviour and the decision making stage of choice. What various scholars have pointed out and Elster has synthesised, is the difference shown by individuals

in viewing the world and the 'self'. At this point it is appropriate to cite Seneca, who provides an interesting philosophical point of view of some Elster's considerations.

Elster dwells a lot upon the nature of beliefs by enlightening psychological and emotive phenomena that systematically influence human behaviour. Hot biases (motivational) are focused to clarify how individuals, frequently without any factual rationalization, tend to believe in both fears and desires. It is worth emphasising the role of "wishful thinking" in setting the overall individual belief system. Cold biases (illusions), on the other hand, are thought to be essential in explaining people's fallacy in reasoning, in regard to evidence used to motivate a choice (just think of the belief in the accuracy of divination).

Here, Elster insists upon the role of information as a variable for pure rational agents, emphasizing the characteristics of the planning process (sometimes similar to a vicious cycle) of decision makers after trying to estimate the costs and benefits of research. There is no psychological and economic evidence to show that this process is driven by an optimality-type method, or any rational considerations. This brings Elster close to the "bounded rationality" perspective, at the same time setting the stage for further advancements. The author sweeps through a wide range of scientific fields, for example when showing the importance of the so called "non-indirection principle" This mechanism occurs where an initial first action is carried out instrumentally in order to realize a second one.

Elster shows that people do not perform in two stages when they could do so in just one, due to not only rational but also emotional choices. He gives a simple example, i.e., a (hypothetical) solution of eliminating guilt which hinders a goal being achieved would be refused really due to its 'blaming' nature. Such a principle, which sounds both rational and emotional, is often disregarded by individuals when an action is framed differently (e.g., Elster quotes the behaviour of German and Norwegian employees "who are too proud to accept public subsidies for their salaries, but who accept being allowed to pay a lower electricity rate for the sole purpose of maintaining employment").

By means of frequent and eclectic examples, he underlines the role of adaptive and counter-adaptive preferences in rounding off the BDI scheme and to explain behaviour that rational action cannot. Emotions are a considerable part of this scheme since they affect all four of its foundations. Elster resorts to a famous Stendhal's opera, *On Love* (Stendhal's syndrome is a psychosomatic illness causing rapid heartbeat and more generally emotional disorder) and explains that when emotions arise from sentiments a person's "imagination becomes reality".

Behind this apparently obvious sentence, Elster shows how emotions influence beliefs and people's mental representation of reality. Moreover, emotions may become fundamental as they arrange urgency for certain actions while deferring others. Elster however, emphasises that urgency is a different sentimental condition compared to impatience, which leads to immediate returns instead of delayed ones. On the other hand, urgency affecting information acquisition might become indispensable in cases when lingering too much could be dangerous. Desires and motivation are central in Elster's scheme, as the latter is certainly essential and more embedded in individuals' personality, while the former could also be driven by self-interest estimation.

The theoretical framework summed up by the author is the ideal reference point for social scientists referring to methodological individualism. It is frugal but rigorous, plain but not simplistic. However, the reader should be warned against the temptation of considering Elster's theory a simple derivation of folk psychology. Elster's trans-disciplinary approach, (from philosophy of language

to neuro-psychology), addresses issues that cannot be appropriately understood by viewing human action just from each individual perspective.

So, is Elster's approach useful for simulating social phenomena from the bottom-up? There are two main arguments for this. Firstly, Elster's synthesis takes into account mechanisms that influence humans' real decision making processes. A researcher could go deeper into them or be more superficial, but cannot ignore their role in explaining interactions amongst individuals. Secondly, it provides a sort of toolbox to explore both intentional and unintentional behavior that can be considered as practical means to arrange action starting from any connection between its constituent. In my opinion, these two points make this book of paramount interest for computational social scientists.

This book can either be considered a useful guide for readers who are first approaching methodological individualism (in which case no particular attention is required), or a reference for researchers who are interested in dissecting relations and *phenomena* essential for human behaviour. For the purpose of social simulation researchers, the second approach is more dominant and can bring great advantages.