

VARIETIES OF RATIONALITY

Michael Taylor: *Rationality and the Ideology of Disconnection* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. xvii, 218. \$75.00; \$26.99, paper.)

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This is an excellent and enjoyable book despite the fact that it is not exactly what it purports to be. Taylor describes his book as “an attack on Rational Choice theory” (54 and *passim*), but this is not quite right. It is rather an attack on three different, albeit to some extent related, ideas.

The first, and the most extensively examined, is the idea that human beings are generally motivated to act only by self-interest, where this is usually understood as the efficient satisfaction of self-regarding, materialistic desires. Among philosophers and others, this tendency is often referred to as the doctrine of “psychological egoism.” Psychological egoism is clearly invalid. It is false, first, because people often have (and often act on) desires that are neither self-regarding nor materialistic. Consider envy, for example: sometimes people have a desire that the rich and powerful get their comeuppance, and, indeed, they sometimes act on this desire even when there is nothing in it for themselves. People also sometimes desire that their society be more just, that wilderness areas be preserved, that their family farm not be sold to a developer for any price, that those guilty of crimes be punished (even when this will not have a deterrent effect), that the Navajo language not die out, and so on. Given the opportunity, people are at least as likely to act on desires like these, if they have them, as they are to act on desires that are self-interested in the narrow sense.

Psychological egoism is also invalid because it offers a deeply misleading and simplistic explanation of human action. It holds, roughly speaking, that people will do whatever makes them happiest, and that what makes them happiest is satisfying whatever desires they happen to have. The bulk of Taylor's book (chapters 1, 2, and 5 through 8) consists of an attack on this aspect of psychological egoism. It is also the most interesting and valuable part of the book—less in terms of its originality than in terms of its effectiveness in synthesizing the work of others in philosophy and experimental social science, together with some fascinating case stories drawn from unusual sources, to form an attractive and convincing alternative to psychological egoism. Briefly, Taylor argues that through our various attachments and experiences, we form structured, personal narratives—what he terms “identities”—and that our identities, in turn, supply reasons for acting in particular ways under particular circumstances. In many cases, these are “desire-independent” reasons, in the sense that people often act with the belief that they have a reason for doing something, even when they do not want to act specifically in that way. To the extent that desires are even relevant here, we might say that people typically desire doing what they believe they have good reasons to do, and not the other way around.

The second and third ideas attacked in Taylor's book are given less attention. Chapter 3 offers a critical discussion of cost-benefit analysis, and especially its reliance on the method of contingent valuation as estimated in willingness-to-pay surveys. This discussion is connected with the main theme of the book because cost-benefit analysis assumes that what counts from a normative political point of view is the degree to which people's desires are (or, in some cases, could be) satisfied. Moral and political philosophers usually refer to this idea as “welfarism,” and it is a component of utilitarianism, among other theories. Chapter 4 discusses a third idea—roughly, that all social interactions ought to be organized, so far as possible, on the model of markets. This idea is familiar in many different contexts: the solution to the problem of environmental protection is to create markets for environmental goods; the law ought to be calibrated so as to maximize social wealth; and so on. For want of a better term, let us call this view “market idealism.” In the middle two chapters, Taylor does a nice job of surveying the most important issues, and he contributes many interesting illustrations of the dangers inherent in unreflectively endorsing either view. His relatively brief discussion, however, cannot be expected to do justice to (much less advance) the enormous and complex literatures existing on either topic.

Though often confused with one another, psychological egoism, welfarism, and market idealism are, in fact, logically distinct ideas. One need not, for example, accept psychological egoism simply because one is a welfarist. Thomas Hobbes, for example, did not. He found it endlessly exasperating that his contemporaries persisted in acting against their manifest self-interest—going to war merely because they held differing views about life after death, and so on. If only people would be more self-interested, he thought, the

general welfare might be greatly improved. Though some combinations of these three ideas might be less plausible than others, no possible combination is, strictly speaking, inconsistent. Neither are any necessary components of rational choice theory properly understood. Psychological egoism, welfarism, and market idealism are certainly connected to rational choice theory, but only in the contingent sense that practitioners of rational choice theory often (though not always) happen also to believe that some, and perhaps all, are true.

Like many people—including, apparently, Taylor himself—some practitioners of rational choice theory believe there is some necessarily logical connection between rational choice theory and some (or all) of the ideas discussed. There is not. Properly understood, the theory of rational choice is merely a bundle of modeling tools for unpacking the complex and causal mechanisms connecting large-scale social phenomena. To use these tools, one need not assume that psychological egoism, for instance, is true. One need only assume that, for the purposes of explaining whatever large-scale social phenomena we are interested in explaining, individuals will generally act in ways that can be concisely summarized as a utility function. Usually, though not quite always, this is the case, regardless of why (psychologically speaking) specific individuals act as they do. The invalidity of psychological egoism would only be a problem for rational choice theory if its point were to explain individual behavior. Fortunately, it is not. The point of rational choice theory is to explain large-scale social phenomena by showing how they can arise from aggregated individual behavior under constrained choice. For example, rational choice theory helps explain Duverger's Law by showing how the number of effective parties is the upshot of many individual voters making decisions under the constraints imposed by district magnitude. This explanation is not compromised by the falsity of psychological egoism, nor is it any less interesting if one happens to reject (as I do) welfarism and market idealism.

As a critique of welfarism, market idealism, and (especially) psychological egoism, Taylor's *Rationality and the Ideology of Disconnection* is valuable and rewarding. I strongly recommend it on these terms. In terms of its stated aim of attacking the theory of rational choice, however, it misses its mark.

—Frank Lovett