

THE MEANING(S) OF STRUCTURAL RATIONALITY

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Abstract

Julian Nida-Rümelin's philosophical approach to rationality is radical: It transcends the reductive narrowness of instrumental rationality without denying its practical impact. Actions exist which are carried out in accordance to utility maximizing or even self-interest maximizing. Yet not all actions are to be understood in these terms. Actions that are oriented around social roles, for example, cannot count as irrational just because no underlying maximizing heuristics are found. The concept of bounded rationality tries to embed instrumental rationality into a form of life to highlight limits of our cognitive capabilities and selective perceptions. However, the agent is still situated within the realm of cost-benefit reasoning. The idea of social preferences (e.g. Rabin, Febr and Schmidt) or meta-preferences (Sen) is insufficient to reflect the plurality of human actions. According to Nida-Rümelin, those concepts ignore the plurality of reasons which drive agency. Hence, they try to fit agency into a theory which undermines humanity. His theory of structural rationality acknowledges daily patterns of interaction and meaning.

In philosophy, questions about rationality and its normative character can be situated within two theoretical debates which have largely evolved separately from each other. First, rationality is a central topic in the philosophy of action. Prominent authors such as Thomas Scanlon, Christine Korsgaard, Michael Bratman or Joseph Raz have debated why we should be rational, how rationality constrains our beliefs, intentions and attitudes, or whether we have any reason to be rational at all. Second, rationality is a central concept in the discussion of so-called rational choice theory (RCT) in economics and classic game theory. A central question, which most authors in these areas answer affirmatively, is whether rationality is purely instrumental or whether there are forms of rationality which cannot be explained by this standard model. According to the standard model, rationality is nothing more than a tool to find the best means to one's end(s).

This text serves two purposes. First, we present Julian Nida-Rümelin's work on the concept of "structural rationality", which expands the instrumental model without denying its importance. Thus, he also criticizes theories of reason which neglect or ignore the importance of instrumentality in various aspects. We argue that his model of rationality is philosophically superior to

both the dominant traditions in contemporary theories of action and rational choice.

Julian Nida-Rümelin's approach explains phenomena like rules-commitment strategies, cooperation and collective action using the formal framework of rational choice (which is difficult for many approaches). His approach is the only theory that takes into account what advocates of rational choice theories *as well as* the theorists in philosophy of action have to say, and which brings these two – hitherto separate – discussions together.

We support our hypothesis, by, second, comparing Nida-Rümelin's account of structural rationality with the most prominent approaches to (structural) rationality in Anglo-Saxon philosophy and rational choice theory. We will show that most theorists have a more limited and simpler view than Nida-Rümelin's, because they often only focus on short-term, instrumental and individualist forms of rationality. They thus disregard two important considerations. First, they fail to see that the critical arguments that are brought forward against rational choice theory also apply to their theories. Second, they are unable to explain various and diverse forms of action and decision-making: cooperation, collective action, actions and practices that have intrinsic value (friendship, enjoying arts, sports), long-term decisions etc. We will point out that Michael Bratman's account of rationality and, to some extent, Joseph Raz's are the only approaches that are able to address some of these problems, even though they overemphasize the individualist perspective. These are the reasons why we believe that it is highly worthwhile to engage more with Nida-Rümelin's account, which is inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein, Immanuel Kant and Aristotle.

In what follows, we give an overview of Nida-Rümelin's account by showing how it differs from the term "Structural Rationality" as it is used in Anglo-Saxon philosophy of action and the concept of rational choice in economic theory. We highlight how Nida-Rümelin's theory of structural rationality transcends these limitations of these two approaches and also bridges the gap between them.

In philosophy of action, the expression "structural rationality" is commonly ascribed to Thomas Scanlon (2007). Nida-Rümelin had already used the term earlier, in his works on rationality written in German (most notably in Nida-Rümelin 2001). It is also important to highlight that the Scanlonian use of the term diverges strikingly from Nida-Rümelin's, since the phenomenon it describes differs in scope and meaning. It should rather be called, as Scanlon does, the phenomenon of "structural irrationality" (Scanlon 2007, p. 84). Scanlon and other philosophical theorists of action – for instance Bratman or Broome – examine it as the problem that some people fail to have their attitudes com-

bined coherently, and thus structures, in a rational way. Thus, irrationality is not only located within one or several particular attitudes, but also in their combination or rather arrangement *as such*. These authors thus claim that it is irrational to combine certain attitudes. Let us take the following example to illustrate this (Langlois 2014): You intend to spend the weekend with your family while simultaneously intending to complete your new manuscript by Sunday. You also believe that both of these goals are achievable. Intuitively, a person truly intending both things *at the same time* makes a mistake of rationality, which cannot be attributed to the content of these intentions. Hence, the structure of the set of attitudes is irrational. This explanation of irrationality is to be understood formally. Conversely, the authors that espouse this theory hold, there must be structural requirements of rationality that create a normative demand on how people are supposed to combine their attitudes. Several questions arise from this conceptualization and the theory of rationality that lies beneath it. Most fundamentally, there is the issue how standards of rationality have normative power over us. Does the tenet that a certain combination of attitudes is irrational have normative traction? If so, how does it have to be characterized? What are the requirements for structural rationality of this kind? Obviously, they are located in conditions of coherence and consistency (Langlois 2014). Hence, one of the most fundamental questions regarding the conceptualization of structural (ir)rationality pertains to the rules that determine in which way attitudes of an agent should be combined and arranged.

For Scanlon and his followers, rationality is of instrumental character in the way David Hume described it, i.e. it pertains to the relationship between the means and ends for an action. Take again the example we just described: the protagonist has two goals (writing an essay and spending time with her family). Neither of them is irrational per se, since either can be achievable within the means of the author. Also they are not in principle incompatible or contradictory in relation to each other. Yet, there is something problematic in holding them both at the same time, because they seem to be in tension with each other. It is, at the very least, very difficult to reach both of these goals simultaneously in the manner planned, if we confine the idea of rationality to an instrumental, subjectivist one as Scanlon et al. do. We cannot criticize the goals or the reasons behind them as irrational, since rationality is a matter of picking suitable means for one's particular goal, e.g. finding time and space to write the paper if you want to write a paper or finding the right means of transport of reaching one's family. Viewing attitudes in this isolated and individualist way thus gives us no ground to criticize either the goals behind them or the way that they relate to each other, because this would transcend the standard instrumental, indi-

vidualist model of rationality. What remains is to look at the ways that agents combine their attitudes, intentions and reasons. This, however, begs several questions, e.g. what kind of requirements regulate the combinations or where the normative traction of these requirements comes from.

Nida-Rümelin avoids these difficulties, since he neither assumes that rationality is purely and only instrumental nor that intentions and reasons or rather goals are merely subjective. For Nida-Rümelin, the structures that people adopt can be objective, and the sources of reason are plural, and also dependent on the *Lebensform* that people are embedded in. In our orientation to adopt and follow structures, we agents do more than simply look for the best means based on reasons and intentions that relate to mere subjective and current goals.

To illustrate this, consider the following example: Imagine a father watching his son falling and hurting himself. The father hurries to his son's side and immediately consoles him. What is his reason for acting in this case? What is his goal? The father acts because he is a father. He is doing this because consoling is part of a father-son-relationship: it is an essential part of such a relationship to help and be empathic. He does not need to have a specific, subjective reason or goal, like, say, that his son thanks him or that he will stop crying. This may be part of his motivation, but it does not tell the whole story. Actually, a father does not have to find a specific reason at all in this situation. Being a father can be a sufficient reason for action. This way of reason generating cannot be fully explained by the individualist and instrumental models of rationality.

Nida-Rümelin also diverges from the model of rationality explained above in several other ways. While he accepts Scanlon's and Korsgaard's understanding of practical rationality as the capability of following a rule that allows us to arrange practical reasons coherently, Nida-Rümelin emphasizes that any action – regardless of its reasons – must be Ramsey-coherent.

Nida-Rümelin, however, rejects that the rule, according to which attitudes, desires, obligations etc. are aligned to, can be formulated in one way only: either as a universalizing maxim (e.g. Christine Korsgaard 1996), consequentialist (e.g. homo oeconomicus-models, Garry Becker 1976), virtues (e.g. Phillipa Foot) social role principles (*homo sociologicus*-models). To arrange the plurality of our practical reasons, we need more than just one standard, and this is exactly the point where Nida-Rümelin's approach comes into play.

Furthermore, this leads into the question where reasons are located. For example, Korsgaard highlights that reasons arise out of our practical identity whereas Nida-Rümelin adopts a realist perspective: Reasons do not arise out of practical identities we choose but out of the form of life we inevitably find ourselves in: in father-son-relationships, friendships, professional roles, virtues etc.

A theory of practical rationality needs to take pluralism seriously and should not reduce rationality to either only one accepted motive (e.g. self-interest) or to only one rule (e.g. universalism).

Comparing the Scanlonian account of structural rationality to Nida-Rümelin's, we can see that he does conceptualize rationality itself differently, but also that his respective characterizations of the structures of rationality deviates strikingly. Most importantly, Nida-Rümelin's account is objectivist, but not (reason)-foundational. Structures are not (only) the relations that an individual's attitudes have to each other, but can rather be located in the world that surrounds an individual. An agent can decide to adopt structures for herself, but she can neither create them solely on her own nor can she modify them significantly without violating them. Hence, a person who does not act like a father in the example above, even though he claims to be one (e.g. somebody that hides from the kid) also commits a violation of rationality in the structural sense. Hence, Nida-Rümelin's account and the Scanlonian approach to structural rationality only share a limited number of features. Despite bearing the same label, they should not be confused, and we hope to have illustrated why Nida-Rümelin's account is richer, more pluralistic and more comprehensive than Scanlon's, Korsgaard's and similar approaches.

Apart from these approaches, we find some other accounts in theory of action that are more similar to Nida-Rümelin's, mostly because they are critical of the model of instrumental rationality (although it must be noted that none of them is equally comprehensive). Joseph Raz, for instance, critically evaluates what he calls "the myth of instrumental rationality" (2005), and claims that instrumental reasons cannot fully be accounted for by the prominent theories of instrumental rationality. Joseph Raz drives a wedge between the ideas of an agent's goals or rather intentions and her reasons. In other words: intentions and goals do not automatically generate reasons for action. He thus questions the foundational idea of the normativity of reasons. He also introduces a wider net of considerations that we have to take into account when we aim to understand actions, such as the processes that lead to an intention and action, and with it the underlying habits, dispositions and patterns of thinking. In this way, Joseph Raz also criticizes the most prevalent views on instrumental rationality as insufficient and introduces considerations similar to Nida-Rümelin's.

Joseph Raz also states that Michael Bratman's approach offers a prominent and comprehensive account of rationality that avoids the problem of many theories. Michael Bratman's "planning theory of action" comes close to Nida-Rümelin's account, because it shares two of its central features. First, Bratman acknowledges that there are social rationality norms for intentions and policies

(Bratman 2014): friendship, love, dancing together, conversations etc. are all practices and forms of action that cannot be explained without references to sociality. Second, Bratman refers to “structures” (ibid. p. 8) albeit in a different sense than Nida-Rümelin: intentions should be seen as plan states that occupy space in coordinating plans that structure agency in a diachronic way. Thus, intentions have a coordinating role in providing continuity and organization over time. They thus and order conduct. Intentions in Bratman’s sense thus share some characteristics with Nida-Rümelin’s account, but Bratman’s account has one significant shortcoming: Bratman does not say much about the sources of reason and the question whether structures are objective. His main interest lies in the specification of plans as part of individual and social action, but he does not proceed to explain the bigger picture, namely what the nature of structures is in the world of agents.

Another unique feature of Nida-Rümelin’s account is that he refers to another prominent account of rationality that theorists of actions are usually silent about: rational choice theory in economics. Rational choice theory is the best example of ignoring facets of human practical reasoning and thus drawing a picture of human actions that does not correspond with our daily experiences, especially in the theory of *homo oeconomicus*. It is precisely the idea of an agent only maximizing its preferences that fails to acknowledge the plurality of human life. The shortcomings of rational choice theory are linked to its understanding of rationality solely as instrumental: an action is considered rational only if it fits best to achieve the aim, i.e. satisfies the desire best. Analyzing and explaining actions in terms of instrumental reason only, however, is clutching at straws. Either rationality is taken as instrumental or as prudent. Other forms of actions are neglected, or rather are irrational. Reducing all practical reasons to maximizing strategies just leads to an artificial language that does not capture reality.

The empirical results of behavioral economics reveal the problems of such a narrow concept of rationality: human behavior is not always in accordance with the theory of practical rationality understood as instrumental or acting prudently, as Sunstein, Kahneman and Tversky show. However, the behavioral economists’ critique of RCT remains superficial, since it moves along with the assumptions of instrumental rationality. They try to nudge human behavior to fit practical rationality, but they do not scrutinize their theory. This is not only true for behavioral economics, but also for psychology and the concept of bounded rationality.

Practical reasoning needs to encompass the totality of our form of life with its specific justifications of actions. A theory that fails to explain various aspects

of our daily actions distorts our daily praxis of practical reasoning, leads to a denial of reality and thus leads to detached theories of human actions. A comprehensive theory of structural rationality has to explain the dialectic between a self-inventing agent and given structures of forms of lives. However, neither the agent nor the form of life should be mistakenly assumed to be independently given. A theory of action that does not entail all kinds of aspects of human agency cannot give an appropriate account of practical rationality.

Nida-Rümelin's approach is thus comprehensive and radical: He transcends the reductive narrowness of instrumental rationality without denying its practical impact. Actions do exist that are carried out in accordance to utility maximizing or even self-interest maximizing. Yet not all actions are to be understood in these terms. Actions that are oriented around social roles, for example, cannot count as irrational just because no underlying maximizing heuristic is found. The concept of bounded rationality tries to embed instrumental rationality into a form of life to highlight limits of our cognitive capabilities and selective perceptions. However, the agent is still left within the realm of cost-benefit-reasoning. The idea of social preferences (e.g. Charness and Rabin) or meta-preferences (Sen) cannot encompass the plurality of human actions. According to Nida-Rümelin, they ignore the plurality of reasons that drive agency. Hence, they try to fit agency into a theory that undermines humanity. Nida-Rümelin's theory of structural rationality acknowledges daily patterns of interaction and meaning.

To illustrate this, consider once more the example of the father described above: the father does not act because he wants to maximize his utility. He does not need to analyze costs vs. benefits to find a reason for acting like a father. Being a father can be a sufficient reason for action, and we do not need any cost-benefit-analysis. There might be agents that might act also as fathers according to cost-benefit-reasoning, but most of them would deny that.

For Nida-Rümelin it is of great importance that some space is left for practical deliberation in practical life: The agent can evaluate her desires, interests, obligations, roles etc. and become the author of her life. She herself determines which reasons are decisive for the actions that make up her life, i.e. that structure her life. Thus, there exists a deliberation equilibrium of individual and structural reasons of actions, which finally enable – to speak in Nida-Rümelin's terminology – a coherentist lifestyle. This lifestyle is considered rational: an agent that lives within a plurality of reasons that outline her life in such manner that she is able to create a compact, upright and authentic life. Nida-Rümelin's structural rationality enables us to think of an agent with integrity within a plurality of reasons and forms of life.

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