

“Rationality in the practical Decision-Process”

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Summary

Rationality in the process of practical decision does not consist in conformity to the Method of Justification, nor in conformity to any other form of morality, nor in conformity to the rules of deductive or inductive logic. The schema which would make rationality consist in conformity to those procedural principles which tend to lead to resolution of problematic situations is more adequate to our preanalytic denotation of ‘rational’, as applied to decision-processes.

Contemporary ethicists, like Stevenson, Toulmin, and Hare, tend to limit their consideration of practical inquiry to the processes by which actions are justified. Hence they agree in requiring of rationality conformity to what I call the Method of Justification and, indeed, in seeming to take conformity to this method as a sufficient condition of rationality. The Method of Justification requires that both the selection and rejection of alternatives of action be made by appeal to material principle, i.e. that in the Kantian sense they be made “from” a rule governing action (as opposed to a procedural rule, governing the conduct of the inquiry itself; from a rule under discussion, that is, rather than a rule guiding discussion).

Conformity to that method, however, is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for rationality in one sort of practical inquiry, the process of practical decision. There are irrational practical decision-processes which do conform to that method. The Method of Justification is simply not applicable to several aspects of the decision-process which bear on its rationality: the discovery of alternatives of action, and the determination of relevance and order,

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for example. And there are rational decision-processes which do not conform to that method – in which changes in decision-behavior made by appeal to procedural principles substitute for appeal to material principles.

The basis of these rational exceptions to the Method of Justification lies in the kinds of conditions under which the process of practical decision -- the process of inquiry directed toward a decision to perform some action – is typically performed. Formulated alternatives are not “given” at the inception of the practical decision process but must be discovered in the course of that process; states of affairs relevant to the inquiry change during inquiry, thus conferring special importance on the order of inquiry; and the fact that inquiry is performed under a time-limit, together with a special urgency attached to the termination of inquiry, make certain short-cuts legitimate. However, these conditions tend not to characterize the process of practical criticism – the process of inquiry directed toward mere criticism of some action. Hence, the Method of Justification tends to be more adequate as a schema for rationality in this process than in the former. One explanation, therefore, for the fact that contemporary ethicists fail to recognize the inadequacy of the Method of Justification as a schema for rationality in the practical decision-process, is that they devote their attention almost exclusively to the process of practical criticism, without realizing that they are doing so, and without distinguishing that process clearly from the process of practical decision.

One consequence of all this, in the realm of ethical theory, is to show the invalidity of the reasons usually given for supposing that there are certain rationally unresolvable ethical disagreements.

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Another, more important for my purpose, is to show the need for a new and wider schema for rationality in the process of practical decision.

If, following Dewey, we conceive of the practical decision-process as an intermediate phase in the existential transformation of a problematic situation, i.e. as a series of operations

performed by an inquirer and directed toward the resolution of that situation as their goal, then rationality consists in conformity to those procedural principles which tend to resolve problematic situations. That this schema accounts for “rational exceptions” mentioned above and is applicable to those aspects of the decision-process left to one side by the Method of Justification, I shall try to show in what follows. First, however, certain terms must be clarified. Inquiry, on this view, begins when the inquirer is presented with a situation that troubles him, calls a halt to action, seems to require certain transformations: the problematic situation. The practical decision-process begins with formulation of the problem: the formulated requirements of the situation, and consists thereafter in successive reformulations of the problem which take the form either of means-specifications or conflict-settlements (operations which correspond roughly to the adjustment of means to ends, and the selection of ends). The practical decision-process is terminated when the formulated requirements are complete, i.e. may be realized by the subject without further inquire, and adequate, i.e. when their realization would resolve the problematic situation. Ethical problems, when practical, fall into the conflict-settlement phase of the decision-process, but not all conflict-settlement phases are ethical. Hence, it would seem possible to treat practical rationality independently of ethical rationality.

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To show the greater adequacy of this schema of rationality, I shall consider two aspects of the practical decision-process: the determination of the relevance of material principles to decisions, and the determination of rational order in the decision process.

As for the first, there are at least four principles which appear to govern the rational determination of the relevance of material principles to practical decisions. They are (1) No material principle is to be admitted into the decision-process which cannot function in it. (2) Those material principles held by the inquirer should be admitted into the decision-process where they can function in it, so that they may be rendered consistent with one another. (3) The inquirer should admit into the decision-process those material principles he is directly committed to take as relevant to his decisions, and (4) Given the desirability of arriving at even a wrong decision, rather than none at all, those material principles which would prevent completion of the decision-process should not be admitted. The method of Justification accounts for none of these principles of relevance. If one appeals merely to logical or causal relations, the first principle, at most, can be accounted for.

All of those principles may be accounted for, however, in addition to certain rational exceptions to them, if the following view of relevance is taken: all and only those material principles should be introduced into a decision-process which tend to yield a solution to the practical problem involved. When has a practical problem been solved? If we call those situations problematic which some inquirer sees as requiring certain transformations (since Dewey's notion of the problematic situation as inherently problematic appears incomprehensible), then a practical problem is “solved” when the problem-formulation

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is complete, and adequate to a problematic situation which is “more real” than any alternative within the limits of efficiency, i.e. a problematic situation for which any additions would require such a drastic reorganization as to prevent completion of the decision-process. The reality of the problematic situation, in turn, is a function of its conformity to these three criteria: (1) that all those elements of the actual situation which would have a bearing on the requirements seen in the situation by the inquirer, be included in the problematic situation, (2) that the problematic situation be complete, and (3) that the problematic situation be organized. Those criteria are derived from the basic requirement that problematic situations, in their full extent, be resolved. They may be applied objectively to problematic situations, but only in terms of some principle of assigning requirements to those situations. The choice of such a principle is an ethical matter, and one can only speak of relevance “for” such a principle. A material principle is relevant to a problem-formulation if and only if its introduction into the formulation, with proper transformation, would probably yield a problem-formulation more adequate to the real problematic situation, within the limits of efficiency.

As to the order of the practical decision-process, where the usual notions of “logical” order will not do justice to our pre-analytic denotation of ‘rational’ applied to order, and where

the Method of Justification is totally inapplicable, use can also be made of the notion of “solution”, and hence of problematic situation. Rational order in the practical decision-process is characterized primarily by the fact that it is “directed” toward solution, as defined above. That is, it is (1) a series of goal-directed actions or operations, where solution of the practical problem at hand figures as

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goal: and (2) each operation sets up relative to solution a requirement which succeeding operations fulfill. Together with the principles of least effort and least risk, the principle of direction goes a long way toward accounting for what we would call pre-analytically, rational order in the decision-process.

Thus, as to both relevance and order, the Method of Justification, conformity to the rules of inductive and deductive logic, or schemas which conceive of rationality as some form of morality, are less adequate to our pre-analytic denotation of ‘rational’ as applied to practical decision-processes than the schema suggested by Dewey.