

Prof. Dr. Matteo d'Alfonso, Full Prof. of History of Philosophy, Università degli Studi di Ferrara
Ferrara, Italia

Disciplina: History of models of rationality

Periodo: 11th September – 25th September

Ementa:

The purpose of this research is to investigate the claim, originally made in economics, that Rationality should be exclusively defined as a set of behaviours traceable to the decision-making model formalized by Rational Choice Theory (RCT). This prescribes that only that individual way of acting can be defined as rational if it is: a) constantly oriented by consideration of one's own interest, b) consistently directed toward increasing one's benefits by making use of c) a logical process that weighs the costs and benefits of each option. We can trace this idea back to the empiricist tradition in social science, inaugurated by Adam Smith and continued by Jeremy Bentham and Stuart Mill. Its neoliberal formulation provides for a twofold extension of this model: 1) from descriptive to prescriptive; whereby, judging an agent's choice as rational coincides with being able to trace it back to the aforementioned logic; 2) from specific to general; whereby this logic, originally conceived to describe choices made in the economic sphere, ends up investing all kinds of choices in every field of individual and social life.

The present research aims to question the permissibility of such extensions, to which a philosophical and social science history tradition that broadens its gaze beyond English empiricism could offer appropriate corrections.

The inspiration for such research comes from two recent publications that, in different ways, put RCT in a critical perspective. Becchio/Leghissa (2017) present the extension from a model with specific validity to a model with general valence as the specific distinguishing feature of economic neo-liberalism - inaugurated by the Austrian school in the first half of the 20th century (Cubeddu 2018) and formalized by the Chicago School in the postwar period (Emmett 2010) - as opposed to classical liberalism originally formulated in the philosophical sphere in the English 1700s. Bronner/Di Iorio (2018) instead problematize the first of the two extensions - from a model with a descriptive function to a model with a prescriptive function, given the many limitations it faces even just in the context of epistemological inquiry proper to the economic disciplines (Simon, Elster Boudon). In conclusion, both highlight the limitations that the liberalist paradigm of rationality encounters, not so much because of the alleged dramatic social effects it would produce, but because of the inherent epistemic limitations associated with systematically leading the exercise of rationality back to the RCT model.

In our research proposal we are oriented:

1) to verify in what way and to what extent the RCT paradigm actually permeates the discourse on rationality in the different spheres of social organization those disciplines deal with; on the other hand;

2) to highlight the problems it leaves unresolved as we are forced to hand over the phenomena that the model is unable to account for to the sphere of the non-rational or irrational;

3) to verify whether the philosophical tradition referring to transcendental philosophy – inaugurated by Kant (1781;1787) and pursued by Fichte 1794, 1797 – cannot support a model of rationality able to integrate RCT by including it in a broader definition, that is, one that exceeds mere quantitative evaluation based on theoretical reason, in order to encompass also that dimension of our rationality traditionally connoted as “practical reason”.

These researches will lead to assume a broader and more inclusive model of rationality, within which a specific role is entrusted to RCT, that is, without it engulfing the entire scope of the rational.

In this sense, we intend to turn to those models of rationality proposed by German Idealism in the period between (Kant 1781) and (Fichte 1794), in order to test whether precisely in the light of these authors - because of their emphasis on the necessary complementarity of different manifestations of human rationality in theoretical reason and practical reason - an argument can be made in favour of a scaling down of the applicability of RCT.

Classes 1st Lesson (3 hours) 11 September, h. 14,00-17,00

Introduction to the course. 6-700th century philosophical models of rationality: Rationalism/Empiricism: Descartes, Locke, Rousseau, Hume, Historicity of reason

2nd Lesson (3 hours) 12 September, h. 14,00-17,00

Immanuel Kant: Critique of Reason and primacy of practical reason. Fichte and Hegel: philosophy of history and the "cunning of reason." Adam Smith and the classical economists; Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill: "the invisible hand model"

3rd Lesson (3 hours) 23 September, h. 14,00-17,00

The critique of the '700-esque paradigm of individual and social rationality: Schopenhauer and Nietzsche; Positivism: Comte and Durkheim, the science of the social world; Karl Marx: the critique of idealistic philosophy of history and classical economists, the irrationality of the capitalist model

4th lesson (3 hours) 24 September, h. 14,00-17,00

Max Weber: the rational becoming of the world; Vilfredo Pareto: rational action and irrationality (residuals, derivations and "optimum"); The Rational Choice Theory

5th lecture (3 hours) 25 September, h. 14,00-17,00

Criticisms of RCT. Herbert Simon: "limited" rationality; Raymond Boudon, "subjective" rationality; Jon Elster, "imperfect" rationality.