1. Two Tales and a Distinction

Let me begin by telling two fictitious stories of varying plausibility. They differ greatly in many respects, but they do carry, for my purposes, much the same message.

**Story 1**: Two pedestrians stop at a red light of a pedestrian crossing. Mr. A, a trained economist, wants to consider his options carefully. Should he run the red light or wait for the green light? What would be the risk involved? Could he get hit by a car? Could he get a fine from an onlooking police officer? Are there any police officers about that might catch him? How many seconds could he gain by making a run for it? How important are these seconds to him, in view of his destination? Would the gain be worth the risk to him? Etc. etc. Ms. B is a sales clerk in a clothing store. She habitually waits for the green light to go on before crossing the street. She’s got other things on her mind.

Now the light turns green. Ms. B crosses the street. Mr. A is still standing there, trying to assess the risk of some reckless driver running the red light and crashing into him. He carefully examines all cars waiting at the intersection as well as those still approaching. He wonders how he can reliably infer from what he observes that none of them is likely to suddenly accelerate and jump the light. What are the odds that his information is faulty? What are the odds that the inferences he draws from it are incorrect?

The pedestrian light turns red again. Mr. A is left pondering whether the fact that none of the cars tried to run the red light this time has any implications for the next time that their light will turn red and the pedestrian light green again...

**Story 2**: Radesh is a poor farmer in a remote village in the Indian state of Bihar. He is considered to be a bit of an eccentric by his fellow villagers for his better-than-average education and his proven willingness to flout tradition when it suits him. One day a government development officer
comes to the village to try and persuade the village elders to support one of the campaigns sponsored by the government to replace various subsistence crops with new cash crops that are sure to lift the local peasantry out of its isolation and poverty once and for all. The village elders, appealing to long-standing, sacred tradition, remain unpersuaded. Radesh, by contrast, applies to be enrolled into the farmer education program conducted in a nearby town, to learn more about the risks and potentials of the new cash crops developed for the region.

In time, Radesh becomes quite convinced of the merit of the development officers’ arguments. He graduates with flying colours from the education program and obtains a considerable subsidy to help him plant his first cash crop. The village elders try several times to dissuade Radesh from what they view as a dangerous violation of sacred tradition, a violation that might bode ill for the entire village. Radesh has little patience with such superstition and goes ahead as planned. He does quite well for several seasons, being able to pay off some debts and marry off his two daughters. But then a serious drought strikes the village. Radesh’s crop is decimated, as are some, but not all, of those of the other villagers. They squeeze through by means of their system of mutual assistance and because at least some of their various crops survived the drought. Radesh, on the other hand, applies for the government farm relief support that he was told would be available in such difficult times to farmers who had participated in the government cash crop program. But the aid never arrives and Radesh is forced to sell off his farm and return to a life of irregular labour for others.¹

The common message of these two very different stories is, I trust, fairly obvious: the most ‘rational’ course of action from the actor’s point of view does not necessarily result from his/her efforts at information gathering and careful deliberation. In other words, there is a difference between rational action, by whatever standard, and rationalized action, that is, action based on conscious information gathering and deliberation (IGAD for short) about the alternative options available.

Before considering the distinction more closely, however, let me try to preempt at least one frequent source of argument and confusion concerning the term ‘rationality’. Much ink has been spilt over the question whether ‘rationality’ does or ought to imply selfishness and/or materialism. In this paper I shall ignore this great debate entirely. I shall apply the term ‘rationality’ only to the means chosen to bring about a preferred state of the world, whatever that state may be (cf. Farmer 1992). Put differently, at no point shall the content of preferences or values be at issue here. In
principle, the arguments presented should apply, whatever goals actors may be pursuing. Thus, for our purposes the point of the first story above remains unchanged whether Mr. A and Ms. B are trying to cross the street in order to help a perfect stranger in need or in order to cheat on their spouses. After all, even the loftiest of ideals can be pursued with more or less efficiency. With these remarks in mind, it might perhaps be better to speak of the distinction between efficient action and efficiency-seeking action or, efficiency and its pursuit.

But by whatever name, the distinction itself is nothing particularly earthshaking. It is taken for granted by both the famous theory of ‘bounded rationality’ proposed by Simon and his followers (see, e.g., Simon 1955; 1979; 1982; March 1978; Conlisk 1996) as well as in the economics of information gathering (Stigler 1961). Both of these otherwise antithetical schools of thought start with the simple idea that information gathering (the latter school) or deliberation (the former) are costly in terms of effort, time and other resources. Once the assumption of perfect information of the simple neoclassical model is replaced by the assumption of information (processing) costs, the distinction between efficiency and the pursuit of efficiency is inescapable. For, if IGAD are costly then there must, under the usual ‘law’ of declining marginal returns, be a point for every decision problem at which the net marginal return to an additional expenditure of resources on IGAD is zero and then becomes negative. In other words, at some point any further efforts spent on IGAD simply cease to pay off. When that point is reached, it is more rational for the actor to refrain from further efforts at IGAD in the search for still more perfect solutions and to settle for the possibly somewhat imperfect solution found thus far. This is what is meant by ‘satisficing’, settling for ‘good enough’ solutions. Our first story above gives a clear, albeit not particularly realistic, example.

But there is more than this to our two stories. Both theories of bounded rationality and information cost economics still assume that further IGAD, while perhaps not rational in terms of total net pay-off, does produce more efficient solutions when the cost of IGAD itself is left out of the account. Put more simply, the gross gain to be had from additional IGAD may not be worth the extra cost, but it will be a gain. But our stories, by contrast, suggest that in certain circumstances further IGAD may actually produce a loss relative to pre-existing practice, even net of the additional IGAD costs.

At first sight, this would appear to be rather counter-intuitive. How could, in any given situation, additional IGAD possibly lead to a course of action that is less rational than before? The reason for the apparent paradox resides in the key term ‘additional’ here. The implicit assumption that it contains is that any IGAD will take as its point of departure all knowledge
and experience embodied in pre-existing practice. The assumption would appear natural enough at first sight, yet upon reflection it is anything but self-evident.

It tacitly rests on the further assumption that all the knowledge and experience that may have gone into establishing pre-existing practice is in fact still readily accessible to the current practitioners. But our stories, in particular the second one, suggest that this may not necessarily be the case. Habitual or normatively motivated actions may be quite rational in terms of their results even though they may not have been taken for that reason - at least not by current actors. In fact, these actors may be quite unaware of the effective rationality of their actions in terms of the payoffs to themselves. Thus, anyone who would wish to reconsider the action in question in light of strict means-ends rationality, who would, in our earlier terminology, seek to rationalize it, would have to start from scratch, or at least from a level of knowledge and experience far inferior to that which would lead one to opt for the effectively rational existing practice motivated by habit or cultural norms. As a result, it is entirely possible that no reasonable expenditure of any individual’s time, effort and other resources on further IGAD would produce an improvement on current practice and it might in the end well produce ‘good’ reasons for actions that turn out to be distinctly less rational in terms of outcomes for the actors than current practice.

It is not so difficult to see why such situations may in fact be quite common. As Hemes (1992, 430-33) points out, even people with only a very weak inclination to seek to improve the efficiency of their actions may, in time, develop highly efficient practices, by a repeated process of serendipitous discovery and imitation. This will be particularly the case in groups where members have relatively easy access to information about each others’ actions and their consequences. From time to time, individual members will, purely by accident, stumble upon slight improvements in traditional practice. The other members need only casually take note of such improvements, and adopt them when convenient, for a process of collective stumbling towards maximum efficiency to occur. Such a process, then, may turn rather leisurely satisficers ‘perhaps behind their backs (...) into de facto maximizers’ (433, emph. omitted).

The phrase ‘perhaps behind their backs’ may, at first sight, appear a little puzzling. After all, the actors described by Hemes are trying, however casually, to improve upon current custom. There is no obvious reason to believe they would ordinarily not be aware of this themselves. But they are not very likely to have remembered the history of piecemeal improvements that produced current custom, much less cared to investigate why
and how they did. Useful innovations are simply turned into new custom and custom is, by definition, not motivated by conscious considerations of efficiency. Given our fairly plausible assumption of not particularly energetic efficiency seekers, it makes good sense to expect such incremental improvements quickly to be turned into unreflective habit, until further notice. And once they have become such habit, the reasons for their efficiency become even less accessible to the actors than they had been to begin with. As a result, it is quite likely that at any one time current, habitual practice is far more efficient than what any one individual would be able to come up with him/herself starting from scratch (Hernes 1992, 432).

Obvious examples would include traditional crafts and skills that rely more on custom than on systematic (re-)analysis and codification, such as, say, acupuncture or woodworking. But such relatively unexamined custom is no doubt present to varying degrees in all crafts, trades and occupations and, indeed, in all practices that contain an element of repetition (and what practices do not?).

2. Efficiency Versus Its Pursuit

The most persistent arguments against the simple, textbook neoclassical explanatory model assuming a vigorously utility-maximizing homo economicus have turned on its alleged lack of realism. Backed by large literatures in anthropology (see Granovetter 1993) and experimental psychology (see Diesing 1991, ch. 9; Dimaggio 1997; Mooney Marini 1992, 23-33), the critics have argued that empirically, even for relatively simple and tractable problems, perfectly rational decision-making is the exception rather than the rule. Given such patently unrealistic core assumptions, the model itself cannot possibly be of much use in explaining social behaviour either, so they have argued. On such grounds, economics is routinely dismissed by its many detractors as an exercise in mindless model-mongering without any serious empirical implications or point of reference (Hirsch et al. 1990).

But the simple model of serendipitous learning sketched out above would permit retaining maximum efficiency as the predicted equilibrium position without having to rely on the patently unrealistic assumption of utility maximizing individuals. On the other hand, compared to the mythical instantaneous maximizer of the simple model the serendipitous learning model raises some difficult questions about the time interval over which actors may be expected to reach the optimum and the factors that
are likely to affect that interval. For instance, as already hinted above, when the structure of relevant constraints and benefits is subject to relatively frequent change or if the task to be dealt with is not a repetitive one, actors may not have much of an opportunity to achieve maximum efficiency by way of serendipitous learning. For such situations, then, the theory should not do particularly well in terms of accuracy of predictions either.

Thus, the introduction of serendipitous learning by casual satisficers may solve one problem by creating another. The overwhelming majority of economists views maximization, or optimization, as the central feature of the economic model (cf. Buckley & Casson 1993). The primary reason for this is that it, when combined with the assumption of declining marginal returns, yields precisely calculable and singular predictions in, according to some, virtually any setting (Becker 1976, 5, 14).

This predictive determinacy is one of the great virtues of the textbook economic model according to its advocates. Compared to it, so they frequently claim, the obvious alternatives, and in particular much of sociology, offer little more than ‘intellectual anarchy’: ‘an enormous hodge-podge of ideas and insights, existing at all sorts of different levels of abstraction, possibly in contradiction with each other, possibly just incommensurate, without a basic theory or structure to sort them out, to order them, or to serve as a guide to research’ (Piore 1996, 742; cf. Winship & Rosen 1988, 5, 9-10; Buckley & Casson 1993, 1035-39).11

But one does not have to be a postmodernist celebrant of hodge-podge to wonder whether the maximization model is really all it is cracked up to be here. Hernes (1992, 422) explains the model’s appeal thus:

The all-knowing, maximizing deus ex machina is indeed a Choice God: a supreme being with well-ordered and stable preferences, notoriously egoistic, omniscient with respect to alternatives, consequences, and probabilities of outcomes—and with unlimited capacity for instantaneous calculation. (...) The advantage of this model of man is that He is so predictable, in the sense that it is fairly easy to figure out how He will behave under specified conditions.

But is it really as easy as all that? This would seem to depend, and rather massively so, on the exact nature of those ‘specified conditions’. As noted already, maximization under conditions of declining marginal returns will yield single, clear-cut equilibria in principle. It is, furthermore, certainly possible to calculate such maxima for highly controlled, restricted settings or for simplified textbook problems that deliberately abstract from most real-world complexities. It is quite another matter, however, even in very simple, real-life situations of choice, as illustrated by our first story above.
In such situations, where the ‘conditions’ characterizing the situation (i.e.,
the relevant costs and benefits) need to be specified by the actor
him/herself, perfect rationality would indeed require a Choice God,
‘omniscient with respect to alternatives, consequences, and probabilities of
outcomes - and with unlimited capacity for instantaneous calculation.’ This
is obviously a level of rationality beyond the reach of trained economists

Such perfect rationality cannot, in fact, be attained even in principle. For
in any unrestricted, open-ended setting there is literally an infinite number
of possible ramifications of any one action that may affect the balance of
costs and benefits from the actor’s point of view. Thus even the best-
informed, smartest real-life actor must operate at some level of rationality
well below perfection. But at what level exactly? It is worth recalling at
this point that for the maximization model to yield singular, calculable
predictions, a single, unambiguous maximization criterion is essential, that
is, we must be able to ascribe to the actor(s) a specific, well-defined level
of rationality. But that level depends, it turns out, on the number of
ramifications that the actor is able to take into consideration. This number,
in turn, would appear to depend on the information and information-
processing capacity available to the actor at any one time. Not only do
these differ substantially between actors, they also presumably evolve over
time for any one actor. Thus, at any moment new information or thinking
may turn up hitherto unrecognized costs or benefits that force one to
reconsider one’s choices. As a result, what seemed perfectly rational in
terms of net benefit maximization yesterday may not meet the higher
standards of today.

Where, then, on the continuum from null to ever-receding perfection
shall we choose the rationality criterion against which to measure any
actors’ actions? If the answer is ‘the criteria chosen by the actors them-
selves’ we obviously abandon the predictive determinacy that is said to be
the major virtue of the maximizing model. Shall we, instead, choose some
expert observer’s - an economist, say - criterion of maximum rationality
as the standard to hold the actors’ actions up against? But why should we
expect such a criterion to be less subject to change and less variable across
‘experts’ than is the case for the actors’ own? The opposite may in fact be
more likely. As Conlisk (1996, 674-5) notes, at least some ‘anomalies’
found in the experimental literature on game theory may be the result of
criteria of calculative rationality that are pushed to unrealistically high and
complex levels by the increasing sophistication and computational capacit-
ies of economic theorists. Conversely, there is quite a cottage industry
now, sometimes referred to as ‘new neoclassical institutionalism’,12 which
specializes in ‘discovering’ all manner of hitherto unrecognized (transaction-, monitoring-, information-, etc.) costs to help account for such anomalies as are found in the empirical world. Now, by implication such costs were already known to the actors themselves, however intuitively, prior to their discovery by the economists studying them. In other words, professional economists appear to be as likely to run behind the actors in the field in terms of levels of rationality as to run ahead of them.

How, then, do economists manage to produce straightforward predictions from the maximization model and how do they manage to approximate actual behaviour in the empirical world with them? Whether or not they often succeed at the latter is, of course, a matter of much controversy (Etzioni 1988, 18-19; Block 1990). As I have already suggested, they largely produce the former by more or less arbitrarily restricting the number of ramifications to be taken into account, i.e., by considering only highly simplified closed systems in which the number of variables to be manipulated does not exceed current computational capabilities (cf. Simon 1979, 496). Now, suppose that in some settings some significant proportion of actors possess computational capabilities and information roughly comparable to that of the economists. Where and when this is the case one would expect economists and these actors to choose roughly comparable points on the maximization continuum. This, then, would account for why, in some cases, the predictions of the economists’ maximizing models turn out to be relatively accurate. In other words, the accuracy of the predictions is not due to actors’ striving to achieve some ‘objective’ level of maximization but due to the fact that actors and economist-observers happen to have selected roughly the same subjective level of rationality.

My general point here is, by now, clear I trust: the much-vaunted predictive precision of the maximization (or ‘objective rationality’) model is largely illusory. This has led a number of rational action theorists, mostly non-economists to be sure, to opt for ‘subjective rationality’ instead. In place of an external, ‘objective’ criterion that is unavoidably arbitrary they propose a standard of rationality based on the perspective and situation of the actors themselves. Since actors cannot reasonably be expected to be perfectly informed, even if we knew what that might mean, we must, so the reasoning goes, accept as a basis whatever information is available to them in their situations. Beliefs and consequent courses of action can then be called ‘rational’ to the extent that actors have ‘good reasons’ for them in the light of the information available to them (see Goldthorpe 1998, 171).

But such contextualization of the standard of rationality would seem quite easily to lead one down the slippery slope toward complete relativ-
ism. For most actors, when pressed for the reasons of their actions, would insist most of the time that theirs were 'good reasons' in the light of what they considered to be the information available to them. If an outside observer should be moved to contest those reasons or that information, in the name of some higher, more 'objective' standard of rationality, then this would surely take us straight back to the problems raised above concerning the maximization standard. This line of argument led Popper to propose to treat rationality as depending on 'the logic of the situation' as seen from the perspective of the actors themselves. 'Rational' action is then effectively equated with action 'that makes sense to' or 'seems appropriate to' the actors themselves (see Goldthorpe 1998, 172 and the sources cited there).

This move produces an interesting turning of the tables in the relation between observer and actor. No longer is the observer in a position to hold the actor's actions up to a 'higher' standard of rationality. Rather, it is incumbent upon the observer to find out how the actor's actions are rational, despite possible initial appearances to the contrary. In other words, the actors are held to be rational a priori and if they do not appear to be so to the observer this can only be due to the observer's failure to grasp 'the logic of the situation'.

This position is strikingly similar to that of several relativistic strands of philosophy of social science. Gadamer's hermeneutics, for instance, is based on just such an axiomatic attribution of rationality to the actor and it enjoins the observer to seek a 'fusion of horizons' enabling him/her to comprehend the actor's actions as rational (Gadamer 1975; see also, e.g., Bleicher 1982; Diesing 1991, Ch.5; Warnke 1987). Similarly, Winch's much-debated Wittgensteinian argument insists that all social scientists can do is to seek to understand 'the point' of the actors' action by means of a thorough immersion in the latter's 'form of life'. Winch quite explicitly develops his position from the claim that not even basic standards of logic, let alone of 'rationality', can be expected to hold cross-culturally (Winch 1958; Dallmayr & McCarthy 1977, Part Three). Not surprisingly, this kind of argument has also found much favour among modern, and more especially postmodern anthropologists (see Gellner 1992 for an amusing diatribe against this trend).

Unquestionably, there is an appealing nobility to such refusals to impose a possibly ethnocentric, Western standard of rationality on others. If standards of logic and rationality do, in fact, differ as profoundly between cultures as suggested, then it certainly behooves us to show them equal respect and to begin by trying to understand how the standards of others make sense to them. At the same time, if different cultures really are that radically different from one another it is hard to see how any cross-cultural
understanding would be possible at all. And conversely, if there are ways of achieving such understanding there must, by definition, be some commonalities between ‘forms of life’ and then there is no obvious reason why these might not include some general standard of ‘rationality’, broadly conceived. Put slightly differently, the relativist positions referred to preclude a priori the possibility of cross-cultural generalizations that may be employed to help explain social behaviour. For those who wish at least to entertain the possibility of some such generalizations, including the advocates of rational action theory, this cannot be a satisfactory starting point.

Thus, the search is on for some viable ‘intermediate’ position between an absolute standard of rationality such as maximization and the utter relativism just described. While respecting differences in context such an intermediate criterion will nevertheless have to have some external aspect, it will have to be independent to some degree of the judgements of any specific actor. In a carefully reasoned argument from which much of the above takes its inspiration, John Goldthorpe has attempted to formulate such an intermediate criterion. He is worth quoting at length:

(...) as a starting point, I would suggest that one should hold on to the idea of rational action as being outcome-oriented or ‘consequentialist’ (cf. Elster 1991), in the sense that it derives from some kind of cost-benefit evaluation made by actors of the different courses of action that are available to them relative to their goals (whatever the nature of these might be). Such evaluation need not be conducted entirely explicitly or continuously, let alone correctly from an objective point of view; but it should at all events be sufficient to ensure that actors have a capacity to respond appropriately, as they would see it, to their situation of action and to changes therein, and to the trade-offs that arise between one possible course of action and another. In turn, then, non-rational action may be identified in that its evaluation in these terms either does not occur or is overridden by other kinds of motivation (1998, 179-180).

Goldthorpe himself presents this formulation as highly tentative and he is fully aware of the dangers of stretching it to cover almost all conceivable forms of behaviour. But in attempting to draw a line between rational action, so conceived, and nonrational action based, e.g., on tradition or normative prescription, he argues that the decisive issue is ‘that of how far the action in question is in fact open to modification in the light of its probable consequences and of those of other courses of action that are available, or that come available as the situation of action changes’ (1998, 180). Conversely, in the case of nonrational actions ‘actors in effect accept
ideational constraints on their ability to respond to their situation in ways that they could appreciate as being to their advantage’ (ibid.).

Two aspects of the argument seem to me to be particularly worth noting. First, unlike the maximization model preferred by economists which takes the outcome of action as measured by some target relation between means and ends as the standard, Goldthorpe effectively proposes a behavioural criterion. For him, the measure of the rationality of an action is whether or not it results from some effort to improve the relation between ends and means, not on whether the effort is successful. That is, Goldthorpe clearly chooses for the pursuit of efficiency rather than efficiency itself as the defining feature of rational action.15

Second, Goldthorpe’s criteria are deliberately cautious and vague. For an action to qualify as ‘rational’ nothing more than evidence of some monitoring of the results of one’s actions and of preparedness to make some adjustments in consequence, is required. To be sure, this would appear clearly to disqualify purely normative or traditional action, i.e., action that is prescribed or proscribed irrespective of any consequences. For such actions monitoring the consequences is irrelevant. But all other actions, that is all actions aiming to realize or maintain some preferred state of the world, may qualify in principle as rational. The question is: is it possible or likely that any of them might not qualify? Would not anyone who wishes to realize or maintain some preferred state of the world have to be positively insane not to engage in at least some monitoring and consequent adjustment of their actions, however casually and irregularly?

To invoke such a limiting case is to point out that the amount of monitoring and adjusting may vary enormously from one actor and setting to another. Moreover, in many settings, as our two stories at the beginning of this paper suggest, it may well make some good sense to resist spending too many resources on monitoring the outcomes of one’s actions and to draw hasty conclusions with respect to adjustments of one’s actions. In fact, some norms at least may well amount to quite economical ways of avoiding wasting resources on monitoring and adjustment in situations where experience has shown that they are not likely to bear much fruit. I shall consider some of these points in more detail below. Here I simply want to point out that the monitoring-and-adjusting envisaged by Goldthorpe, that is, the pursuit of greater efficiency, is a matter of degree without any obvious cut-off point, other than its total absence, beyond which action might reasonably be called ‘nonrational’.
3. The Primacy of Habit

There is a prominent line of criticism of rational action theory, already noted above, that also focuses entirely on the pursuit of efficiency rather than on outcomes. It denies that rational action is in any way universal or ‘natural’. The anthropological and historical record, so the critics argue, demonstrate that the domains in which, and the vigour with which people seek to improve means-ends relations vary dramatically between cultures and historical periods (see, e.g., Friedland & Robertson eds. 1989). In fact, the calculating actor of rational action theory is merely a historical creature of modern societies dominated by the market economy. To extrapolate this historical peculiarity to all other cultures and times is simply an act of Western ethnocentric hubris, such critics charge. In non-Western societies and at other historical times the competitive market economy is and was much less of a dominant and formative force in society and consequently the tireless pursuit of efficiency does and did not enjoy the enormous prestige and moral standing it has in modern capitalist societies (see e.g., Granovetter 1993, 13-16; Smelser 1992, 390, 404; De Swaan 1996, 5; Ingham 1996, 256, invoking Weber; Polanyi 1968; 1992).

Explicitly rationalizing behaviour, then, is not some kind of natural given but rather a product of a particular culture. In most societies it is, moreover, strictly circumscribed and regulated by various taboos and interdictions which ensure that the pursuit of economic advantage does not become so dominant as to be destructive of social solidarity. Etzioni goes even further, insisting ‘that most individual choices are based largely or entirely on normative-affective factors - not only choices of goals, but of means as well; and the limited areas in which logical-empirical considerations are paramount are themselves defined by normative-affective factors that legitimate and otherwise motivate such decision making’ (1993, 1054). That is, rational action is everywhere more or less deeply ‘embedded’ in a culturally determined moral code that prescribes when, where and how calculating behaviour will be encouraged, tolerated or contained. And, indeed, this must be so for communities to hold together and even for regular exchange on the basis of rational interest calculations to be possible in the first place. The loci classici for this kind of ‘embeddedness’ argument are, of course, Durkheim’s famous analysis the ‘precontractual elements of the contract’, Parsons’ exposition of the ‘utilitarian dilemma’ and the ‘Hobbesian problem of order’ and Polanyi’s stinging indictment of the ‘self-regulating market system’ (Durkheim 1933, Ch. 7; Parsons 1937, 89-94; 1968; Polanyi 1957; see Ingham 1996, 253-5).16
All these authors claim that rationalizing behaviour is profoundly dependent on a pre-existing and more or less strictly constraining moral order. That is, they all insist on the primacy of culture over rational action. This primacy has several aspects. First, as already noted, it refers to the purported fact that rational calculative behaviour is not a natural tendency on the part of humans but a product of specific culture. Second, it points to the necessity for moral regulation to precede and direct rational calculative behaviour lest communities perish in anomic fragmentation and strife. This moral prescriptive aspect of the primacy claim is quite pronounced among many authors in this tradition. In fact, there is a large and venerable literature, beginning at the very least with the conservative reaction against the French revolution and its rationalist extremes (see Nisbet 1966), that decries ‘excessive’ rationalizing trends in contemporary societies which are said not only to run counter to the actors’ own long-term interests but even to threaten to destroy society itself (e.g., Etzioni 1988; Block 1990; Wolfe 1989; Münch 1983). Third, and finally, the primacy of culture over calculation implies that not morally constrained behaviour but rationally calculative behaviour is the thing to be explained. In other words, culturally motivated behaviour should be taken as the theoretical ‘baseline’, as the ‘natural’ kind of behaviour that needs no further explanation and that serves instead to help explain the incidence and prevalence of efficiency-seeking behaviour.

Of course, few advocates of rational action theory would deny that there are large differences between cultures with respect to the extent to which rational calculation is condoned or permitted as a basis for social behaviour. But they often draw exactly the opposite conclusion from this observation. Given such variability, they argue, the simple rational action model provides an excellent yardstick for exploring and measuring the degree to which actual empirical behaviour approaches rationality or not. We may take rational action as a Weberian ideal-type or, alternatively, treat it as a ‘sometimes true theory’ (Hemes 1992, 425-7), to see when and where it does account for the phenomena to be explained. Then, for those cases where the simple theory does not turn out to produce satisfactory explanations, we may gradually complicate it, by relaxing its assumptions and/or adding assumptions about nonrational behaviour, until we obtain an explanation that does (see, e.g., Boudon 1990; Elster 1989a; 1989b, 37, 85-6; Coleman 1990, 19; Reynolds 1986, 38; Swedberg 1990, 70, 121-2, 141-2, 197, 220, 238; Lindenberg 1992; 1996, 26-7).

Here is a classic statement of this position by an economist:
(...)

any economic system constitutes a very complicated set of relationships...It
is this complexity which above all constitutes the essential difficulty for economic
analysis.

How then can one proceed? The author of this work can think of only one
method. One must construct a simple model which isolates one or two features
of a possible real world; one must study their implications in this simple setting
and then progressively elaborate and expand the model by making the assump­
tions less and less restrictive. But on each occasion there will soon come a point
at which further elaboration will make the model too complicated for it to be of
any more use than the real world itself in helping one to comprehend the forces
actually at work. Then one must begin again with another simple model which
isolates another set of relevant features of the real world and start the whole
process of gradual elaborations over again (Meade 1965, 22).

The model's supposed simplicity is clearly seen as its great virtue. Whatev­
er the differences between the many variants of rational action theory
(cf. Goldthorpe 1998), at the very least their adherents share 'a commit­
ment to analytical theorizing featuring clear premises and arguments, seek­ing simplicity but also deductive fertility and explanatory power'
(Coleman & Fararo 1992, xii). Given the immense complexity of the
subject matter and the severely limited capacity of even the smartest
economist to handle such complexity, such parsimony is nothing to be
sneezed at, the advocates argue (e.g., Coleman 1990, 19; Piore, 1996, 742;
Buckley & Casson 1993, 1035-39). And unlike their sociological critics
(e.g., Goudsblom 1996, 24; Hirsch et al. 1990), adherents to the rational
choice model gladly trade off a considerable amount of (initial) realism for
the sake of (initial) simplicity (cf. Granovetter 1981, 28). As Buckley and
Casson (1993, 1035) put it, '[s]uccessful system-building in the social
sciences requires fearless simplification. Any theoretical system that
corresponds too closely to complex social reality will be too complicated
to be of any use.'

Compared to the clarity and economy of the rational action model, so
its advocates claim, alternative theories of social behaviour are either non­
existent or else hopelessly fuzzy, laborious, eclectic, complicated and
descriptive (see, e.g., Buckley & Casson 1993, 1036-41; Piore 1996;
Friedman & Hechter 1990, 221; Hechter 1983, 50; Winship & Rosen
1988, 9-10). Thus, as opposed to the ontological primacy of normative
culture posited by the theory of cultural 'embeddedness' sketched out
above, the primacy of the rational action model is claimed here on purely
methodological grounds (cf. Elster 1989b, 35-7). Goldthorpe, for instance,
merely argues that rational action theory 'should be viewed not as itself
constituting a general theory of action but rather as being that currently
available (special) theory around which the effort to achieve greater generality could best be organised’ (1998, 177).

But there is also a subtler argument for a ‘hermeneutic’ primacy of the assumption that action is rational, derived from Davidson’s (1980) philosophy of meaning. It is, plainly, that rationality is the very category through which we can directly grasp the ‘sense’ of someone else’s actions. It is by being able to construe the action as rational from the actor’s perspective, that is, by being able to say that ‘s/he did what s/he did because to him/her that seemed to be the most effective way of realizing the state of the world s/he desired’ that we understand the action to begin with. To point to nonrational motivations such as traditions or moral prescriptions yields immediate understanding only to the extent that we happen to share those traditions or norms. If we do not, then pointing to them merely amounts to pointing out the difference between ‘them’ and ‘us’, a difference which will require additional explanations for us to feel that we have understood ‘them’. On the basis of such reasoning, then, rational action theory can be said to enjoy a ‘hermeneutic privilege’ in that understanding the action of others should proceed, first and foremost, by way of the Davidsonian ‘principle of charity’, i.e. the assumption that others surely have good reasons for doing what they do (see, e.g., Goldthorpe 1998, 185-186; cf. Farmer 1992, 415). Only when such understanding breaks down beyond repair should we have recourse to more problematic categories of explanation such as cultural norms and values.

There is more than a hint a puzzlement at the very nature of culturally motivated action here. Intuitively, many rational action theorists appear to find rational action ‘sensible’ and normative action somewhat mysterious and even slightly discomforting. ‘To examine the process by which norms are internalized is to enter waters that are treacherous for a theory grounded in rational choice’ says Coleman (1990, 292), with apparent apprehension. Norms (and preferences) are often treated as either ‘irrational’ or ‘random’ or both, at any rate as entirely beyond the reach of any attempt at systematic explanation or comprehension (cf. Abell 1992, 194; Goldthorpe 1998, 176, referring to Becker 1976). Alternatively, norms are rejected as a first-line explanans because ‘[t]o begin with normative systems would preclude the construction of theory about how normative systems develop and are maintained’ (Coleman 1990, 31). That is to say, while rational behaviour (and, for Coleman, selfishness) is self-explanatory, norms are to be singled out for special explanatory treatment (cf. Hechter 1983, 19; Abell 1992, 200). Thus, for these authors rational action features as a ‘principle of natural order’ in Toulmin’s (1953; see Coleman &
Fararo 1992, xiv-xv) sense, that is, as a ‘natural’ baseline, deviations from which require explanation.20

Another indicator of this is the fact that many proponents claim that rational action theory, a.k.a. rational choice theory, respects the voluntaristic character of human action, contrary to the determinism inherent in the view of action as norm-driven. This is, of course, the gist of Duesenberry’s famous quip: ‘economics is all about how people make choices; sociology is all about how they don’t have any choices to make’ (cited by Ingham 1996, 266). Thus, for instance, Coleman justifies starting out with ‘norm-free, self-interested persons as elements of the theory’ on the grounds that ‘[t]o assume adherence to norms would impose a determinism that would reduce the theory to a description of automata, not persons engaged in voluntary action.’ (1990, 31).21 Indeed, Boudon (1989) even goes so far as to equate rational action with voluntary action and ‘irrational’ action with any action driven by internal, subconscious forces (cf. Abell 1992, 194-5; see also Lindenberg 1992, 9-10; Mouzelis 1995, 38).

The equation of rationality with voluntarism sits rather uneasily with the celebration of rational action theory’s predictive determinacy discussed earlier. As several observers have noted, if the theory’s predictions are really as precisely circumscribed as its more enthusiastic proponents have claimed, then, paradoxically, ‘rational choice theory assumes away any active choice’ (Farmer 1992, 418, fn.2; also Goldthorpe 1998, 173; Latsis 1976; Hollis 1994, 185-6; England & Farkas 1988, 345). In fact, I strongly suspect that behind the association of rationality with voluntarism lies a quite natural tendency to account for behaviour we find ‘sensible’ and unproblematic in voluntaristic terms while resorting to deterministic explanations when we want to make sense of behaviour that does not make prima facie sense to us. That is, we accept sensible behaviour at face value while looking for factors that ‘made’ people do things that we find odd (cf. van den Berg, 1988, 420-1).22

This may also help to explain the rather curious circumstance that advocacy of cultural-normative models of social action is often based on exactly the reverse claim, namely, that rational action theory is unduly ‘deterministic’ whereas cultural-normative explanations are faithful to the element of ‘agency’ in social action. This was the basis of Parsons’ famous critique of the ‘positivistic theory of action’ (Parsons 1937, 60-69).23 Against the allegedly tight determinism of rational action theory, such critics claim that more ‘sociological’ approaches make room for a degree of voluntarism by paying attention to the meaning given by actors to their actions in light of their interpretation of the situation (e.g., Ingham 1996, 249-51). Along similar lines, Alexander argues that ‘by assuming that
actors are efficient calculators of their own material environment, the instrumental approach to social structure makes action completely determined by external control (...) [and thus] denies the possibility of individual control' (Alexander 1984, 14). Only a theory that is 'sensitive to the internal components of action, to the actor's emotions and moral sensibilities (...) [can] make the individual a fundamental reference point without, at the same time, placing him outside of his social context', according to Alexander (1984, 14-15; also 1987, 14; 1982, 108; see also Van den Berg 1997, 226-8). Thus, quite contrary to the rational action theorists cited above, to these authors Coleman's 'wholly free', unsocialized actor makes no sense at all. Such an extra-social being would not even have a sufficiently formed 'self' that could sensibly be said to do any choosing to begin with, they argue (see also Goudsblom 1996, 17-21).

We have, then, two diametrically opposed 'principles of natural order' here. One side takes rational action as the self-explanatory baseline and insists that non-rational behaviour requires special explanatory attention, the other takes the fully socialized, normatively oriented individual as the starting point and views rational action as the special case to be explained by special circumstances. While recognizing that the disagreement here is probably not one that permits of straightforward resolution by an appeal to empirical evidence, Coleman and Fararo believe that, '[a]lthough the debate may be expected to persist in the coming years, a possibility exists that one of these two principles will prove superior as a foundation for social science' (1992, xv). But if not on empirical grounds how other than through purely temperamental predisposition can we hope to settle the issue? If anything, I think the arguments and counterarguments with respect to theoretical primacy that I have just rehearsed suggest that neither logic nor evidence is likely to help a great deal here. Is there, then, no case to be made for a plausible 'principle of natural order'? I believe there is, but it favours neither of the current contenders.

Recall that at various points in the discussion above, I have stressed the effort that is necessary in any attempt to render one's actions more rational in terms of net benefits. The pursuit of means-ends efficiency requires, to start with, the exploration of the alternative courses of action available to the actor, that is, the gathering and assimilation of information and the deliberation and weighing of the resulting options. Two things are to be noted about this initial exploratory activity. First, it carries some cost that will vary depending on a number of other conditions. Rarely if ever will it be entirely costless. Thus, it is part and parcel of the (costly) means in the means-ends equation. Second, since by definition it takes place before anything is known yet about likely outcomes, the expenditure on explorat-
ory activity must be made *without any assurance of any reward at all.* Adding to this the rather plausible assumptions that people are, on the whole, moderately risk-averse and not inclined toward deliberate waste of energy, yields, I think, a rather more defensible ‘principle of natural order’: thoughtless action or *habit and routine.* Since it requires a minimum of risky expenditure of energy, habitual behaviour would seem to be the most sensible self-explanatory baseline. Not habit itself but *deviations from habit* then become the natural explananda.

Contrary to what the juxtaposition of the two stories at the beginning of this paper may suggest, the same argument can be made for the relation between habit and normatively motivated action. Like efficiency seeking, normatively motivated action requires a more or less conscious *prise de position* on the part of the actor. When a norm is followed ‘blindly’, that is, without any thought given to its validity or appropriateness to the situation at hand, the resulting behaviour is not really *motivated* by the norm but is *habitual* instead, just as habits and routines are that may be the result of some long-forgotten attempt to improve efficiency at some point in the distant past.

If we accept this distinction between normatively motivated and habitual behaviour, then it is easy to see that the former requires a certain amount of effort that the latter can do without, just as is the case for efficiency-seeking action. Norms need to be *invoked, justified and applied* and their creation, maintenance and application ordinarily will require a great deal of *socialization, (self-)monitoring and (self-)sanctioning.* On the aforementioned assumption that people will not deliberately waste their energy, we would expect them to avoid all of these activities if and so long as they can get by with plain habit instead. Thus, here, too, habit would seem to be the most defensible baseline and the occurrence of explicitly normatively motivated action the thing to be explained.24

4. Toward a Theory of ‘Dehabituation’

What, then, will prompt people to abandon their habitual routines for conscious deliberative effort, whether it be toward improving efficiency or toward (re-)assertion of some normative imperative? What sorts of conditions are likely to lead them to question hitherto ‘good enough’ routines? We are entering fairly uncharted terrain here since, as I have indicated, habit or routine are not usually taken to be the operative ‘principle of natural order’ in the literature. Here I will have to limit myself to some
general suggestions as to where we might start looking for the elements of a 'theory of dehabituation'.

There are some suggestive analogies in otherwise quite different literatures about the conditions that motivate people and institutions to abandon set routines for more deliberate forms of action. One recurring theme is that it takes some kind of external 'shock' to shake them out of their natural state of inertia. Kuhn's (1970) famous account of 'scientific revolutions' triggered by accumulating 'anomalies' and eventually provoking a 'paradigm shift' is, of course, a theory of dehabituation of sorts. In the field of policy studies, Hall (1993), takes his inspiration from Kuhn, arguing that policy-makers operate from within 'policy paradigms', received ideas about goals and means, which they are very resistant to give up. Only the accumulation of evident policy failures may end up discrediting the old paradigm, leading to 'a wide-ranging search for alternatives' that may produce a 'paradigm shift', according to Hall (1993, 291).Similarly, Krasner (1988) argues that it takes 'critical junctures' of transition and external challenge to upset institutional routines (see Visser & Hemerijck 1997, Ch.3 for a survey of related arguments). Or again, de Swaan (1996, 11) suggests that rational action is particularly relevant during periods of transition in which the 'rules of the game' for some collectivity are initially worked out, after which they soon turn into taken-for-granted routine.

DiMaggio (1997, 271) provides a very useful survey of the social-psychological literature showing that 'when sufficiently motivated, people can override programmed modes of thought to think critically and reflexively.' Three conditions have been found to facilitate shifts to 'deliberative modes of thought': when attention is attracted to a problem; when people are 'strongly motivated to do so by dissatisfaction with the status quo or by the moral salience of a particular issue' (ibid.); and, third, 'when existing schemata fail to account adequately for new stimuli' (272). As DiMaggio notes, there is an interesting parallel here with the finding of sociologists of culture to the effect that 'collectivities confronted with disjunctive social change construct new social representations (...) in order to interpret new stimuli' (1997, 272).

What this collection of hints from such varied quarters suggests, I think, is something of a theory of periodic rationalization. Periods of habitual behaviour are interrupted by events that draw people's attention to the possibility that current routines may have become counterproductive in some sense. This becomes the occasion for an episode of 'recalibration' in which alternative options are considered. Once a new course of action has been decided upon on grounds either of greater efficacy or normative
appropriateness, it tends to become routine in relatively short order. After a while, new events occur that tend to cast doubt on their continued appropriateness as well, and so on and so forth.\textsuperscript{26}

Empirical examples of such processes are not hard to come by. To begin with there are, of course, the examples given in the works just cited. The paradigm shifts in science in the wake of cumulating ‘anomalies’ analyzed by Kuhn (1970) are, of course, exemplary, indeed, paradigmatic, in this respect. Hall (1993) examines the case of the major shift from Keynesian orthodoxy to Thatcherian monetarism in British economic policy in response to mounting economic difficulties, social conflict and intense public debate. There are many well-known cases of periodic ‘watershed’ elections involving major electoral realignments that conform quite closely to the pattern just outlined (see, e.g., Hamilton 1972; 1975). The periodic realignment of wage-differentials after long periods of stability in labour markets is another well-documented case in point (see, e.g., Brown 1977; Marsden 1986). Fligstein (1990) identifies a similar pattern with respect to widely accepted corporate managerial strategies. One could easily go on.

But plausible and straightforward as the account and examples may be, they do not provide us with much of a theoretical handle on the processes that lead to the reasoned (though not necessarily instrumentally rational) reconsideration of settled routine. After all, it is practically tautological to say that people will pay attention to the problems to which their attention is drawn, or that they are concerned about things that they are dissatisfied with and/or that are morally salient to them! Can we really say nothing more sociologically interesting on the social conditions or about the kinds of ‘shocks’ or ‘anomalies’ that are conducive to the questioning of routines? While I am certainly not in a position to offer anything like a full-fledged theory here, a few simple ideas to start with come to mind.

First, not all ‘anomalies’ are created equal. De Swaan concedes, in an otherwise moderately critical piece about rational action theory, that ‘[i]n competitive situations where physical security, vital resources, or reputation are at stake, people will remain alert and attentive to advantages to be secured, damages to be avoided’ (De Swaan 1996, 5). Although, \textit{prima facie} at least (remember the ‘rational peasant’ debate!), there appear to be vast differences in the \textit{degree to and manner in which} people attend to these matters ‘rationally’ in different cultures, de Swaan is surely right that basic physical and moral security and comfort are among the most highly valued goods everywhere. This suggests a simple hypothesis: people will more readily attend to ‘anomalies’ that affect these vital concerns than others.
Conversely, as we know very well from the experimental social-psychological literature (Tversky & Kahneman 1986; Kahneman, Slovic & Tversky 1982; Henderson 1993, 83-5), people often resist attending to ‘anomalies’, at times quite stubbornly. Such resistance is a function, inter alia, of the degree of commitment to previously held beliefs (cf. Lieshout 1995, 43 and 40-6 generally). Although there are no doubt many factors that may affect the degree of commitment to established routine, one such factor must surely be the sheer length of time during which the routine in question appears to have ‘worked’. Thus, the older the habit, the less prepared people are likely to be to give it up or, conversely, the more obvious and disturbing the ‘anomalies’ have to be that will persuade them to do so. The converse corollary would be that the more recently a routine has been established the easier it is to give it up. But here the cost of establishing it will play a role as well: the harder it was to establish (involving a great amount of conflict, say) the more reluctant people will be to put it up for reconsideration once again. I suspect one could easily come up with a variety of such ‘sunk costs’ that may render people reluctant to give up established routines.

Another possibly useful implication can be drawn from the above skeleton account regarding the nature of the routines themselves. If it is true that habits are initially formed during some possibly long-forgotten period of deliberate decision-making, then current habits will reflect past but not necessarily present conditions. This simple fact may help to make some sense of quite a few apparently ‘irrational’ forms of behaviour by relating them to the most recent occasion when the behaviour was being debated and deliberated.

A third general factor that is likely to affect willingness to reconsider existing practice, besides commitment and importance, is the degree to which the actor’s intervention is likely to affect outcomes, that is, the degree to which s/he can influence or control the environment in question. This would seem to be particularly relevant for shifts from habit to rationalization. At one extreme, there are outcomes that are entirely unaffected by the actor’s interventions. In such cases, assuming s/he is aware of it, it obviously makes no sense wasting energy on finding a more effective course of action. Instead, actors are more likely to note with resignation whatever ‘anomalies’ present themselves and then to carry on in their set ways. At the other extreme, there are (even more fictitious) situations that are entirely controlled by the actor. By definition, such situations offer complete certainty as to the outcomes as well. Depending on the value of those outcomes to the actor, it would seem to make some sense for him/her to make some investment in finding out his/her most
rational course of action. However, precisely because of the total certainty involved, the actor is likely to find his/her preferred line of action relatively quickly and will then settle in a routine that, again by definition, will not be disturbed again.

These considerations suggest a curvilinear or U-shaped relationship: at very high levels of uncertainty there is little point in trying to be rational (or the costs of gathering information permitting one to make accurate predictions about alternative options is prohibitive) while at extremely low levels of uncertainty there is little need for rationalizing since long-established routines will continue to be efficient. Only at middling levels of uncertainty is it possible at all for there to be an incentive to rationalize. Or, to put it more succinctly, people are most likely to practice calculative rationality when uncertainty is neither so great as to make calculation futile nor so minimal as to make it redundant.\(^27\)

While perhaps not so easily operationalized (what levels of uncertainty would qualify as ‘middling’?), this hypothesis might have some interesting sociological uses. It might, for instance, help to explain resistance to efforts at efficiency improvement in places where people are accustomed to living in extreme uncertainty, or at the mercy of forces beyond their control. It may also help to account for why in certain places and domains rationalization does catch on. One could imagine recasting the Weberian theory of rationalization in terms of the intermediate levels of uncertainty emerging in certain domains of social life in certain parts of Europe since the late Renaissance. Once rational-calculative behaviour appears to pay off for those practicing it first (perhaps those who initially went furthest in conceiving of their environment as neither completely predictable nor entirely beyond their influence, such as Weber’s Calvinists; cf. Martinelli & Smelser 1990, 11) it is likely to catch on among others and spread. If it spreads beyond its initial domain the result may be a quite generalized ‘culture of rationality’ in which the pursuit of efficiency is endorsed very widely, and supported by an infrastructure (from the share listings in the financial pages to dating services) that helps reduce the cost of information gathering and processing.

In fact, under certain favourable conditions, the pursuit of efficiency may itself become ‘routinized’ in the sense that the monitoring of results and reconsideration of alternative options becomes institutionalized as routine practice. This is, one might argue, what businesses are in the business of doing. But, of course, the continuous search for better monitoring and managing routines is an almost defining feature of all modern organizations, including, as most of us are all too painfully aware, academia. One interesting implication of the argument I have been trying to
make here is that the fruits of such efforts at ‘routinizing’ rationality will always be somewhat precarious. For, there will be a constant tendency for new techniques of monitoring and managing to revert back to real, that is, thoughtless routine. Interestingly, Fligstein (1990) makes just this kind of argument about changing managerial ‘conceptions of control’: once adopted they become institutionalized into taken-for-granted routines until some outside shock forces managers to rethink them and work out a new one. In other words, for calculative-rational behaviour to persist a fairly regular stream of external disturbances is required. Otherwise, established practices will quickly turn into mindless habit. This is, of course, entirely in keeping with our argument.

So far, I have mostly discussed transitions from habitual to deliberately instrumental behaviour, although some of the above remarks should be equally applicable to transitions from habit to deliberate (re-)assertions of normative validity. Short of a full-fledged theory of the genesis of values and preferences, which is notoriously lacking, we are not in a position to predict whether any particular habit, once questioned, is more likely to become the subject of normative or instrumental ‘rationalization’. Moreover, what used to be moral issues may become subject to considerations of expediency just as matters of expediency may become morally highly charged. But at least one, perhaps somewhat trivial, hypothesis would be that habits that, at the time of their most recent deliberate institution, were primarily justified on normative grounds are, when questioned, more likely to be subjected to normative than instrumental scrutiny and debate. Another, slightly more speculative one is that habits which are of normative origin are most likely to be disturbed by social contestation or conflict while instrumental routines may also be upset by other kinds of events showing that they ceased to be effective (such as a decline in profitability or loss of popularity). This follows from the simple fact that, by definition, instrumentally motivated action refers to desired states of the world which may or may not obtain whereas normatively motivated action refers to a system of normative prescriptions to which one may or may not subscribe.

Having come down the treacherous path of wild speculation this far, perhaps I may be permitted one final, exceedingly tentative suggestion. Thinking about the effects of the vitality of the interests affected and of the controllability of the environment has caused me to wonder whether there might not be an embryonic theory of rationalization/normativization in there somewhere. As I have suggested already, the strongest incentive towards attempting to render one’s actions more instrumentally effective would appear to be found in situations where the interests affected are relatively vital while the environment is moderately controllable. But what
happens when vital interests are at stake in an extremely volatile, unpredictable environment? Given the importance of the interests, there would seem to be a strong incentive to deliberate carefully about the most appropriate course of action. But given the uncertainty in the environment, careful information gathering and rational calculation may not be of much avail. Perhaps it is especially in such conditions that people will tend to formulate normative justifications for their actions once their habitual practices are challenged?

But I must control the urge to speculate further. My aim in this section was simply to suggest some obvious ingredients for a possible theory of 'dehabituation'. While I apologize for their unsystematic nature, I do hope they help persuade readers of the potential fruitfulness of the theoretical strategy I have recommended: the focus on the pursuit of efficiency rather than some 'objective' standard and the theoretical primacy of habit rather than norms or reason.

5. Conclusion

I realize that I am likely to have satisfied neither side in the ongoing disputes between advocates of rational action theory and proponents of cultural-normative (or 'institutional' or 'sociological') approaches. On the one hand, I have sided with the latter in arguing that, given the variability in the degree of rationality, rational action itself should be a major explanandum. On the other hand, the basic assumption on which I recommend building such an explanation, economizing on information and deliberation costs, has a definite rational action ring to it.

To prospective critics on the cultural-sociological side I would have to repeat the frequent challenge posed to them by rational action theorists: show us a better theory and we will happily abandon this one. Of course, there is an impressive tradition of sociological-historical accounts of 'the rise of the West' and thus, by implication, of its characteristic culture of individualism and rationalism (see, e.g., Schluchter 1981; Mann 1986; 1993; Hall 1985). But these accounts, precisely because they tend to be so richly descriptive of the myriad factors affecting and affected by the master trends they identify, tend to be theoretically exceedingly elusive. As I have already hinted, I strongly suspect that when one examines the often implicit theories employed in this work to account for those trends, one arrives at something akin to what I have sketched out above.

To prospective critics from the rational action camp I would repeat that, in the absence of any singular 'objective' maximization criterion, we are
left with a variable 'subjective' criterion that necessitates a plausible account of why actors considered the information they used and the deliberations they conducted 'good enough', for each case of social action to be explained. To render the account plausible, one can either tacitly appeal to the audience's intuitive sensibilities ('you might have done the same in such a situation'), which are, naturally, more or less severely circumscribed by the audience's own situation and imagination, \(^3\) or appeal to some more or less well-established theoretical hunches of the sort suggested here. Whereas many rational action theorists no doubt expect that the first strategy will, as successful explanations of this kind accumulate, eventually produce a more general theory of the second kind (recall the 'yardstick' defense mentioned earlier), I see no reason why the matter cannot be approached from both sides at once.

Nor would I wish to suggest that the approach proposed here should or even could in any way replace either rational action theory or the sociology of culture. It continues to make excellent sense to try and understand other people's behaviour by first asking the question: what state of the world are they trying to realize? But it will also be necessary to follow through with the next question: why did they think the means they chose were adequate for the realization of that state of the world? Such questions, and whatever plausible answers to them that we will be able to generate with our research, will, no doubt, continue to turn up examples from all manner of cultural and historical settings where people do, indeed, turn out to act with varying degrees of purposive rationality.

The sociology of culture, as well, should continue to investigate the 'logics' of value- and norm- formation and destruction in various communities, the processes by which their observation is monitored and secured, and so on. There is, in addition, the entire field of the formation of preferences which has been left untouched by rational action theorists on the grounds that it is too hard to tackle systematically. But if preferences are as varied and unstable as is often claimed, then this will have to be tackled somehow before any satisfactory theory of social action, rational or otherwise, can be formulated at all. In any case, sociologists of culture, too, will continue to turn up examples from all manner of cultural and historical settings where people do, indeed, turn out to act with varying degrees of normative commitment.

Both approaches, then, remain eminently sensible and indeed complementary strategies for continuing to map the social world. What does not make any sense is the piling up of examples of either apparently instrumental or apparently purely normatively motivated action in order to shore up dogma about what humans are really like. For far too long, the ongoing
disputes between advocates of rational choice theory and their critics have been of just this dogmatic nature. It is high time now to begin thinking about and investigating under what conditions one type of action is more likely than the other, and how, and why.

Noten

*1 thank Geert de Vries, Joop Goudsblom, Bob Lieshout, Tony Masi, Henry Milner, Mike Smith, Joe Smucker, René Torenvlied, Nico Wilterdink, the participants in the seminar of the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research that invited me to present these ideas for the first time, and the editorial board of the Amsterdam Sociologisch Tijdschrift, for their generous comments on an earlier version of this paper. Many of their criticisms and suggestions require rethinking of various aspects of my argument far beyond the minor revisions that I have been able to make so far. While I do intend to undertake such a more fundamental revision in the near future, I thought it worthwhile publishing this paper in its present form in the hope of provoking more reactions that will help me improve and sharpen up the general argument.

1. This story is, obviously, inspired by the well-known ‘rational peasant debate’ between, a.o., Scott (1977) and Popkin (1979). However, it is not intended to endorse either side in this debate, much less to make any a priori case for one or the other. In fact, much of what I will have to say in this paper is meant to question the utility of such a priori position-taking in the first place.

2. No association with the Freudian notion of ‘rationalization’, that is, retrospective justification on grounds other than those which originally motivated the action, is, of course intended. In fact, as used here, the term refers to quite the opposite, viz., the conscious search for good reasons to undertake an action before it is undertaken.

3. ‘So far as we are concerned, our economic subjects can be pure egoists, pure altruists, pure ascetics, pure sensu­lists or - what is much more likely - mixed bundles of all these impulses’ (Robbins 1962, 95).

4. Provided, of course, that it is clear that ‘efficiency’ here is used strictly from the point of view of the individual actor and his/her options and preferences, not in the sense of the allocative efficiency that is allegedly produced by perfectly competitive markets in the economy.

5. Strictly speaking, this is true only for ‘bounded rationality’ theory. For the major difference between it and information cost economics is that the latter assumes actors will arrive at a calculable optimal equilibrium whereas the former insist that such solutions merely lead to infinite regress and that actors are, therefore, forced to use various ‘rules of thumb’ to decide when to cut the potentially infinite process of IGAD short, (cf. Simon 1979, 503-6; also Elster 1989a, 15-17; 1983, Ch.1). But, as Conlisk (1996, 690-1) makes clear, this difference has nothing to do with any inherent differences between information gathering and deliberation.

6. As should become clear in the discussion that follows, I am in no way falling back on any kind of ‘latent function’ argument here.

7. Assuming, of course, that tasks are
repetitive and take place in a relatively stable environment (see below).

8. As Goudsblom (1996, 22) notes, 'while we can imagine that the prevailing practices were invented at some time in the past as a new solution to problems of social living, by now they have become a longstanding tradition... Strategies that were once new and "rational" can become a matter of routine in the course of time. Reason lends itself to routinization just as much as charisma.'

9. This may sound very similar to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, a set of predispositions ensuring 'the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the "correctness" of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms' (Bourdieu 1990a, 54). However, as the reference to 'schemes of perception, thought and action' suggests, Bourdieu seems to mean *much more* than mere, more or less readily abandoned habit. This is why his concept, and the uses he has made of it, has been so vigorously criticized for its thorough-going determinism - his many, strenuous protestations to the contrary notwithstanding (e.g., 1990b, 115-9; see also Van den Berg 1997, 212-220).

10. Milton Friedman (1953) has famously replied to such criticisms with the argument that the empirical validity of the assumptions of the model is entirely irrelevant - and that it was, at any rate, untestable - as long as the model's predictions were tolerably accurate, or at least more accurate than competing models. His 'radical pragmatism' has been the subject of much controversy and criticism, by fellow economists no less than by others (see, e.g., Simon 1963; Samuelson 1963; Boland 1979; Mooney Marini 1992, 32; Farmer 1992, 419, fn.10).

11. Thus Buckley and Casson (1993, 1036): 'Critics of economic theory often find it difficult to understand how economics manages to survive what they perceive to be their devastating critics. One reason is that they do not offer a better system - just the prospect of a more complicated system, or even no system at all.'


13. I follow Goldthorpe (1998, 187, fn.3) in using rational action theory rather than rational choice theory to emphasize that we are concerned with action in general rather than with choice only.

14. There has been some debate about whether this is in fact the implication Popper himself was prepared to draw (see Goldthorpe 1998, 172 and sources cited there). Intriguingly, Coleman comes remarkably close to this position as well when he states that 'since understanding an individual's action ordinarily means seeing the reasons behind the action, then the theoretical aim of social science must be to conceive of that action in a way that makes it rational from the point of view of the actor. Or put another way, much of what is ordinarily described as nonrational or irrational is merely so because the observers have not discovered the point of view of the actor, from which the action is rational' (1990, 18, emph. in orig.). But then he proceeds to argue for the criterion of utility maximization as well, apparently assuming, as many economists have done, that if only you look closely enough you will find out not only how action makes sense to the actors but also that it in fact obeys the precept of utility maximization.

15. Farmer (1992, 415) formulates a very similar position thus: 'Rational choice theory, as general social theory, suggests that in all human societies, however
empirically varied their forms, the same fundamental causal mechanism drives human action. The theory proposes that in virtue of the kinds of things that they are, human actors act purposively, trying through the actions they take to bring about states of the world that they prefer. Thus the rational action assumption constitutes a theoretical claim about a causal mechanism. The mechanism is hypothesized to be operative, whether or not the actor’s desired goals are in fact achieved... Nevertheless, in combination with hypotheses about actors’ purposes, their knowledge, and the constraints they face, rational choice theories generate explanations of social events, which do entail empirical implications.’

16. For a strikingly similar argument but based on the tradition of ‘institutionalist’ economics and without any reference whatsoever to the sociological classics, see Ramstad (1993, 182-8).

17. Note, however, that most of these arguments are  really based on the allegedly deleterious purposes that such rationalization of action is said to serve, especially the satisfaction of individual, selfish, material needs and desires. That is, they are criticisms of the ‘atomization’ of modern societies where isolated individuals are encouraged to satisfy their individual material desires without concern for the wider community, rather than of the efficiency with which they pursue these goals. Only the theorists of the Frankfurt School tradition of ‘critical theory’ have mounted any sustained argument along these lines against ‘instrumental rationality’ (i.e. rationalizing) as such (see Horkheimer & Adorno 1972; Jay 1973; Habermas 1984; 1987; also Van den Berg 1980; 1990).

18. The irony of this is not lost on Buckley and Casson, who concede (1993, 1036): ‘This points to a paradox: that it is because people are, in fact, of limited rationality, that it is useful for them to assume that other people are perfectly rational when interpreting their behavior.’ Similarly, Simon notes with some glee that the recommendation to settle for a theory simply because it works ‘well enough’ only shows that economists who are zealous in insisting that economic actors maximize turn around and become satisficers when the evaluation of their own theories is concerned’ (1979, 495).

19. The underlying assumptions are particularly clear in the following quote: ‘To assume that persons come equipped with a moral code would exclude all processes of socialization from theoretical examination. And to assume altruism or unselfishness would prevent the construction of theory about how persons come to act on behalf of others or on behalf of a collectivity when it goes against their private interests’ (Coleman 1990, 32).

20. As Ingham (1996, 262) notes, the tacit assumption of well-functioning competitive markets as the baseline by neoclassical economists turns other kinds of arrangements, such as bureaucratic hierarchies, into the things to be explained, as in the ‘transaction costs’ tradition of Coase (1937) and Williamson (1975; 1981). For a similar argument with respect to the neoclassical treatment of labour markets, see Marsden (1986).

21. Elsewhere Coleman (1986, 17) even more graphically contrasts ‘man as wholly free: unsocialized, entirely self-interested, not constrained by the norms of a system, but only rationally calculating to further his own self-interest’ to ‘a socialized creature whose freedom has been stripped from him by the norms of society and by the process that socialized him’ (ibid., 16).

22. Bourdieu (1990, 80) notes this interesting tendency but ascribes it, rather curiously, in particular to the ‘dominant
world-view' promulgated by those 'who have the monopoly on discourse about the social world'.

23. But then Parsons was, of course, quite forcefully attacked for his deterministic approach by George Homans, who purported to 'bring men back in' by means of a variant of... rational choice theory (see Homans 1964!)

24. I have, it would seem, informally defined 'normatively motivated' behaviour here to be very close to Weber's notion of Wertrationalität (Weber 1978, 24-6). But unlike Weber, I also include some of his 'traditional' behaviour, at least to the extent that tradition is followed more or less consciously, as in the case of the village elders in my second story. This reflects the fact that for me the crucial issue is whether action is deliberare rather than habitual. As a result, I would classify at least some of the more routine zweckrationala and wertrationala Handeln, as well as the habitual following of tradition under 'habitual action'.

Furthermore, I have left affective action completely out of consideration here, not because I think it is unimportant, but because I am not sure what to do with it, given the deplorable state of professional neglect of this type of action among sociologists. There is no question in my mind that it plays a large role in social life, that it is in some sense at least as 'primordial' as I have argued habit to be, but that it is also subject to extensive social regulation and manipulation. But unfortunately, as Jon Elster observes, '[t]he importance of emotions in human life is matched only by the neglect they have suffered at the hands of philosophers and social scientists' (1989, 61). Perhaps the work of Elias (1978-82; 1983; 1998; Mennell 1989) and his followers can serve as a starting point here.

25. Of course, Kuhn himself treated revolutionary paradigm shifts as quintessentially non-rational events akin to religious conversion, and routine periods of 'normal science' as, in terms of the dominant paradigm at least, eminently rational. Hall's and my rendition of Kuhn, describing paradigm crises as occasions for re-rationalizing taken-for-granted routines, may well appear to turn him on his head. What mainly interests me here, however, is his idea of an accumulation of unsettling anomalies that eventually provokes the abandonment of settled routines and habits, not the process, rational or otherwise, by which they get replaced. I suspect, in any case, that his somewhat elusive ideas about that process may, on the whole, well be quite wrong (see on this, e.g., Weinberg 1998).

26. The reader may again be reminded of the notion of habitus. Indeed, Bourdieu explicitly allows for the possibility of more or less conscious adjustments in the predispositions that constitute habitus in '[t]imes of crises, in which the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures is brutally disrupted... But, and this is a crucial proviso, it is habitus itself that commands this option. We can always say that individuals make choices, as long as we do not forget that they do not choose the principle of these choices' (Wacquant 1989, 45). The 'crucial proviso' points, once again, to the much more all-encompassing notion he seems to have in mind. His habitus already includes the very perceptual schemes by which people recognize and respond to such crises whereas I am trying to work out what regularities there may be in such responses. It is in part because of his all-enveloping definition of habitus, I suspect, that Bourdieu never really does get around to specifying or even examining its internal mechanisms any further (see Van den Berg 1997, 212-220).

27. See Ingham (1996, 270, fn.1) for a
similar argument about the relationship between 'marketness' and efficiency.
28. This being the oft-repeated reason for economists and rational action theorists to treat preferences as 'exogenous' (e.g., Goldthorpe 1998, 187, fn.4).
29. For instance, excessive deference to social 'superiors' may come to be viewed as interfering with the efficiency of communication between hierarchical levels; conversely, casually instrumental sexual relations between hierarchical superiors and inferiors may become morally reprehensible.
30. It is, I suspect, this circumstance rather than because 'human life is inherently uncertain and unpredictable' (Farmer 1992, 417), that most rational action theory has had only 'retrodictive empirical implications' (ibid., 418) so far.

Literatuur


Hernes, Gudmund. 1992. 'We Are Smarter Than We Think', Rationality and Society, Vol. 4, No 4, pp. 421-436.


