INTRODUCTION

It is hard for me to decide whether I should be elated or depressed by the fact that over 2000 years ago, Aristotle had already thought about the problem that I am addressing now, which is more or less the relationship of rationality and ethics. He not only thought about it but also achieved insights to which we have found it difficult to add. In his analysis he separated ethics from politics in explicit recognition of the dialectic tension between the man and the citizen--between the particular and the universal. In Aristotle's own words (or rather in W.D. Ross' translation):

If the state cannot be entirely composed of good men, and yet each citizen is expected to do his own business well, and must therefore have virtue, still, inasmuch as all citizens cannot be alike, the virtue of the citizen and the good man cannot coincide. All must have the virtue of the good citizen--thus, and thus only, can the state be perfect; but they will not have the virtue of a good man, unless we assume that in a good state all the citizens must be good (1).

In the early nineteenth century Hegel tied the Gordian knot connecting personal morality with social choice by postulating

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1 Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation. The help of Professor Stuart F. Spicker is gratefully acknowledged.
that in the rational state, personal morality is preserved (aufgehoben).

Many discussions of rationality leave the impression that there is but one rationality whose meaning encompasses all situations, and that those who would argue otherwise are confused. It is my view that the notion of a free-standing rationality is incoherent. Rationality must be looked upon as embedded in a particular ethical theory that applies to personal morality, public choices, and distributive justice. The qualifier "rational" can be used to describe an act or a preference that is consonant with a system of ethics as long as it is understood that this system has a unique structure. Two key features of this structure are the strong link between rationality and personal morality and the equally strong link between distributive justice and social choice. There is a third but weaker link--consent--which holds personal morality, public morality, and social choices together. This is a peculiarly Hegelian consent that does not emanate from consensus but is embodied in the rationality of the state. Once the principles of personal morality are settled, rationality is determined subject only to compatibility with criteria for social choice; in other words, criteria of rationality cannot be specified independently of personal morality. Similarly, public choices cannot be made in defiance of the accepted principles of distributive justice. If for certain combinations of individual preferences and social choice it proves impossible to reach agreement and establish consent, political adjustment mechanisms have to be brought into play. In a democracy this is ordinarily part of the established political process; in an authoritarian government such adjustments can prove traumatic.

Only when it is assumed that there is but one acceptable system of ethics can one draw the inference that there is only one rationality. Classical utilitarianism does this: It presents a model of a coherent and complete system of ethics which purports to be able to deal consistently with issues raised by questions of rationality. This unified theory, based on a single set of axioms, has a beautiful simplicity; it is achieved, however, by sacrificing much of the ethical content and substance of morality. I intend to show that because the link between personal morality and social choice is weak, it permits a much richer concept of rationality than utilitarianism warrants. Furthermore, it would devalue the attraction and the advantages of a unified theory.

Modifications of classical utilitarianism introduced to cope with the moral neutrality of that theory lead naturally to principles of distributive justice which are based on more than