A major problem in the philosophy of action is what constitutes a rational action on the part of an individual person. This problem is also important in the social sciences, particularly insofar as their tasks may be conceived as conceptual or critical, and in ethics, which has traditionally viewed the relation between rational action and moral action as one of its major problems. Rational action will be a central concern of this paper; but since the rationality of an action is apparently dependent on that of the agent's motivation and cognition, we must also explore what constitutes the rationality of motivational and cognitive elements, and how it bears on that of actions based on them. Thus, beliefs and wants, which may be plausibly conceived as the basic cognitive and motivational elements, will be one of our major concerns. The rationality of values will also be explored. This is in part because there has been so much controversy over whether our basic values can be rational and in part because, if they can be, that is important for understanding rational action.

Section I will assess a highly influential conception of rational action — instrumentalism — and critically compare it with broader views. Section II will consider developments and refinements in instrumentalism, particularly by Carl Hempel. Section III will briefly consider a contextualist approach to rational action and will address the controversy between Hempel and William Dray. In Section IV, an important contemporary account of rational action, Richard Brandt's, will be explored. Against this background, Section V will introduce a largely new conception of rational action. This conception is inspired by the analogy between the theory of action and the theory of knowledge. Section V will develop this conception and indicate some directions for further research. The concluding section will point out some of the ways in which the rationality of actions is related to that of persons and will suggest how our results bear on theoretical work in the social sciences.

I. THE INSTRUMENTALIST CONCEPTION OF RATIONAL ACTION

A natural way to approach the question of what constitutes rational action is to consider what it is to go about realizing one's aims in a rational way. For
the question whether an action is rational very commonly arises when it is
not clear that the action well serves some aim(s) the agent has in performing
it. It usually does not arise when an action can be seen to be a satisfactory
way to realize what appear to be the agent's aims in the circumstances.
One might think, then, that the crucial mark of a rational action is its ap­
propriateness to the aim(s) of the agent at the time of action. This approach
is reinforced by the view, held or suggested by many philosophers, that an
action is rational only if it arises from practical reasoning. For it is then
natural to construe the rationality of the action in terms of how good a
means it is, judged on the assumption of the truth of the premises of the
reasoning, to realize the aim expressed in the major premise. To be sure,
a proponent of this view might still want to take account of whether the
aim and the belief(s) expressed in the premises are themselves rational; but
as we shall see, an instrumentalist may argue that this question is not strictly
relevant to the rationality of the action. If what is really crucial to rational
action is its success as a means to realizing one or more of the agent's aims,
then the character of these aims should be irrelevant, except insofar as
realizing one may be at odds with realizing another or with maximum realiza­
tion of the overall set.

On an instrumentalist approach to rational action, one will be especially
interested(600,370),(905,410) in cases in which the agent (S) has not only one or more aims,
but also quite specific beliefs about what constitute his alternatives and
their possible outcomes. It is an empirical question how common such
cases are, but they have seemed common enough to most instrumentalists and
many others to give great interest to the conception of rational actions as,
paradigmatically, those that maximize expectable utility. Roughly, S's
A-ing maximizes his expectable utility if, and only if, it has at least as much
expected utility as any alternative he supposes he has.

The expected utility of an action, on this view, is computed as follows:
one determines (a) the courses of action S supposes he has, (b) what he
believes are their possible outcomes, and (c) the subjective value for S (using
arbitrarily chosen numbers from negative to positive) of each outcome;
one then multiplies the subjective value of each outcome by the subjective
probability of that outcome, and adds these products for each alternative
action. A rational action for S in such a situation is one with a score at
least as high as that of any of S's alternatives. Consider Sue, a surgeon who
supposes she has two options: surgery and non-intervention. (The patient,
let us assume, has asked Sue to make the final decision.) Sue might regard
surgery as having a probability of .60 of curing the patient, an outcome she