Review Essay

Can Emotions Be Rational?

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For a social scientist, Jon Elster is perhaps the most interesting philosopher at work today. Prolific and creative, he has examined and expanded rational-choice theory in a number of directions. In most hands, this is a dull mathematical approach of little interest to sociologists, but Elster pushes its limits to shed light on a number of basic aspects of social action, interaction, and structure. With the eminent good sense and careful argumentation of which philosophers at their best are capable, Elster has recently turned his attention to emotions.

Alchemy of the Mind is uncharacteristically long, with each of its five chapters nearly as long as a typical Elster volume. After the first chapter argues for explanation by mechanism, the other four go at emotions from varying angles. One chapter looks at emotions as analyzed before modern psychology: in Aristotle, in the essays of the French moralists, and in literature. The next examines cultural variations in emotional expression. Chapter four turns to the relationship between rationality and emotion, and chapter five looks at how we misrepresent our motivations to ourselves and others. Fertile examples and arguments abound.

Challenging contemporary psychology, Elster claims that our richest sources of understanding of emotions have been introspection and literature. He is more persuasive, I found, on the former than the latter. Introspection and first-person narratives are anathema to sociologists. Yet surely we cannot understand the power of emotions without introspection, and why not report the results of that introspection?
through personal narrative? Elster’s literary evidence is less convincing. Fictional plots and characters are designed to transfixed and move audiences, but they rarely do this by being accurate reflections of reality. Tropes are not people. Thus Elster has a hard time making sense of Iago and his emotions, several times simply admitting that he is “exceptional” (p. 165) or “may not be the typical pattern” (p. 198). The truths of art are not those of social science.

Strong Feelings is, like most of Elster’s books, short and punchy. He identifies a set of “visceral factors” in human behavior that seem to propel us to action despite our cognition and intention. We cannot easily refuse these impulses. There are almost purely physiological states such as hunger, thirst, and lust; the need to urinate or defecate; fatigue or nausea. Then there are addictions, with the cravings and euphorias they entail. Finally, there are emotions, the most social of these strong feelings. All these have yet to be incorporated adequately into social theory, even in approaches that claim to have rediscovered the body.

Such sensations, many of them relatively independent of social construction, are especially a challenge to traditional rational-choice images of careful decision-makers maximizing a menu of goals. As Elster puts it (p. 195), “Intense pain, intense shame, intense sexual arousal, and intense craving for cocaine have in common a capacity to derail the agent from his normal mode of functioning and to induce behaviors that go against what external observers and the agent himself, before and after the visceral experience, would deem to be in his best interest.” If this is not a form of irrationality, then nothing in the human repertory is.

Indeed, one of the ways that Elster differs from duller rational-choice theorists is his insistence that rationality is a variable, not a constant. Just as behavioral economists and cognitive psychologists have demonstrated a number of systematic shortcomings in human decision-making capacities, so Elster carefully describes certain ways addiction and particular emotions may interfere with rationality. This contrasts with a number of economically oriented students of emotions, notably Ronald de Sousa and Robert Frank, who have tried to show that seemingly irrational emotions have a hidden purpose—or did at an earlier point in evolution. It is just this kind of sweeping claim that leads so many sociologists to dismiss rational-choice approaches.

Although emotions sometimes derail long-term rationality and planning, there are still innumerable connections between emotion and cognition, and these provide the meat of both books. Normally, for instance, emotions are triggered by some belief about the state of the world, and often subside in the face of new information. If nothing else, most emotions have a direct object, so that information about that object can change them. More interestingly, Elster is particularly attentive to cognitions about emotions themselves. Because we have labels for

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2 An article in this journal by Jennifer Pierce made me wonder why more sociologists do not use first-person narratives in qualitative sociology. In addition to emotions, a likely subject matter on which personal experience offers unique evidence is the study of strategic choice.