A Bad Argument for Good Reasons

Robert Nadeau
Département de philosophie
Université de Québec à Montréal

1. In general we agree to recognize the existence, if not the methodological fertility or epistemological legitimacy, of a "rationalist model," at least when we refer to what economists do when they offer explanations.1 However two remarks must be made about this. First, it must be emphasized that this model is not unique, but generic: in fact, it is more a family of models of which the fundamental theoretical suppositions are susceptible to large variations. There are here, as it were, several possible axiomatic bases. One formulation is, for example and to use von Mises's term, praxeological (axed on means/end relation). Another emphasizes the preference/constraint relation (Harsanyi). Other contrasting models are those putting forward the maximization of expected utility (von Neumann-Morgenstern) and those making the satisficing hypothesis (Simon). Second, however, it must also be said that philosophers of science do not really agree on what is asserted by the "principle of rationality" or on what is its status. For example, Popper (1982) made it a minimal empirical hypothesis, or practically empty, and denied, furthermore, that it was a universally valid psychological law. Hempel (1965) did not hesitate, in contrast, to make it a law of experimental psychology which would play an implicit or explicit role in any adequate and complete explanation of behaviour or action in social sciences or history. Dray, to cite another classic author (cf. Dray 1957), made this principle the base for the explanations of historians, but denied it the status of a nomological proposition. In consequence, it is difficult to proceed as if there were a theoretical consensus among researchers when they base their explanatory arguments on the rationality of agents. This is clearly not the case. However, Raymond Boudon is right to consider the "rationalist model" an extension to all the social sciences of the model of explanation which is found at the base of what has been called the "marginalist revolution" in economics. This is true, at least if one refers to neo-classical economic theory, which supposes, among other things, the transitivity of agents'
preferences, the possession of reliable information, as well as the maximization of subjective utility. However, as history has brought to light, this basic theoretical model is inadequate: it only provides the expected deductive results if the agents have complete information, if transaction costs are non-existent and if agents are endowed with supranormal calculating capacities, which is psychologically implausible. Even supposing we relax some of the requirements and weaken some of the excessively strong suppositions of the neo-classical model, we can only admit that we do not presently have a theoretical model of rational action which is adequate and unanimously accepted. In this sense, far from being established, the "rationalist model of explanation" is yet to be worked out.

2. Raymond Boudon asserts moreover that other explanatory models are possible and plausible. He himself points out the sociologists' model, which supposes the agent's interiorization of norms and values which make him act in one way rather than in another. I am far from convinced that theoreticians have a choice between only these two approaches to research. Furthermore, it is not at all clear that the sociological model to which Raymond Boudon makes reference is not itself an instance of the generic rationalist model since this model certainly refers to, at some point, the rationality of the agent. Whatever the case may be, there is, in particular, a third approach - let's call it, for lack of anything better, the "interpretative" or hermeneutic approach, - of which the crucial claim is to dismiss the above two explanatory models by arguing that the same damning defect affects them both. More precisely, the claim is that both of these "scientistic" models aim to manipulate human beings without really making possible the understanding of individual or collective action.² However, this approach could certainly be considered not radically different from the "rationalist model", which minimally supposes that one is acting rationally if one acts according to the reasons one finds most convincing. That solutions other than the rationalist explanatory model or alternative research approaches are in fact available is far from given. Raymond Boudon himself tries to refine this rationalist model rather than to argue against it, and this is where the concept of "good reasons" comes into his analysis.
According to Raymond Boudon, the rationalist model generalized from economic theory has a universal claim: it aims to subsume all human behaviour under its concepts and to explain all the facts and actions of the psychological and social life of individuals (and in particular of their cognitive and volitive life) through appeal to the same set of hypotheses. I do not believe that this thesis is well-founded. In any case, it is equivocal because the economists' rationalist model applies only to action proper and not to every kind of behaviour. The rationalist model is, among other things, of no interest in analyzing acts which could be called "gratuitous," impulsive reflexes, emotional reactions or any form of mechanical or automatic behaviour. Thus, only intentional action, motivated and deliberate, makes up its true domain. Its scope extends only to action motivated by reasons for acting and by beliefs capable of justifying the means the agent eventually chooses. Therefore, contrary to what Raymond Boudon's way of presenting the situation could lead one to believe, the rationalist model of action does not claim to be a complete theory of behaviour. In the same vein, I must say that it is far from clear that the same rationalist model must be applicable both to action in the practical or praxeological sense and to belief formation or to belief revision. Raymond Boudon is certainly ready to distinguish between "behaviour" and "psychosomatic state," but he does not seem willing to distinguish between practical and cognitive activity. The main point of his argument is in effect that the principal limitation of the rationalist model lies in the fact that it has not been noticed that some unintentional behaviour is nonetheless motivated by reasons while remaining "purposeless." Everything hangs on whether the subjectivist conversion Raymond Boudon performs in his text - a theoretical strategy which passes thanks to the use of the concept of "good reasons" - is an efficient and legitimate strategy. I would like to show that this central concept is at least extremely problematic.

Echoing Weber, Raymond Boudon states that "there is a type of rationality which is not goal- but rather value-oriented". The situations for which Boudon is trying to enlarge our traditional concept of rationality are those primarily, if not exclusively, concerned by belief, be it cognitive or
normative. The thesis here is that because we act upon beliefs, we need a concept of rationality which can be predicated of beliefs, seen themselves as kinds of purposeless actions. And, in Boudon's view, "subjective rationality" refers to precisely the "good reasons" one ordinarily invokes to justify one's behaviour, be it of practical or epistemic nature. But what is a "good reason" to act? This is hardly crystal-clear. A clarification is thus needed, and, before we go any further, certain fundamental distinctions absolutely must be made. Let us go back to the situation in which we are looking for an explanation for someone's action. In such a situation, the question of what sorts of reasons could seem good in the eyes of the agent should, it seems to me, be kept apart from the question of what sorts of reasons a researcher would consider good explanations for the agent's action. First, the reasons which justify someone in acting are not necessarily those which actually make him act as he does. Second, the reasons we ascribe to the agent at the time at which he acts should not be identified with the reasons the agent gives as justification after completion of the action. Third, the reasons one overtly provides to justify his way of acting must be dissociated from the unknown reasons which really lead him to act, and these hidden reasons may or may not be accessible to the agent or to the person who attempts to explain the action. Fourth, the real reasons which could explain an individual action must not be confused with the more-or-less spontaneous "theories" the agent will advance to explain to himself and to others why he performed his action. And on this point, we must no doubt look back to Hayek, who drew our attention to this possible confusion and distinguished between the reasons put forward by the agent himself (which are themselves to be distinguished from Freudian rationalizations and the stories one makes up to convince oneself) and the true reasons for the action. Fifth, it must be accepted that the reasons that drive someone to intend to do something voluntarily or intentionnally are not necessarily the reasons for which he will perform the action - an action he might not perform, moreover, since it has been shown, it seems, that one can have the intention to deliberately do something without really having any reason to do it. All these "reasons" are, I think, "good reasons" to beware of what is meant when reasons for action are appealed to explain action. In the end, we seem condemned to recognize - rather trivially, moreover - that the only good reasons which could explain an action are
the (intentional?) causes which could explain its bringing into play. Without resorting to a nomological hypothesis, it seems, indeed, that we are unable to provide any authentic explanation not so much of a unique or isolated action performed by someone, but of the action which leads to the setting up of institutions, in other words, an action bearing unintentional consequences which lead others to act, to consult each other, to coordinate themselves, to unite, to react, to plan, to undertake, etc. This is to say that the only acceptable "good reasons" for an action whatsoever are those which explain it (deductively or inductively), and not those which can justify it.

5. However, the problem only becomes more complicated when it is not only to reasons, but more specifically to “good reasons” in the justificatory sense, to which one wants to appeal to explain the action. This is why I would like to end these comments by drawing attention to one last conceptual problem, which is directly related to the concept of "good reasons." Raymond Boudon - in this respect he is neither the first nor the last - uses this expression to denote, among other things, "the reasons given by an agent and which one would give (or would have given) if one were (or had been) in the same situation as he." The reasons in question here are thus those which inevitably must be endorsed by he who tries to explain the action in terms of a conditional counterfactual argument. However, this argument supposes the possibility of, if not reconstructing, at least very precisely imagining oneself in, the same situation as someone else. It is not clear that it is possible to do this or that this is truly conceptually imaginable. At first glance it might seem plausible that this difficulty comes from the fact that we do not know enough about the criteria for identity of situations. When are we to say that, as a matter of fact, two different situations are "the same" (token indentity), or at least that they are of the same type? This is far from obvious even though we act as if it posed no problem whatsoever. However, even if we had a satisfactory response to this first question, we would not be much further ahead, for what is in question here is the well-foundedness of the following counterfactual argument: "if we were in the same situation as x, x's reasons would appear to us to be good reasons for acting as he does." However such an argument - which is very common, I agree - is not entirely self-evident. First, I emphasize, our common,
everyday intuitions require, essentially, that each and every one of us see himself as relatively unique: we are the only ones who can be like ourselves, and no other person can, in the end, really be in our shoes. There are certainly occasional similarities of situation, possible contextual analogies, certain “family resemblances” between various circumstances - but, in the last analysis, the impression of the singularity of each person's existence wins out, and each of us ends by believing, and having the right to believe, that no one can really take the place of any one else. Even supposing the substitution argument works for people other than oneself (a third-person argument: "this person is or seems to be in the same situation as that person"), each of us rapidly comes to have the innermost conviction that no one else would be able to substitute themselves perfectly for us in all cases (a first-person argument: "I am not you" and its converse: "you are not me"). The empathetic reasoning sketched out above is, as it were, a kind of illusion which leads to nothing and masks the irreducibility of each person's situation. In short, in situational logic, there are no identical twins. Thus, if the idea of "good reasons" requires the possibility that one could put himself in another's place to explain that person's action, it leads straight to a dead end. Furthermore, the conditional counterfactual argument which is supposed to provide us with the meaning which should be given to the eminently problematic notion of "good reasons" itself uses this notion, which makes it circular. This argument is, I believe, a bad one, and there seem to be sufficient troubling reasons to think that this particular characterization of the concept of "good reasons" is aporetic.
References

Dray W.

Hayek F.

Hempel C.G.

Kavka G.

Lavoie D.

Mele A.

Popper K.R.

Taylor C.

Van Parijs P.

Walliser B.
1992 «Rationalité instrumentale et rationalité cognitive», Cahiers d'épistémologie (Département de philosophie, Université du Québec à Montréal), No 9212.
Notes

1. An excellent presentation of this can be found in Van Parijs (1990), especially pp. 30-4.


3. Far be it from me, on the other hand, to want to deny the idea that there is, along side "instrumental" rationality, a *sui generis*, and hence epistemologically specific, "cognitive" rationality. This has opened up a very interesting new area of research in which rational decision theory intersects with epistemic logic. A synthetic presentation of this can be found in Walliser (1992).


5. This, at least, is what is revealed through Kavka's "toxin puzzle" (1983) and Mele's (1992) analysis of it.