Gérald BRONNER & Francesco DI IORIO (eds), *The Mystery of Rationality: Mind, Beliefs and the Social Sciences*

Nathalie Bulle

Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ress/6086>
DOI : 10.4000/ress.6086
ISBN : 1663-4446
ISSN : 1663-4446

Éditeur

Librairie Droz

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 6 juillet 2020
Pagination : 279-281
ISSN : 0048-8046

Référence électronique

Nathalie Bulle, « Gérald BRONNER & Francesco DI IORIO (eds), *The Mystery of Rationality: Mind, Beliefs and the Social Sciences* », *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* [En ligne], 58-1 | 2020, mis en ligne le 06 juillet 2020, consulté le 01 décembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ress/6086> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ress.6086>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 1 décembre 2020.

© Librairie Droz

Gérald BRONNER & Francesco DI IORIO (eds), *The Mystery of Rationality: Mind, Beliefs and the Social Sciences*

Nathalie Bulle

RÉFÉRENCE

Gérald BRONNER & Francesco DI IORIO (eds), 2018, *The Mystery Of Rationality: Mind, Beliefs And the Social Sciences*, Cham, Springer, 260 p.

- 1 This collective book signed by eminent contributors updates an agenda (to take up a theme addressed by Joseph Agassi) that is crucial for the social sciences: the question of rationality. The enigma posed by the concept here is not, as one might have thought in the first instance, the mystery of the faculty it identifies but, while this is undoubtedly related, the mystery of the notion itself, given the apparent impossibility of defining it scientifically in a consensual manner. Like the anthology of dichotomies classically evoked in the literature to circumscribe it: normative *versus* descriptive, instrumental *versus* non-instrumental, intentional *versus* unintentional, etc., the book's fifteen contributions (presented without any particular structure) offer an overall impressionistic picture, allowing the reader to get an idea of the state of the art on the subject in the social sciences. Since it is impossible to give a precise account of the arguments developed in each of the articles, I will mention only a few facets of this central notion that can be discovered when reading *The Mystery of Rationality*.
- 2 Let us begin with what is probably the most provocative idea of the collection, based on the observation that the concept of rationality, one of those most often used in the social sciences, is too often poorly defined by researchers and used according to different meanings, so that it could ultimately be advantageously abandoned (Karl-

Dieter Opp, “Do the Social Sciences Need the Concept of ‘Rationality’? Notes on the Obsession with a Concept”, Chapter 13). But while some empiricist approaches confine themselves to behaviorism, rational models of the social and economic actor seem to express a fundamental need for understanding in the form of an interpretation of human action as conscious (Emmanuel Picavet, “Rationality and Interpretation in the Study of Social Interaction”, Chapter 15). In this regard, the opposition between the conscious level of thought, generally reserved for rational processes, and the unconscious level, or between intentionality and the absence of intention, neglects the “subconscious” level and, correlatively, the question of subconscious intention, which would require a deepening in this sense of the idea of intentionality (Alban Bouvier, “Intentional, Unintentional and Sub-intentional Aspects of Social Mechanisms and Rationality: The Example of Commitments in Political Life”, Chapter 3). The interplay of “embodied” forms of rationality should also be considered (Shaun Gallagher, “Embodied Rationality”, Chapter 7).

- 3 Nevertheless, the question of consciousness is given as a methodological device, or even a heuristic, participating in the enterprise of meaningful interpretation, rather than as a factual assumption. Subjective rational reasoning involves both explicit and implicit types of argumentation. “Good reasons” are those which, in one way or another, are generalizable and thus understandable inter-subjectively when situational contexts are reconstructed to account for the elements of subjectivity involved (Enzo Di Nuoscio, “On the Explanation of Human Action: ‘Good Reasons’, Critical Rationalism and Argumentation Theory”, Chapter 4). On this basis, we can understand, for example, why the cognitive purpose of magic is not fundamentally different from that of science, inasmuch as it is not the symbolic dimension as such that differentiates them, but its meaning in relation to the global intellectual context of societies (Ian Jarvie, “Rationality and Irrationality Revisited or Intellectualism Vindicated or How Stands the Problem of the Rationality of Magic?” Chapter 9).
- 4 Moreover, the mathematically convenient and normative conception of rationality as maximization (of utility, profit, etc.) developed by neoclassical economics can be contrasted with the criticisms of the first generation of behavioral economists. The latter emphasized the importance of the point of view of decision-making processes rather than results, taking into account the cognitive limits of reason, its interpretative dimension, as well as routine behavior, or even lack of reflection or motivation for efficiency (Roger Frantz, “First Generation Behavioral Economists on Rationality, and Its Limits”, Chapter 6). In this respect, the motivational role of emotions in the revision of beliefs and preferences should be taken into consideration (Pierre Livet, “Dynamics of Rationality and Dynamics of Emotions”, Chapter 11). And if reason is a means of introducing coherence into our goals and preferences, then both the strong, normative approach of rationality and the weak approach, involving the idea of intelligible or meaningful action, imply a conception of the good (Paul Dumouchel, “Rationality, Irrationality, Realism and the Good”, Chapter 5). But it should also be noted that the rational actor model used in decision theory is based on axioms of completeness, transitivity of preferences and independence of irrelevant alternatives, which involve neither optimization nor conditions of validity of endorsed beliefs. This is why, for example, the biases of judgment observed in cognitive psychology do not betray it, as is too often believed (Herbert Gintis, “Rational Choice Explained and Defended”, Chapter 8).

- 5 Finally, if we address the question of long-term choices related to the lives of social actors, then the notion of rationality implies in-depth the meaning of action for the actor, independent of any *a priori* planning (Daniel Little, “Rational Life Plans?”, Chapter 10). We could, it should be noted, bring this point of view closer to the notion of personality in Max Weber’s work, which is expressed in the internal link of action to values: the ultimate values and meanings that individuals give to their life take shape through various objectives depending on the context.
- 6 In the course of the discussion led by each of the contributors, points of view that have marked reflection on the subject in the social sciences are examined or confronted. These include those of Max Weber, Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, Karl Popper, Carl Hempel, William Dray, Herbert Simon, Robin Horton, Steven Lukes, Jon Elster, Raymond Boudon and others. It is therefore an important book for anyone interested in the issue of rationality in the social sciences, in line with the major collective works devoted to the subject, such as *Rationality* (B. R. Wilson [ed.], 1970, Oxford, Basil Blackwell), *Rationality To-day / La Rationalité aujourd’hui* (T. F. Geraets [ed.], 1979, Ottawa, The University of Ottawa Press), or the anthology *Rationality in Action. Contemporary Approaches* (P. K. Moser [ed.], 1990, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press) or else the recent *Rationality in the Social Sciences. The Schumpeter-Parsons Seminar 1939-40 and Current Perspectives* (H. Staubmann and V. Lidz [eds], 2018, New York, Springer), none of which is obsolete, since discussions of this concept, even when they seem to touch it only on the periphery, engage it entirely and can still participate in broadening views about it. But one must admit a certain disappointment, since this reading does not allow us to lift the mystery which surrounds the concept of rationality, quite the contrary.

AUTEURS

NATHALIE BULLE

CNRS, Paris – GEMASS