

Rational Choice and the Humanities

EXCERPTS AND FOLKTALES*

Michael Suk-Young Chwe

IN THIS ESSAY, I first compare Beatrice and Benedick in William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* with Richard and Harrison in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. I use this comparison to introduce the reader to game theory, an important part of rational choice theory, and also to address some common criticisms, for example that rational choice theory assumes selfish and market-oriented individuals. I then look at some trickster folktales from the African-American tradition, such as the well-known Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby tale, and argue that these folktales can be understood as early primers in game-theoretic reasoning, long before game theory took mathematical shape in the 1950s.

Much discussion about rational choice theory is hampered by overly broad claims of its aims and abilities, often made by people who see it as a unified force sweeping academia and are in unabashed favor or opposition. Some of these discussions end up stuck in hoary dichotomies such as thinking versus feeling, "cold" rationality versus "warm" emotion, and so forth. It is better to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of rational choice theory in very specific applications or contexts, which is why I focus on specific examples as much as possible in this paper.

Michael Suk-Young Chwe is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Los Angeles. He specializes in game theory and its applications to collective action, communication, social networks, monetary theory, and violence. His book *Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge*, which analyzes public rituals in terms of game theory, was published in 2001 by Princeton University Press. He has held positions at the University of Utah, New York University, and the University of Chicago; did undergraduate work at the California Institute of Technology; and received his doctorate in economics from Northwestern University in 1992. He is currently serving as co-editor of the *American Political Science Review*. His website is <http://www.chwe.net/michael>.

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Still, I discuss rational choice in general, in the hope of anticipating misunderstandings, and speculate briefly on how rational choice theory and the humanities might usefully interact.

BEATRICE AND BENEDICK

Beatrice and Benedick greet each other with insults and disdain. However, Beatrice's family (her uncle Leonato, her cousin Hero, and Hero's attendant Ursula), and Benedick's friends (Don Pedro and Claudio) manipulate them into believing that each has a secret love for the other, and thus each falls for the other, making the fabrication true. They need outside help because of their pride; when Don Pedro tells Beatrice that she has put Benedick down, Beatrice explains, "so I would not he should do me, my lord, lest I should prove the mother of fools." When they realize that they have been manipulated, their love momentarily falters but is saved by the evidence of love poems they each had secretly written, stolen from their pockets by Hero and Claudio.

Beatrice and Benedick each face a choice: whether to love or not. So there are four possible outcomes: both loving, Beatrice only loving, Benedick only loving, and neither loving. We write these outcomes in a table.

	Benedick loves	Benedick doesn't
Beatrice loves	"Benedick, love on; I will requite thee."	"I should prove the mother of fools."
Beatrice doesn't	"Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much?"	"No, Uncle, I'll none."

Each of the four outcomes is represented by a quote from Beatrice expressing her opinion of that outcome. If neither loves (the lower right entry in the table), Beatrice tells her uncle Leonato that she is content marrying no man: "No, Uncle, I'll none. Adam's sons are my brethren, and truly I hold it a sin to match in my kindred." If Beatrice loves and Benedick does not (the upper right entry), then Beatrice feels completely foolish. If Benedick loves and Beatrice doesn't (the lower left entry), Beatrice is happy but feels bad for being so scornful: "Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu!" If both love (the upper left entry), then Beatrice joyfully returns her love.

We abbreviate the feelings behind Beatrice's quotes above in the following way.

	Benedick loves	Benedick doesn't
Beatrice loves	Best	Worst
Beatrice doesn't	Second-best	Second-worst

The best thing for Beatrice is if they both love and the worst thing is to love without being loved. Being loved but not returning it is second-best, and neither loving is sad but better than being a fool. Note that if Benedick does not love (the right column), then Beatrice does not want to love either. If Benedick does love (the left column), then Beatrice wants to love.

Benedick's feelings are similar. He feels foolish if he loves without being loved back, and feels bad if he does not love and Beatrice does. The best thing for him too is if both love. So his feelings look like the following (we use boldface to distinguish his table from Beatrice's).

	Benedick loves	Benedick doesn't
Beatrice loves	Best	Second-best
Beatrice doesn't	Worst	Second-worst

The difference between Beatrice's and Benedick's tables is that for Beatrice, the worst thing is if her love is unrequited (the upper right outcome) and for Benedick, the worst thing is if his love is unrequited (the lower left outcome).

For compact exposition, we merge these two tables together and get the following. Here in each of the four outcomes, we first write Beatrice's feelings and then Benedick's.

	Benedick loves	Benedick doesn't
Beatrice loves	Best, Best	Worst, Second-best
Beatrice doesn't	Second-best, Worst	Second-worst, Second-worst

Again, the two agree on what is best (mutual love) and what is second-worst (mutual indifference). What is worst for Beatrice (loving Benedick foolishly) is second-best for Benedick, and what is worst for Benedick is second-best for Beatrice.

I claim that this table distills the Beatrice-Benedick situation to its essential elements. It might seem slightly complicated at first, but it cannot be made any simpler. Love does not come upon them like a fever or euphoria but because each consciously chooses to love. Each knows that by choosing to love, they risk foolishness. Each is painfully aware that all four outcomes are possible, and that by trying for the best, one risks the worst. One cannot simply say that each desires the other; it is essential to the situation that each person wants to love only if the other does also. One also cannot simply say that Beatrice and Benedick "find love" with the help of their friends and thus collectively move from second-worst to best; they are both independent individuals who make independent choices, and their love almost unravels once they are informed of their friends' manipulation.

RICHARD AND HARRISON

Richard Wright, in his autobiographical *Black Boy* ([1944] 1993, 236), was at his job washing eyeglasses when Mr. Olin, his white foreman, approached to tell him that Harrison, another boy working at a rival optical house, had a grudge against him. "Well, you better watch that nigger Harrison," Mr. Olin said in a low, confidential tone. "A little while ago I went down to get a Coca-Cola and Harrison was waiting for you at the door with a knife. . . . Said he was going to get you.' . . . 'I've got to see that boy and talk to him,' I said, thinking out loud. 'No, you'd better not,' Mr. Olin said. 'You'd better let some of us white boys talk to him.'"

Richard seeks out Harrison anyhow. “Say, Harrison, what’s this all about?” I asked, standing cautiously four feet from him. . . . ‘I haven’t done anything to you,’ I said. ‘And I ain’t got nothing against you,’ he mumbled, still watchful. . . . ‘But Mr. Olin said that you came over to the factory this morning, looking for me with a knife.’ ‘Aw naw,’ he said, more at ease now. ‘I ain’t been in your factory all day.’ . . . ‘But why would Mr. Olin tell me things like that?’ I asked. Harrison dropped his head; he laid his sandwich aside. ‘I . . . I . . .’ he stammered and pulled from his pocket a long gleaming knife; it was already open. ‘I was just waiting to see what you was going to do to me . . .’ I leaned weakly against a wall, feeling sick, my eyes upon the sharp steel blade of the knife. ‘You were going to cut me?’ I asked. ‘If you had cut me, I was going to cut you first,’ he said.”

Harrison is not a fool for carrying the knife; as he says, if you think that the other will bring a knife, you would want to bring one also. In this situation, Richard and Harrison can each choose either to bring a knife or not, and we can make a table as before. Here Richard’s feelings are in regular type and Harrison’s are in boldface.

	Harrison doesn’t	Harrison brings a knife
Richard doesn’t	Best, Best	Worst, Second-best
Richard brings a knife	Second-best, Worst	Second-worst, Second-worst

For both Richard and Harrison, the best outcome is if neither brings a knife; neither has any ill feelings toward the other. If you bring a knife and the other does not, then you are embarrassed for revealing your distrust. If both bring a knife, that is pretty bad for both, but by far the worst thing is if you don’t bring a knife and the other does. So if the other doesn’t bring a knife, you don’t want to either, because no one has any hard feelings. But if the other brings a knife, you would be stupid not to bring one also.

Richard and Harrison vow to keep faith in each other and ignore their white bosses’ provocations. But when each is offered five dollars to fight the other in a boxing match, Harrison convinces a reluctant Richard, saying that it’s just exercise and they can fool the white men into thinking they are really hurting each other. However, “we squared off and at once I knew that I had not thought sufficiently about what I had bargained for. . . . The white men were smoking and yelling obscenities at us. ‘Crush that nigger’s nuts, nigger.’ . . . [B]efore I knew it, I had landed a hard right on Harrison’s mouth and blood came. Harrison shot a blow to my nose. The fight was on, was on against our will. I felt trapped and ashamed. I lashed out even harder, and the harder I fought the harder Harrison fought. Our plans and promises now meant nothing. . . . The hate we felt for the men whom we had tried to cheat went into the blows we threw at each other. . . . [E]ach of us was afraid to stop and ask for time for fear of receiving a blow that would knock us out. When we were on the point of collapsing from exhaustion, they pulled us apart. I could not look at Harrison. I hated him and I hated myself.”

How were their actions “against their will”? They both had agreed to pretend, but once the other started to fight in earnest, even accidentally, each would have to fight in return, making things worse for both.

A COMPARISON

The Beatrice-Benedick situation and the Richard-Harrison situation seem quite different. One is delightful and the other is sobering. One is an unexpected triumph and the other is a degrading defeat. One is about love and the other is about hate. But when we use the tables above to distill each situation, we find that the situations are actually quite similar, even identical. The table that describes the Beatrice-Benedick situation and the table that describes the Richard-Harrison situation are identical, different only in the names of the characters and in the names of their actions. In both situations, the two people involved have a “good but risky” action (loving, not bringing a knife) and a “bad but safe” action (not loving, bringing a knife). The best for both people is if both play the good but risky action, but taking that action alone yields the worst possible outcome. Hence playing the good but risky action requires an assurance that the other will do the same.

We might have discovered this similarity without all this apparatus. But the tables sure make things easier. Once we have pedantically written down the tables, finding the similarity is a matter of inspection, not requiring imagination or any kind of cognitive leap.

Once we see the similarity, it becomes clear how both mutual love and mutual hatred can be created out of nothing, and in what sense exactly this creation is against their own wills. It becomes clear how one person’s action can be provoked by nothing more than her own expectation of the other person’s action, and that once provoked, each person’s action can in turn respond to the other’s action, resulting in an unexpectedly good or bad outcome, a virtuous or vicious cycle. The third-party manipulators (Hero, Leonato, Ursula, Don John, and Claudio, and Mr. Otis and the other white foremen) have opposite goals but operate in the same way, by influencing the expectations of each person about the other in a way that becomes self-confirming.

GAME THEORY AND COMMON CRITICISMS

The tables we constructed above are what game theory calls “games.” Setting up tables like these for various social situations and analyzing them is what game theory does. A game is an abstraction; as in any abstraction, something is lost, but what is gained is the possibility of finding connections among seemingly disparate things. Whether this gain is worth the loss is best decided in very specific contexts. For example, the connection between Beatrice-Benedick and Richard-Harrison is I think at least slightly unexpected. Similarly connected are going to a political demonstration (I want to go only if enough others go also), adopting new technology (I want to instant message only if enough of my friends also instant message), and going to see a movie (the more popular it is, the more I want to see it, just to see what everyone is talking about); these are all examples of what game theory calls a “coordination problem” (see for example Chwe 2001).

Any kind of abstraction privileges some aspects and suppresses others. The privileged aspects in game theory are the people involved, each considered as an individual making independent choices (Beatrice and Benedick, for example), the alternatives each person chooses among (whether to love or not), and how each person feels about the outcomes (loving without being loved is the worst and both loving is the best). Game theory is pretty light in what it “imposes”: if you describe a situation as people making independent choices, you pretty much have to specify at a minimum who the people are, what their possible choices are, and how they feel about the possible outcomes. In this sense, a game is almost a kind of notation, like musical notation, and the process of notating or transcribing is not by itself substantively or theoretically interesting.

Game theory's abstractions are most appropriate in situations in which people make conscious choices. Game theory would not help much in understanding the spread of an infectious disease spread by sneezing, since presumably sneezing is not a conscious choice (although whether to stay home from work is). Game theory might be useful in understanding an infectious disease spread by sexual activity, for example.

One common criticism of game theory and rational choice approaches is that they assume that people are cold and unemotional, that the "brain" is privileged over the "heart," that "thinking" is privileged over "feeling." But both the Beatrice-Benedick and Richard-Harrison situations are steeped in intense emotions of fear, joy, anticipation, disappointment, shame, and disgust. These emotions are not separate from or against the tables we constructed; rather, these emotions are what we took into account when we made the tables. People make choices carefully and consciously not only in boring placid situations; in fact we often make the most careful and consciously important choices precisely in emotionally charged situations, like whether to take a feverish wailing child to the emergency room. A person might love in a tearful paroxysm, ignoring all possible risks, but Beatrice and Benedick do not, and this does not make their conscious decision to love any less emotional. Emotions can be important in many different ways than can be captured in our tables, but it cannot be said that our tables, or the assumption of people making conscious choices, exclude emotion outright.

In the Beatrice-Benedick and Richard-Harrison situations, we wrote down which outcomes were worst, best, second-worst, and second-best by considering each person's "feelings" about each outcome. The standard terminology in game theory is "preferences" over each outcome or "utility" or "payoff" from each outcome. I did not use these terms because of their economic associations, which some people are sensitive about. Using the term "feelings" instead was not unnatural, thus suggesting that whether we think in terms of feelings, preferences, motivations, or payoffs does not matter much. Similarly, instead of the terms "Best," "Worst," "Second-best," and "Second-worst," it is customary to use numbers, such as 10 (Best), -100 (Worst), 5 (Second-best), and 0 (Second-worst). Using numbers is basically equivalent to using ordinal terms like "Best" and "Worst."

Another common criticism of rational choice approaches is that they assume self-interested, atomistic individuals unconstrained by social mores or norms, not embedded in any social or historical context, like consumers in a market are often assumed to be. Again, this criticism is best handled in the particulars of a given example or application. In the Beatrice-Benedick and Richard-Harrison situations, people live in a thick social milieu, complete with norms and social expectations, for example about courtship and how blacks can talk to whites, and within dense networks of affection and distrust. Richard and Harrison try to create their own norm by vowing to trust each other, but it falls apart. It would be odd to say that carrying a knife, avoiding the risk of heartache, or punching back in desperation is atomistic, selfish, narrow, or self-interested as opposed to holistic, altruistic or public-spirited. It is hard to say that our tables impose any "market" or "individualistic" logic; the tables do little more than notate for example the fact that Beatrice and Benedick both gain by loving, but the worst thing is being a fool and loving alone.

FOLKTALES AS GAME THEORY PRIMERS

African-American folktales and books written about them constitute an enormous literature, and there is also a large literature on the trickster figures which appear in many world folk traditions

(for example Hynes and Doty 1993; Landay 1998; Pelton 1980). Here I focus on just a handful of folktales to argue for a common theme among them (I rely heavily on Levine 1977). I argue that the purpose of these folktales is to teach the listener to take one's own actions anticipating the actions of others, an idea central to game theory which is commonsensical but not at all trivial. Characters who do not recognize the strategic nature of others are mocked and punished by events; revered figures, like Brer Rabbit, skillfully anticipate others' future actions. The tales illustrate strategic principles beautifully; their "folk wisdom" long anticipates the principles of game theory.

I start with the tale of a new slave asking his master why he does nothing while the slave has to work all the time (Jones 1969 [1888], 115, discussed in Levine 1977, 130). The master replies that he is working in his head, making plans and studying upon things. When the master later finds the slave resting in the field, he asks the slave why he is lazy. The slave replies that he now is working with his head, and when the master asks what kind of work his head is doing, the slave responds by asking, "Mossa, ef you see tree pigeon duh set on dat tree limb, an you shoot an kill one er dem, how many gwine leff?" The master answers, "Any fool kin tell dat. Ob scource two gwinne leff." The slave replies, "No, Mossa, you miss. Ef you shoot an kill one er dem pigeon, de edder two boun fuh fly way, an none gwine leff." The master laughed and did not do anything to the slave in the future when he neglected his work ("De Buckra man bleege fuh laugh, an eh yent do nuttne ter de New Nigger case eh glec eh wuk").

If the pigeons were pine cones or other inanimate objects, then the master would have been right. The master's error was that he did not recognize that the pigeons were strategic actors, able to make decisions and act independently, just as humans would if shot at. The master did not recognize that the situation was a strategic one, seeing the situation as simply a collection of objects, with the only relevant decision-maker being himself, the shooter.

The slave's ability to think through this strategic situation is valorized, worthy indeed of the term "work," and is rewarded, with the master's laugh and more importantly his forbearance of the slave's continuing relaxation. Here the slave has anticipated strategically again. Once the master justifies his inaction by saying that he is working in his head, the slave realizes that if he himself makes a similar justification convincingly, the master would be compelled to accept it to some degree. He thus tells this riddle anticipating the master's forbearance and thereby gains materially. Here again, the master makes the same error; when he makes the initial excuse of head work, it does not even occur to him that the slave might use it in turn, because he does not recognize the slave as a strategic actor or even that slaves are biologically capable of head work.

In this brief tale there are two games: one involving the pigeons and the shooter, and one involving the slave and the master. In both games, the master makes the same mistake of not recognizing that others act strategically. The slave takes advantage of this and at the same time demonstrates his own strategic understanding by telling the riddle.

The following features are common in the folktales I examine here. Stupid people (or animals) fail to recognize that others are strategic and fail to anticipate the actions of others. Smart people choose their actions anticipating the actions of others, get materially rewarded, and in fact take advantage of stupid peoples' misrecognition. The specific techniques of the smart, but more importantly their general strategic aptitude, are worth remembering and emulating.

In another tale (Jones 1969 [1888], 102, discussed in Levine 1977, 109), Rabbit sees the fisherman carrying fish in his wagon, and comes up with a plan to get some. Rabbit lies by the road pretending to be deathly ill, and when the fisherman stops to ask him what ails him, Rabbit

says that he can't travel any farther and begs the fisherman for a ride. The fisherman agrees and places Rabbit in the wagon, where Rabbit lays down as if dead. As the fisherman proceeds down the road, his back turned, Rabbit throws fish one at a time into the bushes by the side of the road. When the fisherman turns off the main road, Rabbit jumps off and goes back and collects all the fish. On the way back to his house, Rabbit meets Fox, who asks him how he got all the fish. Rabbit tells Fox about his plan, and the next day Fox tries the same trick. When he sees Fox by the side of the road, the fisherman, who of course had figured out what had happened the day before, knocks Fox on the head with his whip and beats him dead. He then takes Fox's body to his wife to show her the thief; the fisherman thinks Fox and Rabbit are the same animal. The tale ends by saying that Rabbit knew this would happen: "Buh Rabbit, him no care so he sabe issell. Him bin know say Buh Fox gwine ketch de debble wen de Ole Man come pon topper um."

The real trickery here is not the fish-stealing, but Rabbit's plan which anticipates the actions of both Fox and the fisherman (and, unlike the fish-stealing, does not involve any deception). Rabbit knows that when he tells Fox the plan, Fox will try it also and the fisherman will retaliate toward Fox instead. Fox's error is that he does not anticipate that the fisherman will obviously learn from the first swindle. Like the master who forgets that pigeons make their own choices once shot at, Fox forgets that the fisherman is a person who makes independent choices once tricked. Fox is so caught up in the specific trickery of fish-stealing that he does not recognize the larger strategic setting. Rabbit takes advantage of Fox's misrecognition and thus gains his own innocence.

Levine (1977, 109) interprets this tale as saying that "unable to outwit Rabbit, his adversaries attempt to learn from him, but here too they fail." But actually Fox learns the fish-stealing technique all too well; Rabbit counts on him to do it exactly the same way he did. Fox dies not because of a failure to learn but because he does not see the larger strategic picture.

The "malitis" tale is a true story from the Slave Narrative Collection of the Federal Writers' Project (Botkin 1945, 4–5, discussed in Levine 1977, 126–27). One master, so stingy that his slaves almost starved, had seven hogs ready for slaughter. The day before they were to be killed, a slave boy ran and told the master that all the hogs were sick and had died. "When the master goes to where-at the hogs is laying, they's a lot of Negroes standing round looking sorrow-eyed at the wasted meat. The master asks: 'What's the illness with 'em'? 'Malitis,' they tells him, and they acts like they don't want to touch the hogs. Master says to dress them anyway for they ain't no more meat on the place. He says to keep all the meat for the slave families, but that's because he's afraid to eat it hisself account of the hogs' got malitis." What's the mysterious and fatal disease of malitis? A slave had gone to the hog pen very early that morning with a mallet, and "when he tapped Mister Hog 'tween the eyes with that mallet, 'malitis' set in mighty quick."

"Malitis" solved the problem of how the slaves could keep the meat and eat it openly (a simple theft would have required furtive consumption) by enlisting the master as a decision-maker, by motivating the master to choose to transfer the meat himself. Had he had thought of the slaves as strategic, the master would have at least considered the possibility that the slaves were lying, but he did not. For the master, the "caste" distinction between healthy and diseased, between white and Negro, was overwhelming. Masters do not think of slaves and pigeons as strategic, and this tale suggests why. If you consider yourself naturally superior, a completely different kind of being, placing yourself in the mind of the inferior even for a moment is revolting or unthinkable, and in fact you might consider your not having to do so a privilege of your dominance. If you can't think of people as strategic, you completely misrecognize strategic situations

involving them, and they can use this misrecognition to their advantage. We see this error even in high-stakes situations: Robert McNamara explains that when the US thinks about its enemies, “we must try to put ourselves inside their skins and look at us through their eyes, just to understand the thoughts that lie behind their desires and their actions. . . . In the Cuban Missile Crisis, at the end, I think we did put ourselves in the skin of the Soviets. In the case of Vietnam, we didn’t know them well enough to empathize, and there was total misunderstanding as a result” (*Fog of War* 2003). Soviet skin was apparently similar enough for the US to put itself in while Vietnamese skin was not.

The tale of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby is well known, and Jones (1969 [1888], 7–11) tells the story like this. Too lazy to find his own water, Rabbit steals from Wolf’s spring. When Wolf tells Rabbit that he has seen his tracks near his spring, Rabbit says they must have been from another rabbit. Doubtful, Wolf builds a tar baby and places it in the middle of the path to the spring. The next morning, Rabbit decides to go get some water from Wolf’s spring to cool his burning cooking pot. He sees the tar baby and is astonished; he examines the tar baby closely and waits for it to move. The tar baby does not wink an eye, say anything, or move. Rabbit asks the tar baby to move so he can get some water, but the tar baby doesn’t answer. Rabbit asks again. Rabbit finally says, “Enty you know me pot duh bun? Enty you know me hurry? Enty you yeddy me tell you fuh move? You see dis han? Ef you dont go long and lemme git some water, me guine slap you ober.” The tar baby still does not respond, and Rabbit slaps him on the head. Rabbit tries to pull his hand back and yells at the tar baby to let him go or else he will box him with his other hand. Rabbit’s other hand gets stuck also. Rabbit continues to make threats and since the tar baby never responds, Rabbit gets his knees and then his face stuck, and cannot pull loose. Wolf shows up, declares that he has proved Rabbit’s theft, and ties Rabbit to a bush and whips him with a switch. Rabbit hollers and begs, and finally asks Wolf to kill him instead by burning him up or knocking his brains out. Wolf says that that kind of death would be too short, and so he will throw Rabbit into the briar patch, so the briars can scratch his life out. Rabbit says, “Do Buh Wolf, bun me: broke me neck, but dont trow me in de brier patch. Lemme dead one time. Dont tarrify me no mo.” So Wolf throws Rabbit into the briar patch. Rabbit runs away saying, “Good bye, Budder! Dis de place me mammy fotch me up—dis de place me mammy fotch me up.”

The tale ends in standard fashion, with Rabbit anticipating Wolf’s action of throwing him in the briar patch and Wolf not considering whether Rabbit might be strategically lying. But Rabbit is not infallible, as shown by his altercation with the tar baby. The tar baby is strange and intriguing, to Rabbit as well as to us listeners. The tar baby is something between solid and liquid, something between an object and a living being. If Wolf had simply set out a bucket of tar which Rabbit stepped in, or if Wolf had simply cornered Rabbit, most of the flavor of the tale would be lost. Rabbit’s mistake is essential to the tale.

What exactly is Rabbit’s mistake? Levine (1977, 115) says that the tale “underline[s] the dangers of acting rashly and striking out blindly.” Smith (1997, 128) says that the tale “emphasizes that Br’er Rabbit can be duped by illusion but that he ultimately saves himself by remembering his ‘home,’ or cultural roots.” Rabbit is indeed duped, but the tar baby is not an illusion: it is not intended to fool Rabbit’s visual perception, as smoke, mirrors, or holograms might. Rabbit sees it just fine, is in fact astonished by its strangeness, and even examines it closely before addressing it. Rabbit is not at all rash; he takes time examining the tar baby, and waits for the tar baby to move before asking him. Rabbit does not strike out blindly; he first asks the tar baby to

move, a quite normal social request, and he even asks twice. Rabbit sees the tar baby as a strange creature, but does not prejudge it and becomes angry only when the tar baby violates standard politeness norms.

Rabbit's mistake is that he thinks that the tar baby is a strategic actor. If Master, Fox, and Wolf do not see that slaves, pigeons, and rabbits are strategic actors, Rabbit's mistake is exactly the opposite: Rabbit thinks that everything is a strategic actor. Rabbit does not put the tar baby aside nor does he simply walk around the tar baby, the obvious courses of action if he thought that the tar baby was an object. Rabbit gets mad when the tar baby does not acknowledge his request to move aside. Rabbit does not attack the tar baby unconditionally but rather issues threats to the tar baby which he thinks a strategic actor would respond to. Rabbit even ascribes mental states and reasoning ability to the tar baby, saying that the tar baby should realize that Rabbit's pot is burning and therefore that Rabbit is in a hurry.

If these folktales teach the importance of recognizing that others are strategic actors, the tar baby tale cautions that one can overdo it; one can mistake objects for actors as well as mistake actors for objects. Hamilton (1985, 19) says that there are over three hundred versions of the tar baby tale, from Africa to India to the Bahamas to Brazil. One tar baby is strategic: in some areas of Georgia, the tar baby is a living monster who insults people and then traps them when they strike out at him in response.

WHAT RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY MEANS TO ME

Of course one cannot characterize the work of every single person who might be considered part of or adopts the label of rational choice theory. But rational choice theory does have a single core idea, which is what you get when you remove all auxiliary associations and distill it down to its essential logic (see for example Arrow 1963; Sen 1970). A lot of misunderstanding can be avoided if one understands this "core model."

The core model is that a single person chooses one alternative from a set of alternatives. The alternatives are ranked from best to worst (ties are possible; she might be indifferent among two or more alternatives). She chooses the highest-ranked alternative (if more than one alternative is ranked highest, she chooses one of them).

To understand the core of rational choice theory, this is all you need to know. Game theory extends things somewhat by introducing more than one person: each person ranks all possible outcomes, where an outcome is not determined by a single person but by all people involved (as in the Beatrice-Benedick and Richard-Harrison examples).

This core model has not much substantive content, and indeed any choice a person makes can be rationalized by saying that the person prefers that choice over all other alternatives. In this sense, the core model is simply a way to notate or describe a situation; it's one of the simplest possible ways to talk about how a person makes choices.

Still, the core model is not completely trivial. For example, say Violet decides how many children to give birth to and raise in her life. The possible alternatives she can choose from is realistically 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 children. She decides that she would be most content without children, that is, choosing 0. Upon a medical examination, however, she is informed by her doctor that she can have at most one child, and so her set of alternatives is now 0 and 1. Knowing that she can have at most one child, she decides that she should have one child and chooses 1. Violet's choice is understandable, but it violates rational choice theory (assuming that there are no "ties" and her ranking itself does not change). Choosing 1 from the two alternatives 0 and 1

means that 1 is ranked higher than 0, which means that 0 could not have been ranked highest in the original situation.

For another example, say that Walter's income doubles and his consumption of coffee, beer, and cigarettes changes as a result. It is possible that he consumes more of all three items, it is possible that he consumes less of some items and more of others, and it is possible for his consumption of all items to remain unchanged. But it is not possible for his consumption of all items to decrease, if we assume rational choice theory. His consumption of all items shouldn't decrease after his income doubles because he could have done the same thing before his income doubled, and he didn't. If his consumption of all items decreases, rational choice theory is violated.

One might think that a crucial issue for rational choice theory is what the term "rationality" means, but it is not. The term "rational" is often associated with instrumental, calculated, calm, deliberate, knowledgeable, individualistic action and is often contrasted with impetuosity, emotionality, ignorance, ideological bias, sentimentality, and social-mindedness. Rational choice theory at its core, however, is about none of these things. According to rational choice theory, a person is "rational" if her choices can be described by the core model above and "irrational" otherwise (for example if Walter consumes less of all items when his income doubles). The core model does not translate directly into any intuitive or colloquial conception of "rationality"; an altruistic person is no more or less likely to violate the core model than a selfish person, for example.

Rational choice theory also does not care about what the alternatives actually are; all that matters is that a person chooses among them in a way consistent with the model. A person with \$100 might choose between buying a new DVD player, donating the money anonymously to the Salvation Army, giving the money to his itinerant brother, or buying a handgun and shooting himself. A selfish person, a generous person, a socially embedded person, and a suicidal person could all choose different things and could all be described by rational choice theory.

Rational choice theory is not really about the process by which people make decisions, whether through intuition, reason, calculation, superstition, rules of thumb, habit, or gut feelings. Rational choice's "process" model is purposefully extremely primitive, especially compared to for example psychological studies of human decision-making. If Walter consumes less of everything after his income doubles, rational choice theory is violated, regardless of whether Walter makes this decision in a calm, thoughtful, instrumental, individualistic, or calculating manner, or whether he makes this decision out of habit, in a fit of anger, or because of social pressures. Violet's decision about how many children to have can be made with both prudence and impulsiveness, and might involve a messy mixture of calculated financial constraints, incommensurable lifestyle changes, deep emotions including guilt and joy, celebration of her newly valued fertility, deep concerns for her relatives and potential children, and her own identity as a woman and mother. Still, regardless of how she makes her decision, Violet violates rational choice theory. If after her doctor's news, Violet instead continues to choose no children, her decision can be described by rational choice theory, regardless of how she makes it.

The discussion of whether rational choice theory is a good or bad thing (for example Friedman 1996) is more interesting on specific issues, such as whether it helps explain when and how people collectively act, rather than perennial conundrums such as what it means to explain something, the relationship between theory and evidence, what "science" is and whether it is good or bad, whether people "really are" rational, and so forth.

People in economics were early adopters and developers of rational choice theory and so it is not surprising that economics and rational choice theory are closely associated in the minds of

both practitioners and critics. It might have happened another way. Economics only really embraced game theory in the 1980s; in the 1960s, for example, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963, 298) was more excited about game theory than almost any economist at the time (see Henrich and coauthors 2004 for a recent use of game theory in anthropology). Game theory's early development was mainly in math and applied math departments and in military-industrial think tanks like the Rand Corporation (Mirowski 1991). Had game theory been more successful at entering the academy directly from the military-industrial complex, critics would more likely talk about the "militaristic" rather than the "economistic" cast of game theory (some do bring up this connection, as in Amadae 2003).

One area in which rational choice theory has been well-domesticated is the study of revolution and social movements. Here I rely on surveys by Goldstone (2001), Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001), and Calhoun (2001), who by the way do not use rational choice approaches in their own work. Goldstone explains that through the 1980s, studies of revolution used "structural" approaches focusing on conflicts between social classes, the state, and elites. These approaches went well beyond the traditional Marxist explanation of revolution arising from class conflict, but still retained the basic idea that revolutions result from large "macro" social forces and relations between large groups of people. The current generation of scholarly work, however, attacks these approaches, calling for "greater attention to conscious agency, to the role of ideology and culture in shaping revolutionary mobilization and objectives, and to contingency in the course and outcome of revolutions" (141). Here "conscious agency" and "contingency" mean simply that individuals are not "driven" in automatic fashion by social forces, but have free will and make choices, and this is where rational choice is helpful. Note that rational choice does not come in here in opposition to considerations of ideology and culture but naturally accompanies them in criticizing structural approaches for neglecting how individual people think and why they care, and how revolutions might succeed or fail as a result. Focusing on individuals does not mean considering only individual-level explanations: for example, rational choice models show that "mobilization flows most readily in groups where there is a tightly integrated vanguard of activists who initiate action, with loose but centralized ties to a broader group of followers" (164; for an example of such a model, see Chwe 1999). Finally, "the past decade of rational choice research on revolutions has thus underlined the same topics—leadership, group identity, network ties—emphasized in recent historical studies" (164–65). In other words, rational choice work and historical work, surprisingly or unsurprisingly, are part of the same scholarly project.

Until the 1970s, the study of social movements saw protest as the result of aberrant emotions: "crowds were assumed to create, through suggestion and contagion, a kind of psychologically 'primitive' group mind and group feelings"; protests were explained in terms of Oedipal rebellion, self-hatred, or psychological alienation, for example (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001, 2–3). Calhoun (2001, 48) explains that protest and collective action were understood as aberrational, outside the sphere of normal politics, "something irrational others engaged in." What changed in the 1970s was simply that scholars began to think that social protest was OK, even normal, partly because they themselves had often participated in them. "The argument that we should think in terms of collective action (not just behavior) marked that shift of perspective, opening up an internal analysis of something that 'people like us' might do. It was seen as rational in the sense of reasonable, self-aware product of choice as well as (more narrowly) strategic, interest-based, calculated in terms of efficient means to an end" (48). Rational choice ideas

did not enter as the result of scholarly imperialism, a flight to abstraction, or an underappreciation of the vast mysteries of human nature, but from a simple empathy with the people being studied, a willingness to think about them as we think about ourselves.

Why is rational choice's interaction with social movement theory and revolutionary theory relatively agreeable? It is true that there are relatively few rational choice modelers in sociology and thus they don't seem to pose the same numerical threat as in political science for example. But it is hard to reject the "idealistic" explanation that rational choice simply had some ideas which people found compelling and helpful given their own interests, and was also part of a scholarly development in which all "sides" responded to the interests of others.

Some argue that the language of rational choice in economics and political science legitimizes a liberal-capitalist world system (for example Amadae 2003), but, as Calhoun mentions above, social movements such as the civil rights, lesbian and gay rights, feminist, environmental, and international solidarity movements are legitimized in a similar way. For another example, Walkowitz (1980, 9) examines the struggle of Plymouth and Southampton prostitutes in the 1870s against the Contagious Diseases Acts and concludes, "Prostitutes thus emerge as important historical actors, as women who made their own history, albeit under very restrictive conditions. They were not rootless social outcasts but poor working women trying to survive in towns that offered them few employment opportunities and that were hostile to young women living alone. Their move into prostitution was not pathological; it was in many ways a rational choice, given the limited alternatives open to them." By the way, it is not clear that calling something a rational choice should legitimize it; for example, slavery is not legitimized by calling slaveowners profit-seeking entrepreneurs instead of sadists.

The political effect of rational choice modeling is not obviously unidirectional. For example, one might say that the strategic thinking taught in slave folktales promotes bad behavior since characters like Rabbit gain by subverting social norms of honesty and cooperation. But sometimes it's good to corrode social norms, especially when those norms are stacked against you. To take another example, violence is typically understood now like social protest was understood before the 1970s, as aberrational, a departure from normal behavior, resulting from emotions like aggression, and almost inherently irrational. This view of violence as deviance and as emotionally driven allows systemic and instrumental institutions of violence, like slavery and various instruments of the state, to elude examination. A "violent soldier" sounds like an aberration, an exception from the everyday soldier, even though inflicting violence is essential to what a soldier does; a true aberration would be a nonviolent soldier. A rational choice perspective on violence (see Chwe 1990 for a simple example) focuses on why particular individuals specifically choose to hurt other people and how they organize themselves to do so, instead of letting violence float around, unattached to any responsible party, as a "scourge," "cycle," or "epidemic."

For example, Gordon (1988) finds that early in the 20th century, when domestic violence activists and abolitionists were closely related, drunkenness, as opposed to the normal state of sobriety, was seen as the main cause of domestic violence. Later, as the field of social work became professionalized, academic theories such as that of Parsons became influential: if a system such as the family exhibited "out of equilibrium" behavior like violence, then getting rid of violence required restoring the equilibrium by restoring traditional family roles. Thinking of domestic violence as caused by emotional instability and aggression leads one to consider remedies such as counseling, psychotherapy, and medication. If the actors in domestic violence are considered as making conscious choices, however, one would seek "economic" remedies of taxes

and subsidies, which constituted 1980s feminist victories: harsher criminal penalties which decrease the incentive to batter and womens' shelters which give battered women better choices.

POSSIBLE LINES OF INTERACTION

It is hard to know what is possible and interesting in advance, but several kinds of interaction between the humanities and rational choice theory suggest themselves. As in the slave folktales discussed here, many narratives present stylized situations and characters which are much more starkly defined than situations and characters in real life, and the characters' interactions form the core of the story. Analyzing interactions among stylized characters in stylized situations, with the hope of gaining some insight into social life, is what game theory does too (see also Livingston 1991 and Brams 1994). Sometimes a game-theoretic perspective allows one to think about a passage, story, or film in an entirely new way; for example, I argue in a book (Chwe 2001) that the main theme of the film *On the Waterfront* is not that ratting out your friends is OK but rather the struggle to create a worker public sphere; I argue that the crucial scene is the eulogy delivered by Father Barry in the ship's hold because it is the first time that the workers, previously an anarchic collection of individuals, form a "public." Game theory is also potentially applicable to understand cultural practices which are not related to narratives or characters: in the book, I argue that call and response, repetition, and group dancing in rituals can be understood as techniques of generating "metaknowledge" (knowledge of the knowledge of others). Finally, social movements and revolutions try to create new social identities and vocabularies; for example, today people in the US, regardless of their political views, generally know what "AIDS activist" or "date rape" means, even though these terms would not exist without the gay rights and feminist movements. Social movements involve lots of "meaning making" which is both intensely creative and instrumentally political, and takes place in humanistic and political arenas such as fashion, poetry, music, novels, rallies, demonstrations, and theater. [A]

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