

Introduction

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I believe the intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two groups. When I say the intellectual life, I mean to include also a large part of our practical life, because I should be the last person to suggest the two can at the deepest level be distinguished. . . . Literary intellectuals at one pole—at the other scientists. . . . Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension—sometimes (particularly among the young) hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding. . . . This polarisation is sheer loss to us all. To us as people, and to our society. It is at the same time practical and intellectual and creative loss, and I repeat that it is false to imagine that those three considerations are clearly separable.

C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*, 1959

If the natural sciences can be successfully united with the social sciences and the humanities, the liberal arts in higher education will be revitalized. . . . The future of the liberal arts lies . . . in addressing the fundamental questions of human existence head on, without embarrassment or fear, taking them from the top down in easily understandable language, and progressively rearranging them into domains of inquiry that unite the best of science and the humanities at each level of organization in turn.

E. O. Wilson, *Consilience*, 1998

THE ESSAYS IN THIS INAUGURAL ISSUE OF *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*, are precisely focused on confronting, head-on, the idea of “two cultures” via a sustained interdisciplinary conversation surrounding a key object—human behavior. Deemed by many to be the most powerful tool for understanding human action, rational choice theory has been the subject of extensive debate in the social sciences, in particular, in the fields of economics, psychology, sociology, and political theory. Embraced by some as a normative tool and others as a descriptive one, rational choice theory can be linked to what I will call “rational choice thinking,” a term I use to name the assumptions that undergird rational choice theory and find even greater mobility than rational choice theory within and without the aforementioned fields and disciplines. These suppositions that grow out of the belief that human choices and behaviors can be evalu-



ated in a way that transcends (or subordinates, at least) particular issues of history, culture, gender, class, and race have colored, it seems, a broad range of intellectual activities and, indeed, have become a key element in discourses about globalization, which relies on certain notions of translatability, if not universalism.

It is only relatively recently that an attempt has been made to link a discussion of rational choice theory to the humanities. This volume brings together an interdisciplinary group of key thinkers from disparate areas to discuss the ways in which rational choice theory can (as an exemplary discourse) speak to and with the humanities, and what the humanities might say back. How else can human motivations and actions be mapped, analyzed, imagined? Why are alternative models not only important, but necessary for our understanding of such key concepts as reason, choice, creativity, imagination, agency?

For those predisposed toward rational choice theory, the matter seems uncomplicated: “The combined assumptions of maximizing behavior, market equilibrium, and stable preferences, used relentlessly and unflinchingly, form the heart of the economic approach.... I have come to the position that the economic approach is a comprehensive one that is applicable to all human behavior, be it behavior involving money prices or imputed shadow prices, repeated or infrequent decisions, large or minor decisions, emotional or mechanical ends, rich or poor persons, men or women, adults or children, brilliant or stupid persons, patients or therapists, businessmen or politicians, teachers or students” (Gary Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*, 1976).

Nevertheless, the purpose of this issue is to query how the economic approach to human behavior may be profoundly challenged when presented with three key questions. First, what happens when we historicize choice and the agents that make choices? How can we see this seemingly transcendent model as embedded historically and socially, not only in terms of its predecessors and its contemporary social context, but also mapped onto the future? Second, what happens when rational choice theory is challenged empirically by difference, specifically differences in culture and gender? Finally, how have literary texts and other forms of narrative treated choice both inside and outside the model of economic behavior? More specifically, how do the humanities, with very different methodologies and predispositions, counterpose creativity and imagination to rationality and choice, and what does that tell us about how human action may be envisaged differently?

We begin with an essay from one of the creators of rational and social choice theory, Kenneth Arrow, who raises one of the key question for rational choice theory—is it any less, or more, respectful of individuality than the humanities? Arrow’s essay is a brilliant survey of thinkers such as Burke, Engels, Carlyle, and Ruskin, querying how rational choice and economic thinking may or may not respect individuality as much or more than the humanities. He extends this philosophical and literary discussion into the realm of actual policy-making, and asks us to evaluate how rational choice may not be a more powerful instrument for peace and conflict resolution. It is a probing essay into the foundations of the economic/humanistic divide written by one of the most influential economists of the twentieth century.

Jon Elster’s “Interpretation and Rational Choice” advances his longstanding investigation of literature and rational choice. He raises the question of how literary texts “mean,” and argues that literary meaning is inextricably tied to choices made not only by characters in novelistic literature, but also by authors themselves. He discusses the various strategies of writing and acting in and out of texts, and uses a number of examples from Shakespeare to Austen to illustrate his

points. How do the particular constraints of literary aesthetics indeed take part in aesthetic production, and how is our ability to interpret literary works of art dependent on recognizing both these constraints and their manipulation by writers? Elster then switches his focus to real human action, seeing that the constraints placed on authors of fiction and their characters alike do not apply there. Instead, he shows how actors can and do misrepresent, in complex ways, the reasons for their actions. Using case histories from civil wars, the author shows the relative opacity of human action. Peter Stone's "Rationality, Intelligibility, Interpretation" comments on Elster's essay and explains its place in Elster's remarkable corpus. Stone adds to Elster's discussion of rationality and interpretation the notion of intelligibility, and shows how intelligibility relies on our accessing our own rationality to make sense of the choices others make.

Michael Suk-Young Chwe's, "Rational Choice and the Humanities: Excerpts and Folktales" looks at a diverse set of texts—African folktales, Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, and *On the Waterfront* to put forward the argument that while each of these texts can usefully be aligned with the model of rational choice, each endows choice-making with an added dimension of wit, power relations, and gender.

The next essays bring forth issues of history and social thought, and focus on the interface between social science and the humanities, with particular attention given to how each regards and maps choice via empirical models and creative ones. Here, the need to locate and contextualize choice within its social, historical, and aesthetic milieu is primary. How do literary texts in particular allow us to see human action and agency as thus embedded in social networks that may vary in nature significantly at different times and in different places? How is the very idea of what choice is open to historicization? John Bender's "Rational Choice in Love" uses *Les liaisons dangereuses*, the scandalous novel of 1782 by Choderlos de Laclos, as a text with which to analyze a key issue of rationality during the Enlightenment—how was love to be instrumentalized, and yet, because of its complex social codification, how was that act of instrumentalization to be always a failure? At its turning point, the novel's two chief characters declare war—another medium in which reasoned strategy, gaming, and the passions meet. Two different historical love systems play out in Laclos' novel—one system in which love is stringently rule-bound; the other in which love is detached from rational management. The classic absolutist system in which marriage is an economically, socially, and politically motivated contract independent of love is counterposed to the more modern system in which marriage follows upon romantic love—that is, upon what Niklas Luhmann in his book *Love as Passion* has called a real or phantasmatic "ecstatic interpenetration" of the passions of two subjects. This is the kind of love that provokes war in Laclos' novel. Paradoxically, the untethered irrationality of modern romantic love enables functionally differentiated societies precisely because the love system is separate from other social systems.

Regenia Gagnier's "Literary Alternatives to Rational Choice: Historical Psychology and Semi-detached Marriages" proposes a less dualistic historical psychology than that presented by the rational/emotional divide, one in which reason is not the province of science and emotion not that of literature. Gagnier's argument is that literature (including biography) can contribute to our understanding of historical psychology not because it is more emotional but because, unlike rational choice models, it is historical: it can show how choice develops through time in specific historical circumstances. A second argument of the essay is that choice itself is historical and did not attain its modern meanings of *individual* choice and preference until the end of the nineteenth century, when it was already outdated among the most progressive members of soci-

ety. The historicity of choice is significant because it can no longer be assumed that “freedom” or “choice” on the market is the end of history.

The two essays that follow bring forward questions of gender and subjectivity that complicate, empirically and philosophically, the notion that rational choice theory can robustly describe choice-making without taking into consideration the differentials of gender and agency. In “Rationality and Humanity: A View from Feminist Economics,” Julie Nelson addresses a fundamental topic of this volume head-on. She asks, “Does rational choice theory have something important to contribute to the humanities?” Usually the arguments for answering “yes” to this question go something like the following: The application of rational choice theory has proved to be a powerful tool in economics and the social sciences, leading to clear and rigorous insights unattainable from less precise methods. Therefore, by also harnessing this power, the disciplines in the humanities could advance toward becoming more elegant, rational, and forceful in their explorations of human behavior. As an economist, Nelson addresses this argument on its home ground. Has the use of rational choice theory advanced economics in good and useful ways? More precisely, what are the disciplinary values adopted in economics according to which the application of rational choice theory has been judged a “success”? Is this system of values one we want to continue to endorse even in economics, not to mention more generally?

While rational choice theory is often presented as somehow neutral and “value-free,” the idea that rational choice theory provides a superior model of human behavior is firmly based in valuing a very particular subset of possible epistemological and substantive ideals. According to Nelson, this is where the problem with rational choice theory lies. The list of rational choice theory -favored epistemological ideals leaves out many properties that can very arguably also be considered to be essential characteristics of a good theory. Other worthy goals include realism, accuracy, richness, comprehensiveness, an appropriate level of complexity, applicability, and usefulness. In the case of economics, a one-sided adherence to the ideals elevated in rational choice theory can lead to explanations that score abysmally low on these other criteria. Simplicity, for example, can be taken much too far, leading to conclusions that are so unrealistic as to be totally ridiculous—and sometimes positively damaging if taken as a guide for action.

Dan Hausman’s contribution, “Rational Preference and Evaluation,” tackles one of the main assumptions undergirding rational choice theory—that preferences are universal, that everyone everywhere wants basically the same things, and hence variation in preferences is insignificant and the appraisal of preferences is not necessary, and even harmful, to the model. Hausman’s essay clarifies what is involved in the rational appraisal of preferences and shows that appraising preferences is fully compatible with the basic framework of rational choice theory, though not with typical formal presentations of the theory. To make this case he first addresses everyday explanations of actions, then turns to formal theories of rational choice, which are, in his view, extensions and elaborations of everyday accounts. Because economists and decision theorists are in fact committed to views of preference formation, this leaves room for the rational appraisal of preferences (rather than leave them as universally assumed and, as such, outside of scrutiny). In sum, Hausman breaks new ground in arguing that formalizations of rational choice theory can permit rational scrutiny of preferences, and this in turn reintroduces a consideration of subjectivity and agency.

Next, we turn to the future with three essays that argue, in different ways, that it is impossible to use a rational model to help us make choices about the future of the planet. Anchored in a firm sense of the historical moment, these essays consider a new global situation informed by

new technologies and ecological and political destruction. John Dupré's "Rational Choice Theory and Genomics" addresses genomics, perhaps the most rapidly developing project in the history of science and the technological possibilities. Dupré's essay considers some of the issues that may arise in attempting to respond rationally to the choices which follow technological and scientific advances. Perhaps the most important thing about the genome, from a scientific point of view, is not its centrality to the functioning of the cell, but its suitability as a lever for manipulating the cell. It is relatively stable; a crucial property of it, its nucleotide sequence, is measurable in various ways; and we have increasingly powerful techniques for manipulating its activity and even its basic sequence. These technical possibilities give rise to the choices Dupré considers; he then shows how these choices throw one into sometimes abysmal choice-making situations. The essay thus draws the connections between medical science and technology, rational choice theory, and an ethics of the future.

Alan Liu's, "Thinking Destruction: Creativity, Rational Choice, Emergence, and Destruction Theory" looks at another, darker side of the Future. Liu's paper turns from a deistic notion of creation and creativity to its seeming obverse side—irrational destruction. He sees in the transit points a useful way to question deep-seated assumptions about how rationality informs creativity and brings into the discussion emergence theory, which argues that if there is no rationally understandable subject responsible for creativity—especially the genius of the individual—then perhaps such a subject (with all its Ptolemaic epicycles of consciousness, intentionality, desires, and so on) does not exist. If we really want to be rationalist about it, in other words, then we should think of creativity as *all* "application," all a mechanical, extrinsic process of expression and development akin to that antithesis of deism in the nineteenth century: Darwinian evolution. Specifically, perhaps the secret to a truly rational approach to creativity is to go *subrational* to show why "subrationality"—at least up to the concluding point of ideology—can seem hyper-rational. Finally, the topic of Jean-Pierre Dupuy's "The Precautionary Principle and Enlightened Doomsaying: Rational Choice before the Apocalypse" is the indeterminacy regarding the survival of humankind. With the advent of the atomic bomb, humankind became potentially the maker of its own demise. In a recent stunning book, England's Astronomer Royal, Sir Martin Rees, who, incidentally, occupies Newton's chair at Cambridge University, forecasts that the odds are no better than fifty-fifty that humankind will survive to the end of the twenty-first century. The title of the book is explicit, and the subtitle even more: *Our Final Hour. A Scientist's Warning: How Terror, Error, and Environmental Disaster Threaten Humankind's Future in This Century—on Earth and Beyond*. Sir Martin warns us: "Our increasingly interconnected world is vulnerable to new risks, 'bio' or 'cyber', terror or error. The dangers from twenty-first century technology could be graver and more intractable than the threat of nuclear devastation that we faced for decades. And human-induced pressures on the global environment may engender higher risks than the age-old hazards of earthquakes, eruptions and asteroid impacts." Sir Martin is by no means isolated in his warning. Already in 2000, someone who is himself anything but an irresponsible leftist, Bill Joy, one of the most brilliant American computer scientists, wrote a celebrated and much commented upon paper titled "Why the future doesn't need us. Our most powerful 21st-century technologies—robotics, genetic engineering, and nanotech—are threatening to make humans an endangered species." Given these dire predictions, what is the status of the rational? How can we think about the Future in an anticipatory manner that will not, Dupuy argues, inescapably make that Future happen? How can rational choice theory help us make choices under such difficult and unique

historical situations? Using references to pre-emptive warfare, ecological activism, and science fiction, Dupuy's paper is an astonishingly complex and evocative paper that philosophically addresses our capacity to understand destruction.

In the final section we include response papers from different fields outside the humanities, and finish with Gayatri Spivak's provocative statement, "Speaking for the Humanities." From their specific vantage points, three commentators assess the encounter between rational choice theory and the humanities, and in so doing generate a critical, interdisciplinary conversation. Sylvia Yanagisako (Anthropology) asserts that some variant of rational choice has always been a key element in the social sciences, but then she evaluates how the fields of psychology, economics, and literature have each presented critiques of rational choice theory that may in turn be seen to be important critical interventions in the social sciences in general. In so doing she asks us to excavate and examine the genesis of this model in the social sciences, and its rise to centrality. Last, David Kreps (Economics) questions the very binarism of humanist/scientist in much the same way that Kenneth Arrow re-examines the logic and consequences of that divide. Kreps looks at essays from philosophy, genomics, and literature and finds both points of sympathetic contact but also disconnect. In several instances Kreps, reluctantly, accepts this divide, but in the end he expresses the hope that the divide may be not erased, but navigated in productive manners.

Closing out this volume, Gayatri Spivak's essay delves deeply into the legacy of reason and rationality, and differentiates between the two, bringing reason into the scope of literary studies and, above all, into the shared project of transforming "the anyone into the everyone." For Spivak, the pursuit of the Rational, the rush to gain knowledge, and especially knowledge of the Other, is always productively interrupted by the ethical. She writes, "It is practically persuasive that the eruption of the ethical interrupts and postpones the epistemological—the undertaking to construct the other as object of knowledge, an undertaking never to be given up."¹ It is precisely in literary texts, and more importantly, a particular act of reading, that the space and time of stalled epistemological striving can be exploited: "The discontinuities between the ethical and the epistemological and political fields are tamed in the nestling of logic and rhetoric in fiction." And it is here and now that "the protocol of fiction gives us a practical simulacrum of the graver discontinuities inhabiting (and operating?) the ethico-epistemic and the ethico-political."² But simple discontinuity is not necessarily useful. What Spivak insists upon is that in this newly carved-out intermediate space, we open ourselves up to the Other and to otherness in general. And this is not solely an exercise to get at a particular experience of reading, rather, that experience of reading is colored by a larger ethical project.

Spivak actually grants "reason as consistency" a key cultural and human role, and yet critiques reason as rational choice's invention of an uncritical and non-negotiated sense of "everyone," a quantitatively arrived-at averaging of not only human behavior, but also, by extension, the grounds for humanity itself. Counterposed to rational choice theory and its aftereffects in policy decisions, Spivak offers "a certain way of teaching humanities" that has an entirely different notion of how "everyone" may be arrived at. It calls for the "translation" of "anyone" to "everyone," and in this difficult working out of translation, we find evidence of an ethics of fragmentation and recombinatory poetics.

¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching," *Diacritics* 32, no. 3 (2002): 17.

² *Ibid.*, 18.

That is to say, against the seemingly already-settled account of a transcendental calibration of human choice that allows some in power to claim with all confidence the ability and indeed the right to “speak for everyone,” Spivak argues for a sustained moment of interruption. She instructs us on the necessity to be able to “self-synecdochtize” and see part of “us” as part of something else, in contingent and meaningful ways. This is a first and necessary interruption of the consistency that is condensed in the logic and operations of reproductive heteronormativity and mapped by rational choice’s alliance with behavioralism. Only after such an interruption can we make good on the basic ethos of democracy—that “anyone” and translate over to “every one.” And, critically, this ability to “self-synecdochtize” is enabled by a humanities education that precisely lingers in the non-quantitative, non-regulative, unverifiable singularity of literary texts. It is through approaching texts in this “certain way” that we are put in touch with the modesty, the courage, and the impetus to imagine ourselves differently.

This collection I believe serves well as an indication of the kinds of work this journal seeks to make available to the widest public possible. Not only crossing disciplinary boundaries, these essays also challenge and indeed disrupt them more often than not. One can see that there is no necessary consensus here—rather, one finds points of friction and dissent that we take to be signs of life and vitality, and in fact some sign of engagement. Future issues of *Occasion* will hope to continue in this spirit. A

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