
Rationality in International Relations

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The role of reason in international relations has been contested since the eighteenth century. The construction of a sphere of calculated state action, *raison d'état*, and an image of the balance of power suggested an Enlightenment equilibrium as comprehensible to human reason as a clockwork. Even at the time, however, the obsessive and often self-defeating war-making of Louis XIV and Frederick the Great illustrated the irrationality of collective outcomes and the failure of self-imposed limits in a world grounded in *raison d'état*.¹ During the nineteenth century, advancing industrial capitalism promised to overcome passions in the interest of human progress, and modern political economy reinforced the belief that individual calculations of interest could lead to beneficial social outcomes. International politics, however, was only partially captured by the force of reason.

The questioning of reason deepened in the twentieth century as modern psychology undermined the image of a unified and rational self. Democratic politics meant that the phantom of an elitist and state-centered rationality would remain elusive. Disastrous international outcomes—the failure of cooperation in the 1930s, the monumental carnage of two world wars—produced pessimism regarding the power of human reason to comprehend the realm of international competition and to contain the passions of ideology and nationalism.

Reason, Rationality, and American International Relations

As the study of international relations took shape in the United States after World War I, however, these shocks to reason in all of its guises—a model of individual psychology, an avenue for comprehending international reality, and an instrument of

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1. Kissinger 1994, 66.

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progress—were felt only faintly. A perspective that was broadly liberal and materialist assumed a central place. Incorrectly labeled idealist, human reason in this view continued to offer the possibility of collective mastery over the forces that had precipitated world war.²

At the same time, international relations was defined in social scientific terms, as subject to the same regularities as other spheres of social life. By the 1930s, pioneers in the new field had begun to adopt the model of natural science for their research; like the liberal materialists, Charles Merriam, Harold Lasswell, and Quincy Wright assumed that human reason could illuminate international relations in the same way that it had comprehended the economy and political behavior. They embedded the study of world politics in a broader political analysis that stretched from individuals to national governments to the interaction among those governments.

Two events shook the rationalist faith of this liberal and nascent social scientific enterprise. The cataclysm of World War II produced progressive hopes for a world in which rational planning and institutional design would play a larger role. Those hopes were not entirely disappointed in the postwar management of international economic relations, but the onset of the Cold War undermined lingering hopes that collective reason could overcome the force of ideology. Political persecution and war also produced an emigration of European scholars whose realist tenets were far more pessimistic regarding the abilities of reason to comprehend and to curb the violent tendencies of world politics. Those beliefs were in sharp conflict with the prevailing consensus in American international relations.

The roots of realism lay in currents of European thought that had undermined the reign of reason. Realism injected an awareness drawn from European social theory and philosophy that the image of a unified and rational self had been overturned. Although these strands, particularly Freudian psychoanalysis, were not foreign to postwar American social science, the attack launched by realism against what it regarded as naive liberalism and a misconceived positivist scientific enterprise was deeper. At the time of its entry into American intellectual life, the relationship between realism and rationalism in politics was more confrontational than complementary.

In *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics*, published immediately after World War II, Hans Morgenthau drew intellectual ammunition from the European cataclysm for a realist attack on prevailing liberal ideology. He assailed the current intellectual consensus as “a repudiation of politics,” offering a false hope of meliorating a social world driven by irrationality. Morgenthau declared that “our civilization assumes that the social world is susceptible to rational control conceived after the model of the natural sciences, while the experiences, domestic and international, of the age contradict this assumption.”³ He was not alone among realists in questioning the dominant liberal embrace of reason. In early formulations of the security dilemma, a core concept of realism, John Herz also pointed to an underlying irrationality in the

2. This account of interwar international relations in the United States is drawn from Kahler 1997.

3. Morgenthau 1946, 71, 2.

interdependence of human beings and the simultaneous “necessity for distrusting and possibly destroying” those same fellow beings.⁴ Realists engaged in the practice of diplomacy, such as George Kennan, were intellectual allies, skeptical of claims for a scientific study of politics.⁵

Realist skepticism toward the power of reason, grounded in European intellectual life, was soon purged in its new American home. American policymakers may have deployed realist tenets in their contest with the Soviet Union, but domestic politics demanded a public attachment to liberal aspirations for international improvement. More important, international relations and realism absorbed what Dorothy Ross has called the “individualistic and ahistorical premises of liberal exceptionalism,” best represented in neoclassical economics.⁶ Running counter to this forceful but temporary European insertion in American international relations were more powerful countervailing tendencies that reinforced rationalist approaches to international relations: economic analysis exploited the assumption of utility maximization to construct a research program that was the envy of the other social sciences; strategic interaction began to yield to the power of game theory and its international relations offshoot, deterrence theory.

Rationality and Contemporary International Relations

Since the domestication of realism, the controversies surrounding rationality in post-war American international relations have been much more narrowly defined. The principal contenders have limited their disputation to the relative power of rational and nonrational models as behavioral foundations for international relations. On the one hand, rational and individualist models seem to fit the frequent delegation of authoritative foreign policy decisions to a relatively small elite, the smaller role of norms when compared to domestic politics, and the high costs of cognitive failure in international interaction. On the other hand, cognitive inadequacy, the barriers to a consistent pursuit of national interests imposed by domestic politics, and the intrusion of emotion-laden issues of identity suggest that rationalist models must be substantially modified or abandoned.

Other, larger controversies surrounding reason’s powers and possibilities—whether constructing a science of international relations or serving as a progressive means for ameliorating the international realm—were set aside. Although some recent challenges to rationalist explanations call into question the social scientific enterprise and its philosophical underpinnings, this account will exclude those who seek to “dethrone” reason (using Jon Elster’s term) and radically undermine the research enterprise in which most international relations scholars participate. Epistemological issues continue to divide the social sciences, but most of those considered

4. Herz 1951, 16.

5. Stephanson 1989, 180–81.

6. Ross 1991, 473.

here, from rational choice to social constructivist, pragmatically deploy their theories in order to understand the substance of international relations. Whether the field has reached agreement on the meaning of “understanding” is an issue too large to consider here; my own belief is that broad canons of evidence and argument in the social sciences are widely shared.⁷

On the narrower ground of whether rationality and rationalist models provide a basis for constructing (or reconstructing) the field of international relations, an alleged affinity between rational choice models and traditional state-centric views of international politics as well as a long-standing embrace of game theory has until recently insulated international relations from an increasingly acrimonious conflict between proponents of rational choice and their critics in other social sciences.⁸ Nevertheless, the current tendency to set up rational choice models as imperialistic targets risks yet another fruitless and time-consuming “great debate” in international relations. Previous great debates, whether maxi- (realism versus idealism) or mini- (neorealism versus neoliberalism), have seldom advanced a coherent research program for the field.⁹

Another intellectual tournament of this kind might be preempted by demonstrating the value of a competitive exchange between those endorsing rationalist models and their critics, rather than an all-or-nothing contest producing victory or defeat for one side. Rationalist treatments have already been challenged to extend their scope and refine their modeling; those who are skeptical of such accounts (from a number of perspectives) have been pressed to reinforce the rigor of their arguments and to define domains in which rational choice and the proposed alternatives carry the most explanatory weight. Given the waves of “bashing” that too often occur on either side, it would be premature to argue for convergence between rational choice and its principal competitors. One feasible outcome, however, can already be discerned in particular fields of research: a willingness by either side to emphasize problem-focused research, permitting explanatory power rather than theoretical polemic to decide the contest.

Two additional and equally important observations serve to obscure the lines in the sand that are often drawn on either side. Rational and nonrational accounts share methodological shortcomings. One problem, considered at greater length later, is a too-easy aggregation from individual to collectivity. Confronting such shared methodological problems could also contribute to intellectual exchange between rational and nonrational modes of explanation.

Careful scrutiny of the criticisms leveled by either side also demonstrates that differences between rational and nonrational often revolve around questions of definition. In accepting the narrower terms of controversy, reason and rationality are defined here in broadly instrumental terms. Still, the variety of rationalist accounts is a target for critics, who see in diversity a slippery unwillingness to confront empirical

7. For a different view of the importance of epistemological concerns, see Smith, Booth, and Zalewski, 1996; and Ruggie, this issue.

8. See Green and Shapiro 1994; and Friedman 1996.

9. Kahler 1997.

shortcomings. For those employing rational choice frames, on the other hand, such variety undermines the allegations of some critics that they represent a monolithic intellectual tribe. Criticisms revolve around the distinction between what John Ferejohn terms “thin” and “thick” rational accounts. To the former’s assumption of simple instrumental rationality, the latter adds auxiliary assumptions regarding agent preferences and beliefs.¹⁰ Many of these auxiliary assumptions—such as those concerning the possibility of other-regarding goals—lie at the core of many criticisms of rational choice.

Another important definitional misunderstanding that exaggerates the lines of disagreement is the common conflation of methodological individualism and rational choice, a reasonable linkage given the roots of both in economics. As the comparison of rationalist and constructivist accounts will suggest, individualist approaches need not imply rationality, and rationalist accounts can and do incorporate social content.¹¹

Since the “thickness” and individualism of rationalist models is often at the center of disputes over their usefulness, Elster’s definition of rational choice can serve as a useful benchmark. As an explanation of behavior,

rational choice theory appeals to three distinct elements in the choice situation. The first element is the feasible set, i.e., the set of all courses of action which (are rationally believed to) satisfy various logical, physical, and economic constraints. The second is (a set of rational beliefs about) the causal structure of the situation, which determines what course of action will lead to what outcomes. The third is a subjective ranking of the feasible alternatives, usually derived from a ranking of the outcomes to which they (are expected to) lead. To act rationally, then, simply means to choose the highest-ranked element in the feasible set.¹²

Whether such a relatively “thin” definition remains empty or inaccurate, as some critics allege, or provides the basis for a far-reaching explanation of foreign policy and international outcomes has been central in controversies over the power of rationalist models in international relations.

Defining a benchmark for the nonrational side of this contemporary intellectual contest is even more contentious than establishing the meaning of rationality. The diverse critics of rational choice models in international relations either propose alternative nonrational explanations for behavior on the part of agents in international relations or call into question the scope and accuracy of a rationalist account for the behavior in question. Whether these alternatives modify, complement, or supplant rationalist accounts is another question of central importance.

Rationalist models have confronted four persistent sources of criticism as the research programs of international relations evolved after 1945. Realism has often been paired with the assumption of a rational and unitary state actor, but its relationship with rationalist theorizing has been uneasy, in both its classical, power-maximizing form and its neorealist and structural variants. Psychological assaults on

10. Ferejohn 1991, 282.

11. Arrow 1994, 2, 4; Sen 1995, 2, 14–18.

12. Elster 1986a, 4.

rational choice can be traced to Freud; contemporary criticisms share the individualist premises of rational choice models but dispute its claims regarding the information-processing powers of agents. Both rationalist and psychological models share a third hurdle in explaining international outcomes: constructing a plausible model of action for entities beyond the individual level, whether bureaucratic organizations, interest groups, or states. Finally, the rationality and the individualism of beliefs is questioned by theories that stress culture, identity, and norms as independent sources of action.

Reason and Neorealism

An elective affinity between international relations and rationalist models has often been based on the assumptions of realism, which has claimed a dominant place in the American study of international relations since 1945. The relationship of classical realism to rational models of state behavior is more tenuous than latter-day realists care to admit, however. The domestication of realism by the American study of international relations obscured the earlier history of realism and rendered it less subversive of rational choice models. In *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau himself adopted rational reconstruction from the viewpoint of actors as a means of comprehending foreign policy. This marriage of realist tenets and rationalist models took place most clearly in the evolution of deterrence theory, but taming realism and rendering it scientific has also been the program of structural realism (or neorealism).

Kenneth Waltz's neorealism represented the final domestication of realism by American social science.¹³ Waltz self-consciously aimed to produce a social scientific version of realism far removed from the anti-scientific model of power politics endorsed by the younger Morgenthau. Whether Waltz's neorealism also represented a final incorporation of realism within a rational choice paradigm is far more uncertain. Although Robert O. Keohane attributed a rationality assumption to both classical realism and Waltz's structural variant, the microfoundations of both are unclear.¹⁴ Morgenthau's critical stance toward rationalism has already been described. Normative prescriptions of calculation and prudence suggested that realism understood rational behavior as far from universal in international politics.

Waltz drew analogies between his enterprise and microeconomics, but his emphasis on structure seems to place neorealism in a different methodological camp. Elster notes that pure structuralist accounts deny the importance of rational choice in favor of structural constraints. A modified version of structuralism—which may approach Waltz's position—assumes uniformity in preferences and motivations and attributes differences in behavior to differences in the opportunity set, which could be defined by tighter or looser structural constraints.¹⁵ This second variant can be accommo-

13. Waltz 1979, 1986.

14. Keohane 1986b, 165.

15. Elster 1984, 113–14.

dated within a rational choice framework, but whether structural realism relies on choice under structural constraints or two other adaptive mechanisms—selection along Darwinian lines and socialization—is uncertain. Waltz’s own position seems to vary on this question. In *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz argues that structure affects behavior through socialization and competition.¹⁶ In his treatment of both classical and structural realism, Keohane argues that the rationality assumption is one of three key assumptions that define the “hard core” of a realist research program; he includes Waltz within the rationalist camp as well.¹⁷ In his response to Keohane, Waltz argues that selection carries most of the explanatory weight in structural realism, awarding it a position of “central importance”; he stipulates that political leaders cannot make “the nicely calculated decisions that the word ‘rationality’ suggests.”¹⁸ The realm of reason within neorealism remains ambiguous. Under tight structural constraints of international competition and selection, the rationality of agents seems superfluous. Waltz fails to demonstrate that structures have such consistent and predictable effects, however.

Psychology and Rationality: Individual Reason and Its Limitations

The inability of neorealism to demonstrate consistent behavioral or systemic outcomes from the structural constraints that it emphasizes—distribution of power or capabilities—may render the issue of its decision-making assumptions moot. To the degree that structural constraints are awarded less explanatory weight, however, other issues of rationality loom larger. The congruence between a rationalist model and the psychological and information-processing limitations of individual decision makers has preoccupied scholars. Given the apparent irrationality and destructiveness that pervades the international politics of this century—wars that appear to have served no state’s interests, military technology whose use would destroy its user—the hypothesis that these outcomes resulted from the obstruction of human reasoning has often seemed powerful.

Psychoanalysis, another European import that was grounded in the irrational substructure of the human psyche, has been employed to examine decision-making behavior that appeared to violate the canons of rationality. In a classic study at the origins of psychobiography, Alexander and Juliette George plumbed the puzzling and recurrent leadership style of Woodrow Wilson, a style that gave evidence of a man “beset by great inner conflict which somehow led to self-defeat.”¹⁹ George and George confronted one criticism of psychological approaches—the weight attached to personality variables in explaining significant outcomes. In building their narrative to culminate in Wilson’s central role in the unnecessary defeat of the Treaty of

16. Waltz 1979, 74.

17. Keohane 1986b, 164–65, 173.

18. Waltz 1986, 330–31.

19. George and George 1964, xix.

Versailles, George and George demonstrate that Wilson's behavior was critical to an important historical outcome. In demonstrating that his behavior in a complicated strategic setting was the result of nonrational influences of which he was unaware, however, two significant assertions must be confirmed: a counterfactual proposition that a more "reasonable" course would have resulted in a different outcome and the more difficult contention that his behavior was nonrational, if not when measured by short-term political ends, then by longer-term goals that he had set. These are difficult tests for those who argue that nonrational influences on behavior are strong.

Responding to such claims, Sidney Verba framed a telling response in defense of rational decision-making models.²⁰ Verba pointed to two important shortcomings in many psychological accounts that were critical of rationalist models. He noted unresolved issues of data: whether findings from experimental and clinical settings could be transferred to the far different environment of foreign policy and domestic politics. He also pointed to the problem of aggregation for any individualist model of choice: both rational and psychological models slipped too easily from individual attributions to those of organizations and bureaucracies.

Verba also clarified the methodological tests that should be applied to nonrational psychological explanations. He advanced a cost-benefit criterion for the inclusion of psychological variables: add psychological complexity only when it yielded greater explanatory power. Even more important, psychological explanations needed to move from important generalizations that were too broad in scope to contingent statements that would clarify when "nonlogical" influences on decision making would be significant. Finally, Verba pointed out that many psychological explanations or critiques incorporated, implicitly or explicitly, a rational benchmark. This benchmark was essential, whatever its limitations in particular cases, in order to permit "systematic consideration of deviations from rationality."²¹ Each of the issues raised by Verba more than three decades ago remains significant in evaluating the psychological research agenda.

Cognitive psychology rapidly overtook psychoanalytic theory as the principal challenger to rational models of behavior. The proliferation of studies of foreign policy influenced by cognitive psychology also blurred the alternative research program. Philip Tetlock and Charles McGuire, Jr. discerned two key assumptions in this diverse literature: international politics imposes heavy information-processing demands on policymakers; in the face of those demands, policymakers—"limited capacity information processors"—employ "simplifying strategies" to comprehend their environment.²² Those strategies may violate definitions of rational behavior and call into question the use of rational choice as a norm for individual decision making.

One widespread bias discovered by psychologists in foreign policy decisions is the reliance on cognitive structures (given a variety of labels—cognitive maps, operational codes, or schemas) deeply influenced by past experience and often resistant to

20. Verba 1961.

21. *Ibid.*, 116.

22. Tetlock and McGuire, 1986, 149–50.

more recent data that might modify or overturn those structures. Yuen Foong Khong, for example, has carefully charted the persistent use of historical analogies as schemas for organizing incoming data, comparing a psychological interpretation of this widespread behavior to alternative explanations.²³

The discovery of “theory-driven” behavior, the term that Tetlock and McGuire use to describe this mimicking by policymakers of scientific practice, poses difficult judgments for those evaluating its positive and normative effects on policy outcomes. Since reliance on preexisting beliefs is both widespread and necessary for the processing of new information, this research program must assess when such reliance becomes irrational and distorts policy outcomes. As Tetlock and McGuire, Khong, and others who argue for damaging cognitive rigidity are forced to admit, “reliance on prior beliefs and expectations is not irrational per se (one would expect it from a ‘good Bayesian’); it becomes irrational only when perseverance and denial dominate openness and flexibility.”²⁴ Assessing that point in other than a tautological way (by referring to a positive or negative outcome as evidence) is very difficult. In effect, the rationality of reliance on existing schemas or cognitive maps for interpreting the world is dependent on the desirability of updating beliefs more or less frequently in the face of discrepant information. No uniform answer to that dilemma is given in the psychological literature. Khong suggests a procedural strategy—forcing existing analogies to a rigorous and public “scientific” test of their validity. That kind of serious testing also imposes costs, however, and once again a sensitive comparison of the benefits (in terms of decision-making quality) would also be required. In cases where particular schemas seem to produce outcomes whose costs are uniformly high, avoiding the use of certain kinds of schemas or analogies might be a more efficient rule of thumb.

Other psychological alternatives to rationalist models of explanation emphasize the process by which decisions are made, particularly the use of information-processing shortcuts and heuristics; these alternatives are often portrayed as challenging rational choice models more directly. Prospect theory has evoked the most interest among students of foreign policymaking. Based on robust experimental evidence, prospect theory points to deviations from expected utility theory, the conventional means of explaining choice under conditions of risk. In barest outline, individuals systematically and frequently evaluate outcomes with respect to a reference point rather than using net losses or gains; individuals are risk-averse with respect to gains from that reference point and risk-acceptant with regard to losses; and preference ordering varies according to the framing of prospects (a clear violation of the criterion of invariance in rational choice).²⁵ Despite the difficulties in measuring these effects outside an experimental or laboratory setting, researchers using cases drawn from international politics have already begun to examine the explanatory power of prospect theory weighed against predictions based on expected utility.²⁶ To the de-

23. Khong 1992.

24. Tetlock and McGuire 1986, 160.

25. See Quattrone and Tversky 1988; Levy 1992; Levy 1997; and Pauly and Stein 1993.

26. See Pauly and Stein 1993; Farnham 1992; and McDermott 1992.

gree that convincing tests can be made using the data available, results appear mixed: expected utility theory is hardly without value in explaining many of the outcomes.

The rich psychological literature in international relations has produced many case studies demonstrating widespread cognitive and information processing distortions that deviate from the predictions of rational choice and expected utility theories. Psychological approaches often supplement rational choice explanations, however, rather than providing an alternative to them. In other cases, such as prospect theory, expected utility theorists are hard at work incorporating anomalous findings into broader and more inclusive theories of decision making.²⁷ Theory-building strategies among psychological critics of rationalist models confront the same issue of “thinness” as those using rational choice. Critics of rational choice voice dissatisfaction with the emptiness of those models in the absence of a theory of preferences. Psychological process models, such as prospect theory, remain equally empty without a theory of reference points or framing.

Psychological studies of foreign policymaking have produced important evidence that qualifies rational choice models, but they do not represent a single psychological alternative to rational choice. Mirroring the claims of rational choice theorists, psychological critics have argued wide scope for their findings. They have generally avoided a presentation of contingent theories or hypotheses that would stipulate the conditions under which psychological distortions of rational decision making are most likely. Even the most prolific and perceptive scholars who have mined historical and contemporary data find it difficult to claim more than the presence of systematic and widespread biases toward misperception across a wide range of cases.²⁸ The judgment of Tetlock and McGuire of a decade ago still stands: psychological approaches must work, not toward a single “cognitive portrait,” but rather toward producing a “contingency theory of information processing,” specifying more clearly the conditions under which particular cognitive strategies, rational and nonrational, are pursued.²⁹

Unfortunately, the obstacles to that course are formidable. Critics of the psychological perspective on choice have long alleged that the transfer of experimental laboratory data, no matter how robust, to real-world choice situations is a flawed strategy: even the most ingenious experiments cannot capture the subjective perceptions of risk that are present in markets or international bargaining.³⁰ Even if one allows the validity of testing for such effects in historical or contemporary settings, the collection and evaluation of data that is aimed at reconstructing very refined, subjective estimates of risk and utility is difficult to accomplish. Alternative and equally convincing explanations based on different utility calculations (for example, those including domestic political goals) can often be constructed.

Given these difficulties, Verba’s cost-benefit criterion of research efficiency must be taken seriously. Weighing the potential explanatory contribution of psychological

27. Machina 1987.

28. Jervis 1988.

29. Tetlock and McGuire 1986, 169–70.

30. For only one example, see Riker 1995.

approaches against more austere rationalist models becomes crucial in designing research strategy. As Arthur Stein has argued, even the direction of psychological effects on international outcomes is uncertain: plentiful and unbiased information may not lead to greater cooperation or to other desired outcomes.³¹ Recent discussions of prospect theory have produced widely divergent conclusions regarding the overall effect of its decision heuristics on international politics. Timothy McKeown argues that prospect theory predicts “bland foreign policies”; Robert Jervis and Jack S. Levy perceive a status quo bias that might be upset by risk-acceptant propensities in the domain of losses.³² A great deal hinges on the reference point deployed in a particular choice situation, and prospect theory provides no theory of reference points. If even the sign of these psychological effects is uncertain, then nonrational models of this kind may add little power to existing explanations.

Using an expected utility framework, Woosang Kim and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita have attempted to measure the importance of misperception—defined as *differences* in perception regarding the probability of crisis escalation.³³ This line of research sidesteps the methodological difficulty in demonstrating *misperception*, a counterfactual that Kim and Bueno de Mesquita claim is unobservable in nearly all historical cases. Such a concentration on shared or dissimilar beliefs and the existence of common knowledge provides one rationalist response to the criticisms of psychologists. A second strategy in the face of evidence that rationalist models do not capture decision making in an array of cases is to relax the assumptions of the rationalist model. Evolutionary game theory and models incorporating bounded rationality have pursued this approach.

Both psychological and rational choice approaches share an individualist orientation. Both have tended to evade the crucial question of aggregation: whether assumptions regarding individual decision-making processes, rational or nonrational, can be transformed into plausible assumptions about the behavior of collectivities. That shared theoretical problem has been a stimulus to incorporating rational and nonrational models of organization and institutions into theories of national behavior.

Reason and Collectivities: The Issue of Aggregation

Deterrence theory represents one of the most sophisticated and highly elaborated uses of rational actor modeling in international relations. It has also been an intellectual testing ground for both rational actor (subjective expected utility) models and those deploying psychological models. Much of the debate has centered on methodological issues, particularly the use of deductive models rather than case studies. Participants on either side, however, have admitted that the contenders share an in-

31. Stein 1990, chap. 3.

32. See McKeown 1993, 217; Jervis 1992b, 190–91; and Levy 1992, 286.

33. Kim and Bueno de Mesquita 1995.

ability to offer convincing models that aggregate individual choices and behavior. Jervis has pointed out that units composed of many individuals appear more irrational than individual decision makers for several reasons: governments or coalitions that pursue contradictory goals, organizational or institutional incapacity in strategy choice, alternation of different groups (with different preference orderings) in power, and the possibility of cycling.³⁴ George Downs, who has urged a positive symbiosis between rationalist and psychological approaches to decision making in order to produce a “strong” model of deterrence, also remarks on a less positive attribute on the part of both rational deterrence theorists and psychological modelers to transfer their assumptions about individual choice to states and organizations.³⁵

Elster notes that treating the polity “as a unitary actor, with coherent and stable values, well-grounded beliefs, and a capacity to carry out its decisions” is most widespread in international relations and in the theory of economic planning.³⁶ Given its unhappy consequences in economic planning, it is surprising that this assumption, which he labels potentially “treacherous and misleading,” has been so easily accepted as an adequate microfoundation for much of international relations. Realist assumptions of state rationality depended on an implicit selection argument, as described in the case of Waltz: states that were unable to behave in at least a crudely rational manner would be selected out through intense international competition. Although a model of international selection may give some purchase on the differential survival of units, the link between rational action and survival has not been made. In fact, much of the psychological literature suggests precisely the opposite: that distortions in decision making and deviations from a rational model occur frequently in international politics, with mixed survival consequences for the units in question.

Building on early decision-making models, Graham Allison’s *Essence of Decision* was one of the first efforts to challenge unitary and rational actor assumptions on the basis of political process.³⁷ Allison described a rational actor model of governmental decision making (model I) and then proposed two alternatives that heavily qualified the model. In choosing the Cuban Missile Crisis, the most threatening case of super-power crisis bargaining during the Cold War, Allison deliberately selected a case in which the international environment should have reinforced pressures toward unitary and rational decision making. Instead, Allison found substantial deviations from such a model, which he explained through two alternatives, an organizational process model (model II) and a bureaucratic politics model (model III).

Critics of Allison’s approach focused initially on the descriptive accuracy of his account of the foreign policy process. More recently, however, his specification of the models and particularly his tilt against his candidate for a rational choice model have become a target. Jonathan Bendor and Thomas H. Hammond argue that Allison creates a rational actor model without a dimension of strategic behavior. Omitting a test of the insights of game theory is odd in a study of crisis bargaining. They contend

34. Jervis 1989b, 204–205.

35. Downs 1989, 236.

36. Elster 1989b, 177.

37. Allison 1971.

that Allison sets a benchmark for individual rationality that makes easier his promotion of boundedly rational or nonrational models.³⁸

Allison's second and third models, whatever their shortcomings, trace two paths by which political and social units and organizations could be portrayed as rational. The first avenue is increasing circumscription of rationality as aggregation increases. Model II assumed that large organizations constrained individual rationality and behaved according to highly simplified decision rules. John Steinbruner's cybernetic theory of decision, published soon after Allison's work appeared, elaborated a similar model of simplified organizational behavior that relied on simple and nonrational decision-making processes.³⁹ In both cases, rationality was held to become more bounded and imperfect as one moved from individual choice to organizational routine. Despite the widely held view that organizations are less rational and "dumber" than the individuals who compose them, Bendor and Hammond argue that large organizations may, on the contrary, enhance the decision-making capacities of individuals rather than constrain them. Allison's view of institutional rationality is founded on an optimistic view of individual rationality embodied in model I.⁴⁰

If limitations on rationality are one route toward aggregation (the whole is less rational than its parts), Allison's model of bureaucratic bargaining points toward another. Policy outcome may be seen as the equilibrium of two-level or linked games. In other words, bargaining among rational agents within an institutional setting adds a degree of specification and rigor missing in Allison's bureaucratic politics model, as well as captures the dimension of external bargaining. Helen Milner's contribution to this issue of *IO* describes at greater length the positive benefits of relaxing the assumption that states are units. She provides a particularly telling critique of the realist assumption that states are unitary actors. Less attention will be given here to the modeling of internal political processes. Aggregation conceived as bargaining among rational domestic actors in what Milner terms polyarchic settings has its own risks and limits, however. Allison's early bureaucratic politics model appears to assume that little hierarchy exists in foreign policy organizations.⁴¹ Two-level game models sometimes evade this issue by positing a "chief of government" or other authoritative decision maker who bargains with other political actors, typically legislators (or the legislature). Whether that chief executive must also bargain with bureaucratic subordinates or cabinet colleagues (other than coalition partners in a parliamentary regime) can be unclear in simpler game-theoretic models of two-level games.

Modeling the influence and points of intervention of interest groups raises similar issues. Although on many international economic issues, a likely route for influencing foreign policy will be the legislature, many interest groups forge strong bonds with bureaucracies in order to influence policy implementation. How such influence filters into the preferences of the chief executive or head of government should also be incorporated in the modeling of foreign policymaking. Principal-agent models

38. Bendor and Hammond 1992, 313, 319.

39. Steinbruner 1974.

40. Bendor and Hammond 1992, 312.

41. *Ibid.*, 316–17.

and delegation regimes provide one avenue of institutional analysis that can incorporate diverse domestic actors within hierarchical settings.⁴²

Another potential weakness of rational institutionalist analysis is its treatment of the institutional rules of the game. Robert Bates's recent study of the International Coffee Organization is an excellent exemplar of building from rational social and economic actors toward institutions at the domestic and the international level.⁴³ His treatment of political institutions is squarely within the frame of positive political economy, "the study of rational decisions in a context of political and economic institutions," or, as Bates puts it, institutions "defining political games in which interests compete for influence over public policy."⁴⁴

Building foreign policy actions from individual rational actors constrained by institutions leaves open the question of whether institutions are exogenous or endogenous, however. Positive political economy ultimately regards institutional change as explicable through the same rational choice means as equilibrium outcomes within a given institutional setting. However, most studies, like that of Bates, accept domestic institutions as fixed and play out the domestic political games (interacting with international strategic bargaining) within that context. In assessing the stability of national preferences in a more elaborated institutionalist analysis of foreign policy, as described by Milner, stability of domestic political institutions and the games that they define is crucial. Unfortunately, determining when political actors will opt for institutional change rather than change within institutions is rarely specified clearly. If one can assume relatively fixed preferences on the part of key individuals (or representatives of interests) and fixed institutional rules of the game, treating national preferences and behavior within a rationalist framework is far more convincing than under circumstances in which institutional rules change frequently and unpredictably.

Despite their weaknesses, Allison's alternative models stood at the beginning of two broad avenues for creating unified, if not unitary, rational actors from organizational and national collectivities. One route produces actors embedded in and constrained by organizational context. Whether that context bounds or amplifies their rational decision making remains open to argument. The second route carefully specifies domestic bargaining games that are then linked to international bargaining behavior and strategic interaction. Those games may vary according to domestic institutions, information environment, and type of international interaction.⁴⁵ This second avenue produces outcomes that may serve as proxies for a unified national interest. Both routes force close attention to the simple, conventional assumptions within international relations that have produced unitary and rational actors from the complexities of domestic political and bureaucratic competition.

42. For an introduction to agency problems and their solutions in a political context, see Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991, chap. 2.

43. Bates 1997a.

44. See *Ibid.*, 164; and Alt and Shepsle 1990, 2.

45. For a representative and rigorous array of models linking international and domestic politics, see Pahre and Papayouanou 1997.

Culture, Norms, and Identity: Supplements and Alternatives to Rational Models

The insertion of norms and identity into the analysis of international relations has been taken by some as a direct assault on rationalist models of national policy and international interaction. That insertion has taken many different forms, however, and not all are incompatible with rational choice models. In part, the view that rationalist models are incompatible with the inclusion of norms or culture is the result of an unfortunate conflation of methodology and substance. Most cultural and normative treatments employ “thick description” or interpretive approaches to their subjects, in contrast to the deductive and parsimonious bent of rationalist models. The alternatives are critical of the methodological individualism that is coupled with rationality in these models of politics. Whether rationality and collective identity can be combined within a modified rational choice framework is one of the central questions posed by the recent turn toward identity and norms. To the degree that one can assemble common positions among a diverse group of theorists and researchers, four different criticisms have been leveled at rationalist models. These critical positions can be arrayed from those that complement modified rationalist models to those that suggest a much larger theoretical divide between rational and nonrational.

The treatment of preferences as exogenous and individualistic has been questioned by economists, social psychologists, and, within international relations, proponents of strategic culture as a determinant of behavior. For some, the absence of a theory of beliefs and preferences is simply a failure of explanation within rational choice models; if explanation occurs “when the mind is at rest,” standard rational choice models often leave restless minds in their wake. Herbert Simon has argued that without strong auxiliary assumptions (such as those in public choice theory) rational choice models are nearly empty of explanatory or predictive content.⁴⁶ Others have questioned individualist assumptions regarding beliefs, preferences, and the information environment that seem to underlie many rationalist models. Kenneth Arrow has recently argued that both the rules of the game (in economic or strategic interaction) and much knowledge is irreducibly social.⁴⁷ Arrow’s assertion can be tied to the assumption of common knowledge that underlies equilibrium analysis in game theory.⁴⁸ Norman Schofield situates this question at the heart of social (and by extension international) cooperation: “The theoretical problem underlying cooperation can be stated thus: what is the minimal amount that one agent must know in a given milieu about the beliefs and wants of other agents, to be able to form coherent notions about their behavior, and for this knowledge to be communicable to the others.”⁴⁹ Schofield’s language and the problem of common knowledge that he raises provide a link to those who propose including social and cultural content in rational models.

46. Simon 1995, 50.

47. Arrow 1994, 5–6.

48. For a summary, see Morrow 1994a, 307–308.

49. Schofield 1985.

Within international relations strategic culture is sometimes portrayed as an alternative to rational choice explanations. In fact, strategic culture is better seen as a modification or extension of those models, providing a source of organizational and national preferences. For example, Alastair Iain Johnston offers “a limited, ranked set of grand strategic preferences that is consistent across the objects of analysis . . . and persistent across time” as the “essential empirical referent of strategic culture.” Strategic culture is proposed as a more powerful explanation for this ranking than variables such as “technology, threat, or organization.”⁵⁰ Elizabeth Kier also presents a “culturalist” approach to the choice of military doctrine as a means of endogenizing preferences, in contrast to structural or functional explanations.⁵¹ Jeffrey W. Legro, in another deployment of organizational culture (as an alternative to realist and institutionalist explanations), also uses the culture of military organizations as a means for explaining state preferences.⁵² In each of these cases, cultural explanations are a means of enriching models of state choice, not an instrument for overturning them.

Even these efforts to explain the collective or social content of beliefs and preferences may with extension suggest a deeper conflict with rationalism. One point of disagreement concerns the nature of culture itself. To the degree that organizational and strategic culture is defined carefully, it is not seen as the result of individual interaction: through processes of socialization, organizational cultures are embedded in individuals and those individuals accept such cultures in a relatively unreflective way. Contrast this image with the rational and individualist model of corporate culture proposed by David M. Kreps. Although Kreps allows that corporate culture may be “rigid and immutable,” he offers a definition of culture that is functional and evolutionary: a principle or set of principles that permit “relatively efficient transactions to take place and on which a viable reputation can be based.”⁵³ Although both views of organizational culture employ the word *culture*, the means by which culture is created and transmitted is very different.

A second point of divergence links culturalist explanations to psychological critiques described earlier. If culture implies “culturally dictated schemas which guide individuals to see, do, and want what is required of them,”⁵⁴ one may arrive at a view of choice so constrained by culture that little choice remains: to return to Elster’s original definition, the feasible set is sharply constrained by culture, collective beliefs largely guide interpretation of the choice situation, and in the most culturally driven account, choice can hardly be said to occur. If this interpretation is placed on strategic or organizational culture, we approach a nonrational, norm-driven behavior that is described later.

This first group of critics wishes to elaborate and “socialize” beliefs and preferences within reigning rationalist accounts. A second group is more concerned with

50. Johnston 1995b, 48.

51. Kier 1995, 67.

52. Legro 1995, 27–28.

53. Kreps 1990a, 127, 125.

54. Rosenberg 1995, 132.

anachronistic or inaccurate auxiliary assumptions that have characterized too many rational choice models of political behavior. If the first critics are concerned with the emptiness of rational choice models, the second set remarks that such models have been filled with particular assumptions about individual and state preferences, specifically the assumption of a self-interested *homo economicus*. Using Ferejohn's distinctions, the criticisms here are directed at "thick rationality" of the wrong kind (in the view of the critics) rather than the thin rationality that was the focus of the first criticisms.

The inclusion of other-regarding or altruistic motivations in rationalist models has been the source of considerable controversy, much of it without direct relevance to international relations. On one side, it is argued that by emptying rational choice of self-interest narrowly defined, the concept of rationality becomes so thin as to become a tautology.⁵⁵ The opposed view is in favor of "broad," not thin rationality, criticizing the narrow self-interest view of rationality as an unnecessary auxiliary assumption imposed by too many economists. Elster, for example, distinguishes between economic man "defined through continuous preferences and narrow self-interest," and rational man, "who may have non-Archimedean preferences and be moved by concern for others."⁵⁶

Although less concerned with altruism, debates within international relations revolve around similar issues: does "broadening" rational models to incorporate different beliefs about the world and nonmaterial conceptions of interest render the model so "thin" as to undermine its explanatory usefulness? The introduction of ideational variables into explanations of foreign policy, widespread over the past decade, does not seem to have weakened the explanatory power of essentially rationalist models.⁵⁷ Ferejohn makes a convincing argument that even interpretivist accounts based on thick description of distant historical episodes, accounts that challenge some of the assumptions embedded in public choice and positive political economy models of political behavior, can be fruitfully incorporated into broader rational and purposive models of behavior. By drawing on both interpretivist and rationalist approaches the indeterminacies of each can be partially alleviated.⁵⁸ This apparently happy complementarity may reach its limits, however, when the beliefs and preferences of another culture or another time challenge rationalism itself. Some argue that the worldviews of other cultures, such as Islamic fundamentalism, cannot be melded with an approach derived from the European Enlightenment.⁵⁹ The reply to such arguments raises two questions: is this worldview, typically derived from the writings of intellectuals and clerics, shared widely by the population and reflected in its behavior? To the degree that action cannot be explained by a very thin rational model, how do these actors accomplish their political and religious ends (that is, are there costs or selective pressures imposed on nonrational operating codes)?

55. Monroe 1995, 5.

56. Elster 1984, 146. On less self-centered views of rationality, see also Sen 1994, 389.

57. See the contributions to Goldstein and Keohane 1993b.

58. Ferejohn 1991, 285.

59. Euben 1995, 157–78.

Rather than emphasizing the social and cultural content of beliefs and preferences, a third set of critics concentrates on the determinants of identity, which is held to be socially constructed and prior to any definition of preferences or behavior. Once again, the elevation of identity undermines methodological individualism rather than rationalist models *per se*, but some interpretations of identity call into question rational choice assumptions as well. Social constructivism, which incorporates a diverse body of scholarship, emphasizes socially constructed identity and its implications as a core constituent of its research program.⁶⁰ Sociological approaches to international relations also argue against a starting point of individual, rational agents. Instead, agents themselves, whether individuals or states, are shaped profoundly by a dense institutional environment. The environment can not only alter choices, it can also constitute the properties of actors and even their existence.⁶¹ The sociological perspective accepts institutions as pervasive; although institutions “are certainly the product of human activity, they are not necessarily the products of conscious design.” They represent “collective outcomes that are not the simple sum of individual interests.”⁶²

The social constructivist or sociological view of a highly institutionalized environment shaping or even determining the identity of its constituent actors need not be incompatible with rationalist models. One could argue that choices are simply highly constrained by social and cultural determinants (as earlier criticisms alleged) and that socially constituted identities are an ontological issue prior to behavioral modeling along rational choice lines.⁶³ As John Ruggie puts it, “a core constructivist research concern is what happens before the neo-utilitarian model purportedly kicks in.”⁶⁴ In outlining the effects of identity on national security policy, for example, Ronald L. Jepperson, Peter J. Katzenstein, and Alexander Wendt point to two ways in which identity is prior to interests: states may develop interests linked to particular identities, or domestic identity politics may be reflected in foreign policy interests. In both cases, identity is prior to interests and may define those interests, but the pursuit of those interests could be incorporated in a rationalist model.⁶⁵

Once again, however, extending or reinterpreting this concern with identity may produce conflict rather than complementarity with a rationalist approach. Identity may itself affect interests and behavior in a direct and unmediated way that is difficult to reconcile with rational choice models. Kristen Renwick Monroe’s sphere of ethical action, for example, proceeds directly from identity: “Certain kinds of political action emanate primarily from one’s perception of self in relation to others; this perception effectively delineates and sets the domain of choice options perceived as available to an actor, both in an empirical and moral sense.” Or more radically:

60. See Adler 1997; and Ruggie, this issue.

61. Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996, 41.

62. DiMaggio and Powell 1991, 8–9.

63. Spruyt’s excellent account of the emergence of the sovereign territorial state combines an analysis of the success of one identity with a rational choice explanation for the emergence of the initial competitors. Spruyt 1994.

64. Ruggie, this issue.

65. Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996, 60–61.

“ethical action does not result from conscious calculus.”⁶⁶ Identity may also undermine a rationalist calculus if it can be attached to different forms of rationality. Shawn Rosenberg contends that individuals may exhibit different structures of reasoning and different rationalities; at the level of collectivities, cultural arguments (described earlier in the case of non-Western cultures) could ascribe the same variation.⁶⁷ Doubts remain, however: would selection produce some form of roughly similar rationality among individuals or collectivities; can the evidence of such radical variation in reasoning (drawn from experimental evidence) be transposed to social and political settings?

A final alternative to rational choice explanations of behavior, described by Elster as the only alternative that cannot be absorbed by even an expanded rationalist frame, is behavior driven by social norms.⁶⁸ Behavior driven by social norms defined in this way undermines both individualist and rationalist premises of rational choice models. The norms in question are social in two respects: they are shared by a population, and that population sustains them by enforcing them (through expressed approval and disapproval). Unlike rational action, which is determined by the instrumental pursuit of future outcomes, norm-driven behavior is not outcome-oriented. One easy guide to behavior governed by social norms (as compared to behavior driven by rational or optimizing behavior) is the response (when challenged) that a certain action “just isn’t done.” Norm-driven behavior is nonrational in a second sense, in its tie to the emotions: “Social norms have a grip on the mind that is due to the strong emotions their violations can trigger.”⁶⁹

Elster’s conception of norm-driven behavior is contested from both the rationalist and the social constructivist positions. Those deploying rational choice models seek to incorporate this sphere of human behavior within a rationalist perspective as well. Russell Hardin, for example, challenges Elster’s definition of norms as not outcome-oriented. For Hardin, following norms may combine elements of both rational self-interest and nonconsequentialist motivation. The fluid boundaries between norm-driven and rational choice can only be assessed empirically.⁷⁰ Social constructivists, on the other hand, would contest the methodological individualism of Elster’s definition and seek to expand the scope of norm-driven behavior as against behavior explained through individual choice.⁷¹ Two separable characteristics of norms are at issue then: to what degree norms can be regarded as based in individual beliefs and behavior and to what degree norms are sustained by rational self-interest (defined minimally as concern with the consequences of the behavior induced by norms).

More than in economic transactions (where there are strong norms regarding what money can buy), international relations has been portrayed as a setting of weak or nonexistent norms. Norm-driven behavior in the conventional or realist view is rare

66. Monroe 1995, 12–13.

67. Rosenberg 1995, 124–25.

68. The description here is drawn from Elster 1989c, chap. 3; and Elster 1989b, 32–35.

69. Elster 1989c, 100.

70. Hardin 1995, 108, 140.

71. On the individualism of Elster’s conception of norms, see Elster 1989c, 105.

or absent. Social constructivists have expanded attention to outcomes that appear to be explained by the evolution of social norms in international relations—norms that are often closely tied to identity. Nevertheless, most case studies of the influence of norms in international relations, as responses to realist skepticism, have not been designed to establish norm-driven behavior as a nonrational alternative to rationalist, outcome-driven behavior described by Elster.⁷² Although social constructivists would reject an individualist account for the origins of norms, as Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink make clear in this issue, they would not in every case reject a role for individual or state self-interest in sustaining norms. On further investigation, norms with a wholly nonrational basis may be discovered in international relations: the attachment to national sovereignty may be one example. In international relations, however, the ability to assign an instrumental explanation for the power of many norms and the absence of an apparent affective or emotional linkage that sustains compliance through social disapproval in domestic contexts may reduce the scope of wholly nonrational, norm-driven behavior.

Just as deterrence theory has served as the principal site of contest between rational choice and psychological approaches, identity- and norm-centered explanations on the one hand and rational choice models on the other have challenged each other on the field of ethnic or national identity since the end of the Cold War. In predicting the prevalence of ethnic conflict in particular, rational choice and cultural or eclectic models have competed for explanatory success. The competition is made more interesting by a mingling of normative and positive analysis. As Bernard Yack has argued, the familiar distinctions between civic and ethnic nationalism (good/bad, rational/nonrational, peaceful/conflictual) combine unexamined assumptions about the sources of unfolding ethnic conflict as well as assumptions about desirable outcomes.⁷³

Models of ethnic outbidding based on rational politicians have been widely employed; the instrumental view of ethnicity at the individual and the elite level is a powerful one. At the same time, those models appear incomplete or fail to “work” in the absence of a cultural (if not primordial) substrate that closely resembles Elster’s norm-driven behavior: suffused with affect and often unconcerned with outcomes. All of the social and interpretive qualifications of rational choice models mentioned earlier are applicable here, as are the cautions regarding the easy leap from individual to group motivations and action.⁷⁴ Prevailing theoretical eclecticism in the study of ethnicity and ethnic conflict, combined with a rich and growing set of historical and contemporary cases, suggests that this arena will provide not only some clear tests of the limitations and strengths of rationalist models and their competitors but also a site for bridge building between the theoretical and methodological camps. Whether those bridges are illusory or real is the subject of the concluding section.

72. See the cases in Katzenstein 1996c.

73. Yack 1996, 7.

74. On this point, see Fearon and Laitin 1996, 731.

Reason and the Domain of International Politics

International relations has always been a realm of reason only in part, claimed by both passions and interests. Perhaps the long coexistence of those who have tried to capture its elements of calculation and prudence and those impressed by the irrationality of international outcomes and processes has spared the field from some of the battles that are underway between rational choice and its critics elsewhere in the social sciences. In the inconclusive great debates of international relations, those employing rational choice models could be found on either side, particularly in the most recent neorealist and neoliberal controversies. The image of rational and unitary state actors has been pervasive in the field; strategic interaction is a given. As a result, rational choice and game-theoretic approaches have been easier to accept.

A certain familiarity with models drawn from microeconomics has not meant an absence of critical scrutiny for those approaches, however. Critics from a number of psychological perspectives—depth psychology, cognitive psychology, prospect theory—have pointed out important deviations from austere models of subjective expected utility. Psychological approaches have confronted rational actor models on a level playing field: both accepted individualist premises. The long-standing exchanges between rational choice and its psychological critics demonstrate that arguments about scope must be framed precisely to move the field forward. The hegemonic aspirations of rationalist modelers have often confronted equally broad claims regarding the prevalence of psychological distortions in decision processes. Many of those at the center of psychological research programs, such as Robert Jervis, Philip Tetlock, and Janice Stein, have argued for context-dependent or contingent theories that would specify when rational choice or alternative psychological models of decision should be applied. Unfortunately, such a theory has not emerged on either side. Although the experimental results in support of prospect theory—the latest theoretical alternative championed by the psychologists—are robust, the translation of those findings into decision situations comparable to those in international politics remains problematic. Psychological critiques have elicited a significant response by rational choice modelers and game theorists, however. Expected utility models rely on a rationality that is increasingly constrained, reducing the heroic assumptions that provided such an easy target for the psychologists. The incorporation of bounded rationality into these models and the development of evolutionary game theory have permitted more realistic definitions of rational behavior and opened new research avenues.

In addition to the need for contingent statements of scope, rational choice and its individualist critics also share methodological shortcomings that could be explored together. Both rational choice and its micro-level critics have moved blithely from the individual to the organizational and governmental levels of analysis, accompanied by their rational and nonrational assumptions. The issue of appropriate aggregation or modification in order to preserve assumptions drawn from the individual level has seldom been broached explicitly. Under the influence of neorealism and moves to “bring the state back in,” international relations, far more than the other social sci-

ences, was willing to attribute a circumscribed rationality to states and other international actors. Typically, the issue is dealt with through simple pragmatism: unitary actors are a useful assumption until proven unrealistic. Only recently has institutional analysis provided a rigorous means for identifying the constraints on domestic political actors and modeling both the international and domestic bargaining in which they engage.

A diverse set of critics who emphasize culture and norms exemplify a third strategy that is necessary for fruitful theoretical exchange: clarifying points of complementarity and conflict through careful definition. Many of these critics have questioned the individualist assumptions of most rational choice models; their arguments have implications that are less clear for rational choice assumptions. By forcing implicit auxiliary assumptions to the surface, rational choice models have been broadened. By pressing for a theory of preference and belief formation and arguing for attention to the identity formation of actors, alternatives based on culture and norms opened questions that many rationalist models had mistakenly believed to be answered. As a result, new research agendas—driven by rationality, culture, and identity—have illuminated ethnic and identity politics and their influence on international relations, the character of units—as defined by themselves and by others—across time, and “knowledge politics,” the construction of social knowledge within and across national boundaries.

Arguing for inevitable convergence or accommodation between rational choice and its critics would be as naive as proclaiming peace in our time. Nevertheless, the conditions described provide a basis for intellectual exchange that promises to advance research agendas on either side rather than promoting fruitless and grandiose claims and counterclaims. Careful stipulations of scope, acknowledgment of joint methodological shortcomings, and precise definition of perceived differences can be supplemented empirically by problem-centered research. If research agendas are largely theory-driven, selection biases will tend to favor research questions more tractable for rational choice or its critics. By accepting the “neutral” empirical ground of historical or contemporary issues whose importance is widely acknowledged, a level playing field for theoretical competition may be established. Deterrence served this purpose and illuminated the differences between rational deterrence theory and its critics. Nationalism and ethnicity provide a similar competitive research frontier for social constructivist and rational choice models.

Full-blown alternatives to rational choice may arise from each of these critical alternatives. An evolutionary or selective model, endorsed by Waltz, would render micro-level rationality otiose. Prospect theory or another model of psychological processes may yet offer the breadth of application that rational choice has enjoyed as a model of individual decision. Social constructivism could produce a unified, norm-driven model of international relations that will contend with the state-centric and rationalist predilections of both neorealists and liberal institutionalists.

What is more likely is further evolution of rationalist models in directions that accommodate at least some of these criticisms. Heroic and unrealistic assumptions regarding information and information processing will continue to be relaxed in fa-

vor of constrained or bounded rationality. Models of linked domestic and international bargaining will eliminate the need for another set of unrealistic assumptions concerning unitary and rational states. Finally, rational models will be “collectivized,” as persistent cultural beliefs are incorporated into game-theoretic and institutionalist models.⁷⁵ In light of past experience, valuable complementarities between rational choice and its critics will be more rapidly exploited by rationalist models.

Assumptions of rationality and criticisms of those assumptions have defined research agendas in international relations; in the past they also defined a normative stance in international relations. Rational choice provided a means to explore the most efficient means to pursue national ends, to attain collectively desirable international outcomes, and to avoid disastrous ones. Military strategy, at least since Clausewitz, has been designed to impose reason on conflicts that threatened to spin out of control, to transform fights into games. Deterrence theory, with its applications to nuclear policy and arms control, was perhaps the most striking demonstration of reason in the service of particular national and international goals, but one that demonstrated in the eyes of some the irrationality of reason’s offspring. Psychological dissents from rational choice were directed toward what was seen as the hubris of early deterrence theory, but the goal remained an undistorted set of rational beliefs and decision-making processes. The delicate balance of terror was rendered less delicate and less dangerous, but what many saw as the fundamental irrationality of mutual assured destruction remained.

The narrowing of reason’s import to a criterion of decision-making efficiency may have eliminated its status as a normative standard. The effects of misperception and other nonrational distortions on international outcomes are ambiguous; theory-driven behavior can have both positive and negative consequences. Rational institutional design (from the point of view of individual agents) may produce governmental deadlock and foreign policy passivity at the national level. And nonrational influences, such as norms and national identity, may create both a community capable of forging a coherent and legitimate foreign policy and one that oppresses its own minorities and wages war against those outside the community’s pale. Reason’s role at the core of explanatory models continues to grow. Its status as a benchmark for judgment remains as uncertain as it was when Morgenthau attacked “scientific man.”

75. For an important example of such a strategy, see Greif 1995.