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Comment on Boudon

It gives me great pleasure to comment on Professor Boudon's (1989) provocative article, for I am a fan of casuistry. Casuistry is the adroit rationalization of anything and everything that comes along. In my own discipline of anthropology, the rational reconstruction of the apparently false beliefs and seemingly bizarre practices of premodern peoples has, for a long time, been one of the more popular games in town, and I am a practitioner of the art (see, for example, Shweder 1986, 1989, Shweder and LeVine 1984). Nevertheless, as any self-respecting casuist should, I want to draw some distinctions, in this case, with an eye to the difference between bounded rationality and rationalization unbound.

Professor Boudon had two aims in his article: first, to treat rational justifications for action (the "good reasons" for doing this or for believing that) as explanations for action; and second, to rationally justify (and thereby explain) apparently false beliefs or irrational actions. He does so by relying on the concept of "bounded" or "subjective" rationality, arguing that the actions of a motivated actor are done not only for reasons, but they are done for good reasons, which we can understand if we just view them in their proper context.

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Those two aims of the article – to substitute reasons for causes, and good reasons for bad ones – are joined in Professor Boudon's ideal-type concept of the "motivated actor," who "has good reasons to do what he or she does or to think what he or she thinks" (p. 195). The motivated actor not only *does* the rational thing, but is also inclined to make good reasons the only *motive* for doing anything. The motivated actor, a rational agent, does the right thing for the right reason (see Rescher 1988).

A major contribution of Professor Boudon's article is that it helps us to recognize that in the special, ideal-type, or utopian instance of a society made up entirely of rational agents (where every man is a god, or better yet a philosopher-king), good reasons are the only causes of behavior and the rational justification for an action supplies the only terms which one needs for the explanation of its occurrence.

Now as I understand the art of casuistry, rational justification consists of showing how an action, a practice, a policy, and so on promotes some worthy end (moral rationality), and does so efficiently (instrumental rationality) and with an accurate grasp of the facts and underlying dynamic processes of some ambient reality (scientific rationality). It consists of establishing a series of proportionalities or optimal fits between desires and real interests, means and ends, and subjective responses and objective truths (see Rescher 1988 on those three types of rationalities, which he labels evaluative, pragmatic, and cognitive rationality).

In recent years, this traditional casuistic objective has been pursued in the cognitive science literature through reliance on the notion of "bounded rationality," with special attention to judgmental "heuristics" (Tversky and Kahneman 1974; Lenat 1982; Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1983; Wimsatt 1986). Professor Boudon did not use the expression "heuristics" in his essay, but he illustrated the concept throughout.

Heuristic rules of thumb are relied on because they are cost-effective, even though they may result in erroneous or bizarre outcomes. Wimsatt (1986) pointed out that for heuristic rules of thumb (unlike algorithmic or deductive rules) there is no guarantee that they will give you a correct or adaptive solution to a problem, although they work well enough much of the time within a certain range of circumstances.

Professor Boudon finds the notion of bounded rationality appealing. That is because, from a bounded rationality perspective, there are many instances of apparently irrational action which are just that, merely apparent. If you place a basketball next to the nest of a mother goose, she will struggle to sit on the ball and she will neglect her own eggs. Since her offspring may die, her action appears irrational and bizarre. Yet her apparently irrational action

occurs because the goose relies on a heuristic rule of thumb—circularity of shape—to decide which things to sit on in its environment, and a basketball is a super stimulus for circularity. With good reason, one hesitates to say that the goose is irrational for neglecting its eggs in that circumstance. The circular shape heuristic works quite well in the bird's normal adaptive environment, and basketball is not about to become a national pastime in gooseland. Wimsatt (1986, 297) made the relevant point nicely: "It is not irrational to use a procedure that may under certain circumstances lead you into error if you take pains to avoid those circumstances [or if you do not normally encounter those circumstances?] and if using it saves you a great deal of effort." Professor Boudon's article consists of a series of suggestive and stimulating variations on that theme. It is powerful and exciting stuff.

Still, I can imagine many challenges that might be made to Professor Boudon's particular formulation. In the spirit of constructive debate, let me mention four.

First, it seems unnecessarily paradoxical to say that "good reasons can be objectively invalid" (p. 186) or that motivated actors rely on judgmental criteria that are "invalid and good" (p. 174). Perhaps Professor Boudon merely meant to say that rational agents *occasionally* do the wrong thing for the right reason. But that is quite different from saying that their reasons are objectively invalid, for if right reasons typically got you to do wrong things, they would not be right reasons very long.

I prefer a less paradoxical formulation: Rational agents do the right thing, for the right reason, which is to rely on a heuristic and then suffer certain costs, because that is the optimal way to proceed, given the constraints.

Second, actors may do the right thing for irrelevant reasons, or for the wrong reasons, or even for bad reasons. They may follow rational policies, but not necessarily because they are highly motivated by the ideals of goodness, efficiency, and truth. They may put on a seat belt when driving a car, but they may do it to avoid embarrassment, or to impress high-status members of their in-group, or simply because it makes them feel good to uphold a family tradition whose rationality they may or may not understand.

Doing the right thing for the wrong reasons is arguably preferable to doing the wrong thing for whatever reasons, but the fact that actors often do the right thing for the wrong reason does suggest that a rational society is not necessarily premised on a population of rationally motivated gods.

Indeed, the genius of a rational society (and of a noble social science) may consist in devising traditions or customs that make it easy for actors to do rational things, and in devising practices that harness a rich supply of non-rational motives and put them to use in the service of the collective good.

Some things may be just too important to be left to rational choice. If individual actors are too highly motivated to be rational, they may do suboptimal things, like defect in the prisoner's dilemma situation (see Frank 1988 on the "strategic role of the emotions").

Third, Professor Boudon argued through several illustrations that heuristic procedures are rational things to use in certain circumstances, even when they result in error. For the sake of the argument, I will not quibble with his interpretation of his cases, except to point out that ad hoc arguments and circularity are not peculiar to irrationalist explanations (p. 194) and that there is no good reason to assume that *every* rule of thumb is heuristic.

Yet, even if it is true that actors do the rational thing in using those procedures discussed, Professor Boudon never really established that actors are *motivated* by good reasons to use them or to act as rational agents in using them. Indeed, his examples may suggest otherwise. For, if his actors are rational agents, should we not expect them to have a more flexible relationship to their own reasoning procedures? As Wimsatt (1986, 297) noted, within those sciences that provide us with models for rational agency "a fair amount of effort . . . is devoted to determining the conditions under which instruments can be used without bias or to 'calibrating' them to determine their biases so that they can be corrected for." Why is it that Professor Boudon's motivated actors seem so consistently unable to detect when the normal environmental conditions presupposed by their heuristics do not apply?

Perhaps Professor Boudon's actors could adduce good reasons for their inflexibility, and maybe they are even motivated by those good reasons to be inflexible. Yet I doubt it. I have no doubt, of course, that there are circumstances when it is rational to be inflexible and to make no exceptions to a rule, just as there are circumstances when it is not rational to do so. Perhaps Professor Boudon can tell us about those circumstances. I doubt that the typical social actor could.

Finally, and tersely, I would ask the following question: Does Professor Boudon intend his article on bounded rationality to be an example of rationalization unbound? More precisely is there *any* place in Professor Boudon's scheme of things for irrationality, for weakness of will, for people who work to create the things they fear most, for people who struggle unsuccessfully to protect themselves against their own undesirable wants, and for people who do the wrong thing for bad reasons and do it a lot?

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