

choice

Richard Harper Dave Randall Wes Sharrock



Choice

The Sciences of Reason in the 21st Century:
A Critical Assessment

Richard Harper, Dave Randall and Wes Sharrock

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
1 Choice: A Twenty-First Century Science?	1
2 The Origins: Choice in Economics	15
3 An Experimental Choice	44
4 Choice in Context	82
5 Evolutionary Choice	114
6 Modelling Choice	143
7 A New Place of Choice: The Internet	173
8 Reasons in Action: From Philosophy to an Anthropology of Choice	197
<i>References and Bibliography</i>	235
<i>Index</i>	261

CHOICE: A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SCIENCE?

People make decisions every day; indeed, we all make lots of decisions. And yet decisions can seem difficult to comprehend. Others' decisions especially, but even our own, can sometimes seem inexplicable. When we make a choice we cannot account for, we say that we were 'irrational' or were driven by our gut feelings; sometimes it was 'instinct'. That we all make decisions is then a fact of life, just as is their occasional ineffability. Being perplexed about choice is a feature of the human condition. This is hardly a new concern. Historically, cultural techniques have been used to explore this topic. Greek plays made hubris the cornerstone of their narratives about choice; Shakespeare put muddles about identity as the centrepiece of his comedies about choice in love, and he put prejudice as the source of decisions – ones that turn out to be cruel – in his tragedies. In the early twentieth century, the 'death of God' led to the existential turn, and the need to decide – to make decisions – became a 'moral imperative'. In this view, To Be was To Decide, to paraphrase. Much writing on this angst appeared. Sartre's *Roads to Freedom* trilogy comes to mind.¹

Recently, however, the ineffability of choice has become something that we are at once celebrating and admitting, and yet, even as we do this, treating as a concern we can unpack and better understand. There is, however, a curious paradox about this new understanding of choice – or, rather, how we are thinking about choice and the tension between the ineffable and the analysable. On the one hand, cultural theorists are arguing that people are no longer willing to make choices. This is not because a credo of 'unreason' is coming into the ascendancy, as the cultural theorist-cum-philosopher Slavoj Žižek might put it (1989); it is, rather, because the amount of

¹ Consisting of *The Age of Reason* (*L'Âge de raison*, 1945), *The Reprieve* (*Le Sursis*, also 1945) and *Iron in the Soul* (*Le Mort dans l'âme*, 1949).

information now being produced by computer-based systems is so great that it is overpowering the capacity of the human mind to digest (Andrejevic, 2013). The term cloud-computing evokes not how new technology is helping people reason but how, on the contrary, it is only computing on a massive scale that is capable of making the analysis that leads to right choices. This shift is supposedly visible in the performance of US presidents: 'Reagan, being uninformed, could be utterly clear about his goals. Clinton, being exceedingly informed, sometimes got lost in his facts' (Shenk, 1997: 78, cited by Andrejevic, 2013). After Clinton, the next president didn't even bother with evidence: Andrejevic quotes Laura Bush: 'He [President Bush] has good instincts, and he goes with them. He doesn't need to evaluate and re-evaluate a decision. He doesn't try to overthink. He likes action.' The basis of his choices, according to Laura, was 'gut feel'. In short, we turn to the inner, to our instincts, because we are confronted with 'Infoglut'.²

The view from cultural theory turns on the ineffability of choice. But there is another side to the debates about choice. If the cultural theorists are claiming that we are losing our desire to choose, being confronted by an all too awesome amount of information upon which to make up our minds, those within the social sciences, economics and psychology, particularly, are beginning to claim that this most essential of human characteristics – the ability to choose – is being made palpable to experimental dissection and, thus, scientific comprehension. A 'science of choice' is appearing (though this particular nomenclature goes some way back, well before the kinds of arguments we are thinking of came to the fore). This is creating considerable excitement in some parts of the academic world and, indeed, in the press.

This shift has its roots in old debates, as well as in the emergence of new thinking and techniques in the area. The long-standing dissatisfaction with economists' classical views of rationality, a notion that people made all their choices on the basis of what was optimum for them, has resulted in a gradual but now almost irresistible turn to new notions of reason. For one thing, the classical notion did not describe the 'real world', nor could one find actual instances of

² The trouble with these arguments, though they articulate strongly held views about the competence of a sequence of political leaders, as well as a critique of the mystique of technology (Žižek, 1989), is the difficulty with which one would know whether this approach to decision-making and choice is widespread. How a president reasons in his or her White House office may be a long way from reasoning on the street, in the world of ordinary affairs. It doesn't help that Andrejevic uses *Wired* magazine for his evidence; Žižek, Andrejevic's inspiration, doesn't seem to use evidence at all.

persons making choices in economics books. It was, as economists themselves readily admitted, an idealised notion of choice. Over the years, and in an effort to allay this over-idealised view, economists have explored, for instance, the different 'conditions' that influence choice, where conditions label the form and constraints on information available to a chooser. Some of these conditions sound very like sociological phenomena, such as how the cargo of skills and social connection that people build up comes to frame their decision-making and hence their capacity to choose at any moment in time. Indeed, the work of Gary Becker, who was the first economist to develop fully the notion of 'social capital', is illustrative of this attempt to link the basic idea of rational action to stocks of knowledge, to the things people know when they act.

At the same time, and within the social sciences more generally, in sociology and anthropology particularly, there has been an equally long-standing and continually vigorous debate about what matters beyond the economic; rationality cannot be, in this view, only about money matters but about all things. Here, the answers offered emphasise both moral uniformity and systems of exchange and obligation that are not economically motivated but socially driven. Experimental techniques are not valued when exploring these concerns. What might be the 'right' way to proceed is rather less clear, and many of the arguments, as we shall see, turn out to be about methodological appropriateness.

Even so, the pull of the basic economic model of rationality has remained central to nearly all these debates, and it has done so by being the measure against which all new ideas are placed. Daniel Kahneman's Nobel Prize for economics in 2002, and the subsequent publication of his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* in 2011, has led to an interest in the possibility that the picture of human rationality in economics is substantially wrong for reasons that are psychological. People's reasoning is, in some sense, irrational, he claims. In his view, it is not an economic model that lies within the mind (i.e., a capacity to identify maximum utility) but psychological mechanisms that govern choice. Along with his colleagues, Kahneman claims to have shown that there are *systematic, mentally derived* deviations from the traditional standard of rational decision-making in real instances of action. People not only misjudge their options, they misjudge them repeatedly and in specifiable ways. While Kahneman's view starts with the economic one (the view that action is governed by some notion of rationality), his claim is constructed on the basis of something that economists (and not sociologists or anthropologists) hadn't always entertained: the traditional laboratory experiment. He argues that the business of decision-making, or

choice, can be subjected to an empirical description of a scientific kind, and in his view this means experimentally. This is, of course, a very limited notion of what is science, even if it is commonly held.

These are not by any means the only views on reasoning and choice being articulated at the moment, even if they are currently the most cited – Kahneman especially. There are plenty of other approaches which see themselves as investigating how the mind works and comes to make decisions or choices, and some of these seek to expand the case of economic choice (irrational constraints notwithstanding) into a wider set of topics. Here the question of method is only partially material. In recent decades a return to the notion that human action can be explained *causally* has been revised in philosophy, for example. For many years this idea was largely dismissed, but it has gradually come to prominence again, though, as with economists and their notion of rational action, philosophers have various notions of what cause might be (for an introduction, see Sandis, 2012). Many within philosophy want to treat cause as merely a logical fact; in this view, something must have led someone to undertake such and such and the relationship between one and the other must be causal, even if it is not clear in any instance just how. After all, accounts of reasons and causes do not necessarily lead one to a true understanding of cause, so Davidson (1963) argued long ago. But some have advanced causal explanations of a particular kind. Daniel Dennett in his *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995), as a case in point, attempts to explain *why* people make their choices through reference to evolution. In his view, even if one's choices are typically made through a process of maximising utility, as economists suppose, there is still a need to explain why people's motives for making certain kinds of choice are fairly consistent through time – indeed, in Dennett's view, over the ages. Understanding what disposes people to value and desire the things they do is to be provided through Darwin's ideas, unlikely though it may seem on the face of it.

There are, also, other notions founded in cognitive and evolutionary psychology which suppose that the mind operates through logically structured computational procedures; these are causal too, but in a subtle sense. John Duncan claims, in *How Intelligence Happens* (2010: 116), that many psychologists are coming to believe they are 'demystify[ing] thought' by combining insights from observation of brain processes with those derived from mental acuity tests of various kinds. This combination of evidence implies that certain sorts of computational powers operate in the brain. We choose algorithmically, this perspective holds. According to Duncan, human reasoning is made up of logical processing elements, analogous to a

computer program. Not only is intelligence to be thus explained, but so too are character and personality, as well as the more mundane facts of choice, of everyday reason, he would have us believe. Some philosophers of science have offered similar arguments, though each with a different nuance. If Duncan emphasises pattern-matching then Skyrms, in *Signals* (2010), following Dennett, models the way systems capable of performing logical operations can evolve from very simple signalling behaviour. In this view, choice is merely (though complicatedly) a function of entropy versus strength, the evolutionary development from strictly biological signals to linguistic ones. The work of Norbert Wiener in his seminal book *Cybernetics* (1948) comes to mind.

The topic

This is only to highlight some of the reasons why choice is of such interest at the moment. From the view of cultural theory to the more arcane views of experimental psychology, from economics to philosophy, how people choose, why they choose and how it is to be explained is now treated as open territory for investigation. What was once the ineffability of the human condition is now being tamed, rendered explicable through new tools and techniques, new concepts and starting places. At least this is the hope.

In this book, we cover as many of the perspectives on this topic as we reasonably can, and our goal, also, is to offer reasonable assessments of these claims. As with all new sciences and territories for investigation, there is much excitement, but along with the excitement comes hyperbole and exaggeration. We want to sort these out from the facts.

Five elements will be central to our musings. The first is conceptual. A simple way of viewing our topic is to ask the question ‘What are we talking about when we talk about [motive, reason, decisions, the individual]?’ We will show that there are conceptual difficulties to do with definitions about these matters that are much more profound than sometimes thought. A second theme has to do with a topic beloved of the social and human sciences – the question of methods. This pertains not so much to what evidence can be marshalled to support the various explanations on offer as to how that evidence is *produced*. We will not say that some methods produce false data but that, rather, different methods cast evidence in different sorts of ways. This can make comparison between the output of one set of methods difficult to compare with the output of another, or at least can make it a very hard thing to do. Besides, and as we

shall see, some of the methods that are deployed when addressing the topic of choice are simply not handled very well. It is not always clear why these errors are made, but made they are. Kahneman's experiments are a notorious and high-profile example of this.

A third concern is obviously related to both methods and definitions, and this has to do with boundaries. For, when one examines choice, it is not just a question of defining what one means or coming up with a method to capture evidence about it; we also have to come to a view about what to include and what to exclude from our deliberations. In this regard, human choice is radically different from other types of phenomena subject to empirical inquiry, for it really is unclear where choice ends and something else begins. As we shall see, it is not wise to assume that human reasoning is made up of chains of thought, each determinate, logical and easily specifiable; reasoning is more a set of interconnected concerns that makes separation of one line of thought from the larger context of which they are a part quite difficult. Indeed, and given this, one can sometimes come to doubt whether there is a class of 'decision-making', such as, say, related to 'economic life', which can be separated from other forms of decision-making behaviour – indeed from behaviour in the general. Without this kind of distinction, claims about the right tools for the analysis of choice behaviour can become contentious – are experiments good for everyday decision-making, for example? If not, what are? Ethnographic techniques? Modelling or other abstractions?

The fourth element relates to what is right and what is wrong, or, rather, what is the right kind of behaviour presupposed in our perspective. This is typically called the question of *normativity*. Many of those concerned with choice, most obviously sociologists but of course economists too, have never feared to step into debates about how the world ought to be. Describing choice is only the preface to that concern, in their view. A whole range of correctives are implied in their various methods and topics. Experiments such as the 'Prisoner's Dilemma', as we shall see, purport to tell us something about the conditions under which we might be selfish or, alternatively, cooperate with others. They suggest how the world ought to be when cooperativeness is clearly better than the selfish view. The notion of what is better and what is worse, even though it is often unstated, allows contrasts and critique of the world as it is. Models about choice in economics don't just invoke rationality but also imply a more 'economic' future, where rationality can be more effectively undertaken, and so on.

The fifth element concerns changes in the modern world which might entail changes in human nature, thus shifting the foundations

of choice-making. As we noted, some cultural theorists claim we are being driven from choice towards our gut feelings by the weight of information. We are overloaded and so can't choose. Others, meanwhile, have developed pragmatic techniques that seek to encourage decisions of one kind over another. These 'nudge' people to choose, as it has been put (see Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). Others have suggested that essential or motivational aspects of choice behaviour are altering because of the Web. Yochai Benkler's celebrated work *The Penguin and the Leviathan: How Cooperation Triumphs over Self-Interest* (2011) comes to mind. This proposes that online behaviour is creating a new social psychology, where cooperation begins to displace self-interest. This is clearly different from Andrejevic's view, though echoes can be found in the starting place of each. Information production is affecting choice, either making it more freely available, as in the case of Benkler, or in overloading us, as in the case of the author of *Infoglut*.

Our goal: a view across disciplines

Claims about the science of choice, then, and despite some indication of inter-disciplinary approaches emerging, need to be seen as of distinct and possibly incommensurate kinds. There is considerable difference between, say, Taddeo's (2009) logical model of trust, which might help explain choice in game theoretic behaviours, and the use of trust by people to make choices in everyday action as described by Watson (2009), for example. One is not a reduction of the other. They offer different accounts of the basis of decision-making. The differences cannot be summarised by triangulation or some other view of integration in scientific reasoning, for they are predicated on different assumptions about the phenomenon in view. The empirical adequacies of these and many similar arguments has to do with their pragmatic goals, what they were trying to answer and why. Put simply, disciplinary purposes largely underpin questions of concept, method and theory when it comes to the question of choice (as indeed they will with any topic). These 'logics', as Winch (1958) pointed out long ago, define how one ought to judge each.

Beyond this, there is the question of the relationship between the explanation offered and individual instances of choice. Accounts such as those of Duncan and of Kahneman offer *models* of reasoning and not accounts of particular choices. This raises important issues in respect of the relationship between the (often abstract) models produced in classical or rational action (and hence choice)

and revised accounts of rational choice and actual cases of decision-making. The connection between gross notions of choice and inherently particularised individual choice is still obscure. Is the model an abstraction, a distillation of these particulars, or a heuristic that seeks to characterise them at the expense, to some degree, of accuracy, of verisimilitude?

Developing these themes, we will begin with a brief history of the idea of 'rational choice' and the different things it might mean. An important part of this has to do with the fault lines dividing the way social and human scientists consider why and how people choose and what implications this has for understanding the nature of economic behaviour and social behaviour more generally. Arguments about free will and determinism will not be central to our interests, though consideration of the ways in which people make choices might be seen as begging the question of whether there are any choices for people to make. After all, the idea that anyone has personal control over what they do next presupposes that they have, in some sense, free will. Unfortunately, there is no settled answer to the question of whether they do (indeed, one of the reasons we do not wish to sail upon this particular boat is that there are few settled answers to any philosophical questions at all, this one included!). To the extent that we engage with problems of this kind, we do so strictly and only insofar as they arise *after* the assumption that people do in fact make choices has been accepted and treated as allowing evidence of various kinds to be gathered. It is important to bear in mind that the notion of choice we will focus on is strongly connected to the idea of 'decision', because the idea of choice, as we will see, is most often understood from the perspectives we deal with as a matter of electing to do one thing rather than another – as an empirical matter. The problem of 'free will' is not.

As we shall explain, most of the disciplines identify an activity as choice-making if people face a situation composed of discrete alternatives, a situation affording the possibility of doing lots of different things but in which, at a given point in time, they could choose only one. Of course, one of the questions we can pose for the science of choice is whether and how we can delimit the number of choices the decision-maker can be said to face, since, in the real world, there are normally lots of choices to be made. In experimental conditions, in contrast, choices will be artificially limited, to A, B or C. And, moreover, choice has to be made in the experiment, making it all the more easy for the researcher. Subjects can hardly say, 'I'm fed up with this, I'm going to the pub' – even though they might wish to do so.

Though the real-world character of decision-making is elided in

the experimental context, nevertheless the tidiness with which the experiment sets up choice has its echoes outside of the perspective of experiments. The relative simplicity of experimental conditions is, broadly speaking, matched by how economists think about making choices, for example. In their picture, they create situations of choice that have that kind of organisation – where choice is between this and that and is not bound up with a multitude of concerns (the question of marginal utility, judgements between choices of similar and dissimilar goods notwithstanding at the moment). Along with this, they emphasise how decision-making in the real world is confounded by limitations in understanding, in what those who make choice know about the relative merits of the alternatives in front of them.

This way of treating choice glosses much that is of importance. Take as an illustration the following somewhat playful (and certainly English) scenario. There are fish and chips and a sponge cake on the table. An individual sits beside the table and is confronted with a choice. They can eat the fish and chips or the cake but not the fish and chips and the cake together (at least, not within the conventions of seemingly dining). Thus the diner's eating the cake is a matter of eating the cake first *rather* than the fish and chips *or* vice versa. The fact that there are, theoretically, alternatives that entail choosing both, the question really being one of order, can therefore be considered unimportant in explaining how the diner comes to choose what they do and what should be subject of inquiries into that choice. Choice here is not, then, a logical choice between independent acts A and B. The two acts are interdependent and defined in part by conventions (i.e., don't eat cake with fish and chips; eat them as separate entities, first one, then the other). One might add that conventions such as this are sometimes so taken for granted that they can lead one to forget, or at least fail to see clearly, how they frame choice situations. Choices subject to any inquiry need to be understood carefully before any attempt to explain them is made – their conventional features recognised, the particular logical relationship between acts deriving from choices determined.

There are other issues. Not only are these choices bound to each other but the selection of one or the other is also, obviously, a matter of *what* to choose. The preferences of the persons in question are self-evidently pertinent. To inquire into the nature of choice presupposes, then, that the diner be assumed to be a reasoning creature where that reasoning needs some explanation – all the more so if those reasons might be said to be constrained, inhibited or even irrational to some degree. *Explaining* choice consequently turns out to be quite an encompassing task, whether one is taken

with the experimental method or is focused on real-world sites of action. Choice is rarely if ever simply between things, but has to do both with the character of that choice (that it might require serial ordering, say) and with who makes the choice. What starts out as something that looks like a question of logic and information processing turns into a question about the nature of the creature that makes the choices – a creature with preferences, habits, a capacity to process information, perhaps, but also a creature that might be wilful, deceitful or simply lazy.

It is in these ways that 'choice' quite often ends up pointing towards the ineffable – and thereby something that needs explaining, something that needs inquiry, that deserves a 'science'. To say that people reason and that they choose is not, in itself, enough. The trouble is that, when the word 'explaining' is brought into play, a raft of other considerations result. The fish, chips and cake example is conceived of in very simple terms indeed, but the point of studying choices isn't to go around finding out what *specific* reasons people have for choosing one thing over another – at least it most often isn't. More commonly, studies of choice try to identify *general* principles on the basis of which people make any and all choices. This is not an easy undertaking. And if this is the goal of understanding (to generalise, say), then there is a requirement that the resulting level of generalisation satisfy the conditions that those making the study set out as acceptable, proper explanations, at the right level, with the right methodological proofs of evidence and justification.

Generalisation has various forms, of course, but if it is a label for an effort to systematise knowledge there is still a distinction of considerable importance between this and what one might call scientific knowledge. Philosophers seek to generalise, and this is not the same as what scientists do; their generalisations are of another order. The key difference – and of course this is simplifying but sufficient for the point we are making – is the relationship between evidence and explanation. This is, to say the least, a tricky and delicate affair and can distinguish many of the disciplines from each other and not just those that cast themselves as either scientific or philosophical.

Consider: a scientific approach seeks (or claims) to discover the truth about why people choose one thing or another, but, if it does this, are these reasons, the ones that science uncovers, different from the ones that people themselves avow? What does it mean to say that the reasons for an action are *not* the ones that the parties in question think they have? It seems very reasonable to say that some kinds of explanation of human conduct don't entail looking at the reasons people themselves have, but not in all cases. The contrast between when one would want science and when one would want

another order of explanation is not then so simply made. It becomes even more complex if it is the case that the way people organise their affairs is through conscious recognition of the role their own and others' choices make on the situation in question: *where it is reasons that both oneself and others have* that determine what gets done in a particular situation. Whether these reasons are good or bad, right or wrong, is moot; what needs to be recognised is that it is this – reasons as understood and acted upon – that is to some degree constitutive of the behaviour in question. What then of scientific inquiry? Is it offering something that is to compete with this role of reasons in action? How would it compete? Could one have a revised notion of scientific inquiry which made reasons as so conceived the topic? Wouldn't this be best described as more like an empirical philosophy anyway? Why the need for the label 'science'? And thus we end up having to reflect on disciplinary views about science and other evidence-based social sciences and humanities, about the relationship between evidence and explanation, the role of method and generalisation, and much else besides.

As we end our introductory sketch of the topic, we can see then that, when one asks 'What is a decision?' and 'What does it mean to "make" one?', these questions are less trivial than they appear. As should be clear, the first question is to do with what a decision is and has a number of different and competing answers depending upon where one approaches the topic and, as part of that, what one assumes and how one wants to measure 'success' – what a good answer looks like. The second question, to do with what it means to make a choice, is equally complex. When we ask what a decision might be, are we referring to an outcome, to a particular kind of process which applies in limited circumstances, or to a categorisation of human activity which can be universally applied?

As is obvious from what has already been said, the answers to these questions can lie in the disciplines and the purposes they lay out for themselves. But however hard one tries there will be dispute between disciplines, each claiming to be the best, and this will turn out to be a dispute about what the purposes of different disciplines might be and the appropriateness of the concepts, methods and theories deployed by each in pursuit of these goals. If one is bold enough to seek an approach that is not constrained by disciplinarity, one needs to ask who might be interested – not the trades that have built a business by having a view, a stance on choice already. Choices about choice, about what it is, how it might be examined, what one seeks thereby, are far from easy. One needs to take a view from 'here', this discipline, or 'there', that discipline, and, if not from these places, from an alternative that needs to justify its start-