A Critique of Modern Reason And Rational Problem Solving

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Abstract
Modern politics and the economy are based on a way of thinking called modern reason, first articulated by Thomas Hobbes in 1651. The field of social work has adopted this way of thinking and rational problem solving as its primary method. However, modern reason and rational problem solving are defective ways of helping people resolve personal and social problems. This paper critiques modern reason and rational problem solving.

Key words: modern reason, rationality, rational problem solving, and decision-making

When a man reasoneth, he does nothing else but conceive a sum total. For REASON in this sense is nothing but reckoning, that is adding and subtracting of the consequences of general names agreed upon for the marking and signifying of our thoughts.

Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan

Introduction

Modern reason and rational problem solving have been officially designated as ways by which members of the social work profession are expected to engage in assisting clients and reach decisions. (Curriculum Policy Statement, 1992) While modern reason and rational problem solving method are powerful tools they have a number of limitations for social work practice. These limitations militate against the unqualified acceptance of rational problem solving as a model for the social work profession.¹

What is Modern Reason?

Modern reason, first articulated by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) in his book Leviathan published in 1651, is a process of calculation. "In what matter so ever there is a place for addition and subtraction, there is also a place for reason; and where they have no place, there reason has nothing at all to do." (emphasis in original) Therefore, "when man reasoneth," Hobbes asserted, "he does nothing else but conceive a sum total." "Reason" said Hobbes, "is nothing but reckoning, that is adding and subtracting of the consequences of... names agreed upon." (Hobbes, Ch. 5, pp. 41-42) Graham Allison asserts, therefore, that modern rationality refers to an "essentially Hobbesian notion of consistent, value-maximizing reckoning or adaptation within specified constraints." (Allison, 1971, p.29)

What is Rational Problem Solving?

Rational problem solving is derived from modern reason. It is individualistic, based on self interested.
maximizing behavior, and oriented toward calculating a benefit/cost ratio that has become a universal way of thinking today.

1. Instrument of Problem Solving

For Hobbes, reason is an instrument of problem solving. In order to use modern reason in problem solving, Hobbes asserted that one must “get a good and orderly method.” This method says Hobbes is “…nothing but reckoning of consequences.” (Hobbes, Ch. 5, p. 41) Hobbes then proceeds to describe how modern reason can be used to reckon consequences of decisions. Rational problem solving, asserts Hobbes, begins as the decision maker first decides or defines interests or goals that one wants to achieve. For Hobbes each person is the best judge of his or her own interests, needs and preferences. The rational problem solver arrives at a definition of the preferences that he wishes to maximize, asserts Hobbes, “so that he who that by experience, or reason, the greatest and surest prospect of consequences, deliberates best himself.” (Hobbes, Ch. 5, p. 55)

2. Individualistic

According to Rational Choice Theory (RTC) “the unit of analysis of rational choice is the individual decision made by an individual decision maker.” (Zey, 1988, p. 2) With modern reason, the ends of choice are intentionally lodged in the subjective values of the decision maker. Each person is the ultimate judge of what is best or good for him or her and is assumed to have full knowledge of his or her preferences. These ends are not generally not open to question. They are inherent in individual needs and wants, presupposed by the situation with which a person is confronted, or are given to a person extraneously.

3. Self Interested

If, therefore, I am the supreme arbiter of my own preferences, interests, tastes and opinions it follows that it is in my own self-interest to maximize those preferences. The more successfully that I do so, the better off I am, and ultimately the happier I become. Rational choice is nothing but a means by which individuals calculate which choices maximize his or her self-interests. Rational problem solving is intended to be purely instrumental a means to attain whatever end that is identified by the individual as his or her particular goal or preference and assists in calculating the most effective and cost/beneficial means toward that end.

4. Maximizing

After a person understands clearly what his preferences are, he considers all of the alternative ways that his preferences can be achieved or in Hobbes terminology “the right ordering of names.” (Hobbes, ch. 4, p. 36) The decision maker rates each alternative according to a set of criteria conceived in economic terms. These criteria become the “consequences” or results of the decision making process. For example, more, faster, and cheaper consequences are generally to be preferred over less, slower and more expensive ones.

Hobbes cautions, however, that before one decides on one or another preference ordering, not to simply jump to a solution that first appears to meet ones goal or solve a problem. Neither should the problem solver consider only a few of the criteria, but instead to scan the range of all of consequences that may affect the decision and then systematically assess each criteria in turn until one has assessed each alternative completely. Hobbes explains, for example, that “the use and end of reason is not the finding of the sum and truth of one or a few consequences remote from the first definitions...but to begin with these and proceed from one consequence to another...till we come to a knowledge of all the consequences of names appertaining to the subject in hand.” (Hobbes, ch. 5, P. 42, 45)

5. Benefit/Cost

The alternatives are then ranked in order. The rational decision maker will choose the alternative whose consequences are “reckoned” or calculated to produce the most benefits at the least cost. (Hobbes, ch. 5, p. 45) It is not by accident that such problem solving is called “rational.” Rationality is simply a way of computing a ratio of benefits/costs or pros and cons. Modern society has adopted instrumental reason as “reason at large” and rational problem solving as the means by which decisions are reached in any number of situations. This approach provides a framework applicable to all human behavior to all types of decisions and to persons from all walks of life.” (Becker, p. ix, 1981)
6. Universal way of thinking

Mary Zey, for example, asserts that although rational choice models use an economic metaphor, they explain not only economic behavior, but also the behavior studied by nearly all social science disciplines from political philosophy to psychology. The range of human behavior it tries to explain encompasses the entire spectrum including government decision making, individual consumer decisions, collective economic decisions, and decision making in social institutions such as the criminal justice system, the family and social behavior in general. (Zey, pp. 9, 10, 1992)

Modern Reason in Politics and the Economy

Modern rational problem solving forms the premises of both politics as well as modern economic systems.

1. Politics and Modern Reason

If individuals are sovereign in their rights to make rational choices in their own self-interests, government in a democracy has no prerogative or right to impose a set of preference orderings onto people that distort those self-interests. Except for its own survival, government ought not advocate or pursue interests other than those that its populace maintains. Government is established to assist people achieve their self-interests and takes its cues from the individual desires and opinions of people.

At regular intervals, therefore, people are asked to indicate their preferences by voting. By adding up their preferences the majority of the populace chooses various officials and sometimes even decides on policy issues. This feedback enables government to regularly adjust for shifting values preferences.

Government is obliged by its own survival and self interests to treat everyone equally and impartially according to a set of rules. These rules provide the boundaries, channels, and networks within which stability, order and uniformity take place. From this rational perspective government is little more than a self regulating mechanism by which rules are carried out that allows each person a maximum amount of freedom to pursue his or her interests.

2. The Economy and Modern Reason

Rational decision making in the economy is nothing but getting the best buy. People know what they want to purchase, or as economists say they have full knowledge of their preference schedules. They choose products that give the best quality at the cheapest price.

In more technical language, rational consumers purchase the amount of goods, A, B, and C, etc., that maximizes their utility. (Simon, 1997, p.111) A person selects the alternative on their preference schedule that maximizes his or her output for a given input or minimizes input for a given output (more is always better than less). (Allison, 1971, p.29)

Just as each person votes his or her preferences in the political market place, in the economy each person "votes" by purchasing products that match consumer preferences at the best price. In this way consumers give signals to the economy about what or not to produce and about prices people are willing to pay. Rational individuals maximize their self-interests at the least cost to themselves and the economy is provided with a feedback mechanism that provides an automatically self-regulating system of supply and demand.

Rational Problem Solving and Social Work

The first person to explicitly link social work with rational problem solving was Helen Harris Perlman. In 1957, she described the social casework method as a problem solving process and outlined its steps. (Perlman, 1957) Since then, rational problem solving has become a conscious part of the core understanding of social work. Today, most social workers agree that rational social work problem solving involves the following steps:

a. Deciding on a problem
b. Gathering information about the problem
c. Generating a number of alternative solutions
d. Assessing and comparing alternatives
e. Selecting the best or most cost/beneficial solution
f. Developing a strategy or plan of implementation
g. Carrying out or implement the solution
h. Evaluating the results (Allison, p. 29,30)

Rational social work problem solving is systematically used as the primary method of micro as well as
macro social work practice, and it is synonymous with social work research. (Grinnell, 1988, p. 15)

A Critique of Rational Social Work Problem Solving

While modern reason and rational problem solving are very useful in politics and the economy, it has many limitations in social welfare where human issues are at stake. Rational problem is instrumental, is skewed toward quantitative values, and denies emotions that are not capable of calculation. (Brody, 1992, p. 107) It is helpless in understanding or developing social goods and fails to assist in overcoming social problems.

1. Instrumental

Alberto Ramos asserts, "rational man is unconcerned with the ethical nature of ends per se. He is a calculative being intent only on accurately finding adequate means to accomplish goals." This is why rational problem solving is "instrumental. It functions to map out terrain and achieve goals." (Ramos, 1981, p. 106) The purely instrumental nature of modern reason lies in its complete inability to judge the goodness or badness of either the means or the ends of decisions. Reason is completely limited to quantification. By confining reason to a mere quantitative cost calculus, "Hobbes intended to strip reason of any normative role in the domain of theory building and human associated life." (Ramos, 1981, p.5) Reason is incapable of identifying non-quantitative aspects of human associated life such as values, feelings, ideals, or ethics.

Modern rational problem solving is a purely "technical calculation of means; it contributes nothing substantive to the grasp of ends or values themselves." (Winter, 1966, p. 186) For such decision makers there are no "evil decisions or actions. There are only mistakes." (Blamires, 1963, p. 22) Morality has become reduced to calculation, and to error reduction.

As a result, social workers who use rational problem solving will encounter difficulties in situations deciding upon issues where rival ends are in question, where multiple values are involved, or conflicting values are at stake such as often occurs in working with communities.

2. Value skewed

Rational problem solving is value-skewed. It considers quantification, utilitarian application, efficiency, facts, and profit as values of the highest order. Other values that escape calculation are simply not recognized. Ramos asserts, for example, that ethically laden questions like the 'good' of man or society, have no place in the area of rational debate. (Ramos, 1981, p.106)

Decisions, based on rational problem solving, therefore, can rarely be judged according to their intrinsic worth, truth or goodness, but in terms of their utility. Neither can modern reason help evaluate whether the values inherent in decisions are worthwhile or even what constitutes a good or correct decision. (Simon, p. 57)

The values implicit in rational problem solving promote self-interested maximizing behavior. Modern reason is opposed to altruistic compassionate action, one of the core components of social work, and drives it out. (Max Weber, 1968, p. 975 and Thomson, 1975) Those who selflessly give to overcome poverty or injustice, for example, are considered to be acting irrationally by standards of modern reason.

3. Emotion Free

One of the primary bases of modern problem solving lies in its impersonality and strict adherence to calculable rules in which every situation is treated alike. Modern problem solving promotes standardization, uniformity, and attention to facts, regardless of one's feelings or emotions. Emotions are seen as unreliable and values antithetic to objective fact gathering. (Babbie, 1982, pp 21-26) Modern reason is intended to eliminate from decision making all emotions that "escape calculation." (Max Weber, 1968, p. 924)

4. Social Goods

One cannot use rational problem solving to create social goods, calculate the value of social goods, or privately own a social good. Conversely, social goods must be externalized, a condition that precludes the use of calculative reason.

1) Cannot create social goods

Social goods such as citizenship, public spirit, truthfulness, integrity, loyalty, social responsibility, and caring are fundamental to both the economy and
government. It is impossible for the economy to exist, for example, unless people are basically honest, trustworthy, and dependable. Government could not operate without people who have public spirit, display citizenship, courage, integrity, honor, and fairness. And yet, social goods such as these cannot be produced by either the economic or public sectors where rational problem solving is the paramount way of thinking. They can only be produced in the social arena, in community.

2) Cannot price social goods

Social goods are not capable of being priced or calculated by means of modern reason. In fact if a price is attached to a social good, it becomes corrupted. For example, the purchase of someone’s trust is considered to be bribery. One cannot put a price on a person’s honor. A person cannot buy love or friendship, or calculate its cost by means of instrumental reason.

3) Cannot divide social goods

Social goods cannot be divided or parceled out by modern calculation as can private goods. As a result, it is impossible for a social good to be privately owned or consumed. In fact, if the attempt is made to privately consume a social good it no longer has existence.

4) Social goods must be externalized

Social goods must be shared, externalized and made available to others in order to exist. Friendship, for example, can only exist if I am a friend to others and the more I offer my friendship to other people, the more friendship will exist.

Moreover, the more I freely give friendship away to others, the more friendship I have as well. This same principle applies to all other social goods such as honor, respect, or justice. The more I treat others honorably, respectfully, or justly, the more of these goods others will have and the more of the social good I will have. Conversely the less of these goods that are shared, the less they will exist.

Calculative reason is incapable of assisting one assess, decide or compute the value of purely externalized, shared social goods.

5. Social Problems

Rational problem solving is deficit oriented, used by technical experts, misinterprets the human condition and maintains the status quo

1) Deficit oriented

Rational problem solving is oriented toward a needs-centered or deficit approach to the human condition. Poor communities, for example, and the people in them are seen as the cause of social problems. They are asserted to be weak, helpless and in need of correction.

2) Used by technical experts

Expert city planners, politicians, or others try to solve social problems that deficit oriented people carry with them. It is up to the experts to assess problems according to their preference schedules, calculate the costs and impose solutions from the top down to maximize their version of the public good in the most efficient way.

Social problems, however, cannot be resolved by applying rational techniques by professional decision makers from the top down. When the role of creating the public or social good, deciding on what is best, or solving the issues of the human condition for others is usurped or appropriated by experts, social goods lose their substance. What is best is deprived of purpose, and people are disengaged from very issues whose solution forms the meaning of their existence. People are placed in a helpless, passive position unable to use their natural human capabilities on their own or other’s behalf.

3) Misunderstands the nature of the human condition

The use of modern rationality by technical experts misunderstands the necessity for people to be active and creative actors in constructing their own social reality. On the other hand, when people are involved in generating social goods, using values, expressing feelings, and engaging in social change by mutual engagement and interaction a better society can be created that is in continual process of re-creation.

4) Maintains the status quo

Rational problem solving tends to maintain the status quo. When a system is fixed it is returned to its stable state so it operates as before only to become broken again sooner or later.
Conclusion

While rational problem solving is very powerful and has a place in social work it may only be accepted with a number of qualifications. It cannot be welcomed as a universal method of problem solving nor can it be wholeheartedly utilized in social work by itself. Rational social work problem solving always needs to be supplemented with other forms of thinking, and it needs to be utilized only in its proper sphere where calculation and quantification are appropriate and necessary.

Social workers, therefore, must be cautious about uncritically accepting rational economizing models. Instead we must develop methods which emancipate people from captivity to the economic society in which they are embedded.

References

Thomas Hobbes: Leviathan or the matter, forme, and power of a commonwealth ecclesiastical and civil. ed. Frederick J.E. Woodbridge, Scribner, New York, 1930.


Notes

2 Herbert Simon says, for example, "major value premise of the administrator's decision is thereby given him, leaving to him only the implementation of these objectives." Herbert Simon: Administrative behavior. 4th ed. The Free Press, New York, p. 11, 1997.
3 The closer a benefit/cost ratio is to or exceeds 1, (B/C=1) the more attractive it becomes. Furthermore, this is the same definition of efficiency. E=I/O, the more efficient (E) a decision is one where inputs (I) are equal to or less than the outputs. If a person receives more output than he or she puts into a project or work he or she has achieved efficiency. If a decision gives me more
benefits than it costs, one has profit.

"Rational choice asks questions about how to maximize efficiency or growth. They do not realize that efficiency, productivity and growth are values." Mary Zey: Decision making, 1992, p. 20.

"The values at the basis of preferences do not concern rational choice theorists. What is assumed is that actions are undertaken to achieve objectives that are consistent with the actor's preference hierarchy. The substance of these values and their source are irrelevant to RCT."
モダンリーズンと理性的問題解決の評論

ウィリアム・ブルーグマン

概要

近代政治と経済は1651年にトーマス・ホップスによって最初に発表されたモダンリーズンという考え方に基づいている。ソーシャルワークの分野でこの考え方は取り入れられその主要方式は理性的問題解決と呼ばれる。

しかしモダンリーズンと理性的問題解決は人々の個人的そして社会的問題を解決するには欠陥がある。この論文でモダンリーズンと理性的問題解決について評論する。

キーワード: モダンリーズン 合理性 理性的問題解決 意思決定