

Reply to William Gorton
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(Editor's Note: William Gorton's reply, to which Boaz Miller refers, resides at <http://tinyurl.com/7vm6lqb>. Gorton replies to Miller's article "Popper's Realism, the Rationality Principle and Rational Choice Theory: Discussion of "The Rationality Principle Idealized" in *Social Epistemology* 26.1, 2012)

I thank William Gorton for his thoughtful commentary on my paper. I am glad that Gorton finds my interpretation of Popper's Rationality Principle (RP) convincing. Not all people share this view. On several occasions, I have been accused by some Critical Rationalists that my interpretation distorts Popper's views. But I stand behind my interpretation. I think that this accusation is ill founded and that my interpretation is adequately backed by textual evidence as well as consistent with the rest of Popper's philosophy. One of my aims was showing that Popper anticipated, though only sketched, some of the later developments in philosophy of science in thinking about theories as models and the role that abstractions and idealizations play in them. In this sense, my interpretation aligns Popper much more closely with mainstream philosophy of science, whereas some Critical Rationalists would like to think of Popper as standing in profound opposition to it. Indeed, I think that there is less disagreement between Popper and mainstream views in philosophy of science than some of his rhetoric suggests.

A central question that Gorton raises regarding RP is this: "Is Popper's situational analysis really just a less technical or somewhat underdeveloped version of rational-choice theory? If so, does Popper's situational analysis offer anything of value to working social scientists – some special insights or methodological direction that would help them create social models that are more testable, have more predicative or explanatory power, or are of greater verisimilitude?" Gorton thinks that the answer to the first question is positive, and the answer to the second question is negative. I disagree. I think that RP and situational analysis, and the notion of instrumental rationality in rational-choice theory are not the same. I briefly addressed this in the paper (footnote 18), and I welcome this opportunity to further explain my view.

There are two reasons why RP is not an underdeveloped version of rational-choice theory, both of which concern the objectivity of situational analysis. For Popper, analyses of situations exist in an objective sense in what he calls "World 3" – the objective world of ideas, in which ideas exist independently of people's minds, or if you like, his own version of the synthetic a priori. For Popper, what a rational agent does is to figure out which situational analysis applies to a given state of affairs, figure out his aims out of the analysis, and act in an adequate way to realize them. By contrast, rational-choice theory assigns the agent a preference-ranking function or a utility function and states that the agent will act to achieve her most preferred outcome or greatest utility, respectively.

This picture is different from Popper's in two fundamental ways, which are also the reasons why I do not equate rational-choice theory with RP and situational analysis. First,

while it makes sense to talk about a utility function in cases involving monetary transactions or quantitative goods, or about a preference ranking in cases such as voting, they seem less appropriate in other cases. That is, I do not think that a utility function or a preference-ranking function is an integral part of the objective description of every social situation. If we take Popper's pedestrian example, such functions do not naturally belong to the situation as opposed to the street signs and the cars, and I do not think that they are part of the situation for Popper. Rational-choice theory imposes such functions on the situation as a useful fiction. Such a fiction may be regarded as an idealization, but it is not an idealization that simplifies elements of the situation that already objectively exist in it, as I argue RP is.

Second, rational-choice theory uses the notion of instrumental rationality. Instrumental rationality does not specify the subject's aims or deems them rational or irrational. That is, it does not pass judgement on the preferences or utilities themselves. Rather, it only deems irrational certain preference orderings that violate consistency constraints or behaviours that do not best realize the subject's aims. By contrast, for Popper, aims are objective and exist as part of the objective description of the situation. For him, so it seems, some aims are rational and some are not. Due to cognitive or psychological constraints, a subject may misanalyze the situation, and consequently adopt wrong aims, but Popper does not take seriously a possibility that a subject will have subjective aims that are different from the objective aims of the situation. As I argue in my paper, this constitutes a major problem for RP, which can only partly be solved.

While Popper was inspired by economics and claims to have captured the notion of rationality that economists use, I do not think that he did. Therefore, RP may potentially introduce novelties to social science methodology, though I cannot tell for sure what they might be.

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