

Rationality 理性; 合理性 & Decision-Making

The meaning of rationality can vary in different situations, from the rule-based bureaucracy that was Max Weber's* ideal form of legitimate authority 法定职权, to the nuclear deterrent of “mutually-assured destruction (相互确保摧毁 MAD),” and the utility maximization 效用最大化 of “economic man” and other decision-makers. Rationality is a basic assumption that lies behind these and many more social science concepts and theories. But if the term can mean many things, are we sure we know what it means? Is rationality really possible, or does our more “bounded” rationality 有限理性 pale in comparison 相形见绌? Does rationality translate across cultures, such as The West and China? Is any “goal-directed behavior 目标导向行为” rational, even if outside observers 外部的观察家 (or the actors themselves) can see that the behavior has no chance of achieving the goal (i.e. due to flawed logic and wrong assumptions)?

What's *not* rational? Sometimes understanding a concept can be aided by looking at its antonyms 反义词. In most political analysis, emotions 情感 like anger are thought to be irrational, perhaps even dangerously out of control. Being emotional is often associated with being female, and this (unfairly) contributes to the stereotype of women being less rational than men and thereby less fit for political leadership (which requires cool calculation of cost-benefit analysis 成本收益分析). Much else is “not rational”: Impulsiveness 冲动. Frustrated, reactionary, and destructive 破坏性的 behavior with no apparent reason or goal. Crazy 疯狂. “First-strike” use of nuclear weapons 第一次攻击的武力. To be irrational is to be illogical, inscrutable 难以了解的/神秘的—the only answer to “What were you *thinking*?!?” was that you were *not* thinking when you did those irrational things. Phenomenology 现象学, the close study and observation of consciousness and phenomena without trying to explain their motive or intent, is sometimes given as an opposite reaction to modern trends toward rationalism.

Will rationality “save us”? One of the meanings of Errol Morris' biopic 传记片 of former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, *The Fog of War*, is that war inevitably presents decision-makers with so much uncertainty that rational decisions—perhaps even realistic planning and goal-making themselves—become impossible. Apparently rational decisions made by wise, rational leaders often have unforeseen and catastrophic consequences, including the destruction of entire nations. McNamara came to believe that a decision so destructive as whether to use nuclear weapons should not be in the hands of one person (i.e. the president or national leader), no matter how wise and rational s/he is presumed to be. His experience in the Cuban Missile Crisis 古巴导弹危机 is the standard example of how rational leaders very nearly used nuclear weapons against each other, leading to nuclear war which would have destroyed the same leaders' nations. McNamara's advice to Pres. Kennedy not to attack Cuba (over that of Gen. Lemay 李梅, who thought it rational to attack while the U.S. had an advantage in strength, even *after* the USSR removed the missiles), was vindicated in 1992 when McNamara met Fidel Castro. Castro said his response would have been to respond (rationally) with Cuba's nuclear weapons (which the U.S. didn't know Cuba had Soviet permission to use), which would have killed millions of Americans.

A “rational” bureaucracy's seemingly endless rules, regulations, and standard operating procedures, often dismissed by critics as unnecessary or counter-productive “red tape,” are in fact intended to save us from having to make decisions at all. The ideal bureaucracy has a rule for any situation, so that no arbitrary 任意的, individual decision need ever be made—the only real decision is whether to *be* rational and follow the rules *or* deviate from 偏离 protocol, to make an exception “just this once 就这么一次,” which the dutiful 责任感强的 bureaucrat is trained to see as “a slippery slope” leading to 滑向 outright lawlessness and corruption.

Managers and other higher leadership within public service organizations (i.e. bureaucracies) are tasked with designing “foolproof 完全不出错的” systems of rules for clerks and employees to follow. Meanwhile, their own decision-making responsibilities are greater, yet often circumscribed 限制 by outside authorities in the government. Rational decision-making functions best when working toward a single, clear goal, yet public managers often face multiple, conflicting goals which have to stay “vague & intangible.” Organizations which span different locations (or different countries) find that there is too much variation in the environment for rational, goal-based decision-making to be possible (Rainey, *Understanding & Managing Public Service Organizations*, 2014).

International Relations, especially the paradigm of Realism, often treats states as “rational, unitary actors” which also structure “the international system.” Self-interested actions and indeed the formulation and pursuit of “national interest(s)” are the ultimate in rational behavior, so much so that Realists warn of any deviations being made from these being “at one's peril.” Questioning whether Kim Jong Un or North Korea is rational is a recurring tradition in the U.S., while President-elect Trump has openly admired how “unpredictable” Putin is as a national leader, perhaps seeking to emulate his style on grounds that being predictable—a longstanding goal of international institutions and treaties—is “stupid.” China frequently describes its national state of mind in emotional terms, such as when the acts of another country “hurt” or “anger” China. Do you think China is angry? Is it appropriate or accurate to talk about an entire nation or state's emotions?

Other Decision-Making Models: ·Ad hoc (without a plan)/improvised ·coin flip (flip a coin) 抛硬币 ·divination 占卜 ·draw straws ·The “Eight Diagrams” of the *I-Ching* 八卦 ·fortune-telling ·Game Theory ·The Garbage Can Model ·gut feeling/go with one's gut 直觉 ·harm minimization ·“I'll cross that bridge when I come to it.” ·incrementalism 渐进主义 ·“The Magic 8-Ball” ·make the best of a bad situation ·Rational Choice Theory ·ouija board ·palm-reading ·public choice ·“putting out fires” ·randomization ·satisficing 决定并实行能满足取得某一目标所需最低要求的行动方案 ·strategic management ·vote one's pocketbook/conscience ·wait and see ·wait until “the last minute/second” ·What would Jesus/Lei Feng do? (WWJD?)

Other Vocabulary: ·circumstances 情况 ·conundrum 难题 ·dilemma 困境 ·ends Vs. means ·error Vs. mistake ·game out (the possibilities) ·goals Vs. objectives ·indecision 优柔寡断 ·instrumental goals Vs. terminal goals ·ordered preferences ·(follow Vs. break with) precedent 先例 ·put off a decision 推迟一项决定 ·rationalize a decision (after it has already been made by irrational means) (aka “post-hoc rationalization”) ·relativism (i.e. across cultures) ·second-guess (oneself) 事后评论/批评 ·strategy 战略 ·(a) tragic choice (between two deeply held values) ·uncertainty 不确定 ·(the) unforeseen 无法预料的 ·vindicate (Sb. or a past decision as the correct one) 证明无辜

*Max Weber outlined four different types of rationality: purposive/instrumental, value/belief-oriented, affectual, and conventional, with combinations of each usually behind most decisions.