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Rationality In Action (Jean Nicod Lectures)



Synopsis

The study of rationality and practical reason, or rationality in action, has been central to Western intellectual culture. In this invigorating book, John Searle lays out six claims of what he calls the Classical Model of rationality and shows why they are false. He then presents an alternative theory of the role of rationality in thought and action. A central point of Searle's theory is that only irrational actions are directly caused by beliefs and desires -- for example, the actions of a person in the grip of an obsession or addiction. In most cases of rational action, there is a gap between the motivating desire and the actual decision making. The traditional name for this gap is "freedom of the will." According to Searle, all rational activity presupposes free will. For rationality is possible only where one has a choice among various rational as well as irrational options. Unlike many philosophical tracts, *Rationality in Action* invites the reader to apply the author's ideas to everyday life. Searle shows, for example, that contrary to the traditional philosophical view, weakness of will is very common. He also points out the absurdity of the claim that rational decision making always starts from a consistent set of desires. Rational decision making, he argues, is often about choosing between conflicting reasons for action. In fact, humans are distinguished by their ability to be rationally motivated by desire-independent reasons for action. Extending his theory of rationality to the self, Searle shows how rational deliberation presupposes an irreducible notion of the self. He also reveals the idea of free will to be essentially a thesis of how the brain works.

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Customer Reviews

Searle's *Rationality in Action* is lucid and accessible. The thrust of the book is to show that

desire-independent reasons for action are commonplace (as opposed to the traditional or "Classical" model - Hume, Williams, Davidson, modern decision theory, etc. - that reasons for action follow desires). Searle argues that there is a gap between reason and decision, decision and action, and continuing to do an action and that reasons for rational action actually are made effective by the agent (the person). I found the section distinguishing reasons for action from justification for action quite interesting. The explanation of what Searle calls "weakness of the will" follows very logically from the rest of his argument and is no problem for his theory of rationality. Finally, Searle touches on the question of neurobiological determinism versus freedom of the will. Anyone who has followed Searle's previous works on intentionality, consciousness, speech acts, and institutional facts will find this as punchy, logical, and clear. All in all, *Rationality in Action* is an enjoyable work of philosophy.

Well, here we go again. Back to the proverbial rationality and free will drawing board. I recommend a slew of preliminary texts as an overview of the field, such as Williams, Scheffler, Korsgaard, Scanlon, Velleman, Nozick, etc. Nevertheless, Searle writes with his usual clear, direct, and economic prose. He enters a crowded practical reason debate with, again, his usual bravado. He argues against Williams's externalist view by describing substantial tautological errors. But this approach tends to oversimplify Williams's complex view. One wonders if Searle's reading of Williams is actually right (or careful enough). I prefer Scanlon's handling of W's externalism in the Appendix to *What We Owe to Each Other*, and McDowell's well-known article on the subject. The strength of Searle's book is his defense of an internalist view of rationality and action, which resurrects his views on intentionality and speech acts. He thoroughly demonstrates in one chapter how a Deductive Model in rationality (i.e., a practical syllogism ala Kenny) cannot work. He also clearly identifies the major problems in practical reason, conflicting reasons, and defends a novel approach, what he calls a semantic categorical imperative. This is a controversial view, which navigates between (or circumvents) Humean and Kantian theories on moral motivation. Another strength of the book is how Searle connects rationality in action (hence the title of the book) and his theory of intentionality to the free will problem. In the last chapters, he clearly identifies just what the nature of the free will problem is, which is pretty much a rehashing of his chapter in *Minds, Brains, and Science* (Harvard UP). The reader gets a clear picture of how and why the free will issue is a major contemporary philosophical problem, requiring a correct scientific research project to help solve the problem. One also gets a clear view of a top-notch philosopher at work on this serious problem. It is obvious why this problem has kept Searle awake at nights--why he misses the

freeway on-ramp during his drive to work. It is a seemingly insoluble problem, and Searle makes the nature of the problem and the reasons that it keeps philosophers awake at night explicit. So the book closes, basically, with a challenge for philosophers to continue work on free will and rationality. It is also a challenge for scientists in the labs to work on a research program that would identify the whole problem and its potential solution.

This book is in many senses a very unusual philosophy one. First, even though, the topic is not easy Searle has showed an extreme effort and capacity to express himself with clarity. In this book you can always know what the author thinks, based on which premises he believes so, and of course what problem he is trying to solve. I got surprised when I saw that Searle changed his view respect to the free will expressed in "minds, brain and science" where he reached to the conclusion that no real free will may exist. In this book he not only accept his error, but also produce a complete description of the "gaps" that cannot be filled with necessity and, therefore, require free will. He moves one step forward and declares that a human being is not enough to describe human beings, on the contrary a substantial being able of free will is what is required. So clarity, rigor and honesty is the characteristic of this book. Going to the book, it basically says that in our action there are gaps, meaning for gaps, actions that cannot be completely explained by external causes, so we, as free will holders, must decide our actions. This is extensively discussed in it, and so are many of the consequences of that. In the book Searle tried to provide an explanation for moral commitment based on the compromise derived from the use of language instead of solutions based on cost-benefit analysis. I believe that he is right in the second, partially right in the recognition of the importance of speech acts as compromisers but I certainly believe that we need more to justify his ethic behavior. I'll wait for new books from Searle, I want to read more shining thoughts like those showed in this book and I may end up finding that he keeps improving.

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