A Note on the Possibility of a Pure Theory of Choice?

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The purpose of this note is to draw attention to a fundamental difficulty that affects all attempts at building a pure theory of choice. It does not aim at surveying all known theories of choice, nor does it pretend to originality. Though within different contexts, its main argument can be found in the developments of many authors, e.g., in O. Neurath’s criticism of ‘pseudo-rationalism’ in G. Myrdal’s ‘immanent criticism’ of ‘rationalizing’ economic theories, or in K. Popper’s point of view on inconclusive reasonings whose term must be some sort of conventions.

The syntagm ‘a pure theory of choice’ has two accepted meanings. According to one, a pure theory of choice is an explanation of the way human beings make actual choices. According to the other, a pure theory of choice is a normative system of rules according to which human beings should make their choices.

In this last sentence, the verb ‘should’ is itself ambiguous. It may mean that the system of rules forms a standard with the help of which the actual choices become intelligible, their intelligibility resulting from an analysis of the discrepancies between these actual choices and the standard. Or it may mean that the rules of the system are supposed to be the ones which human beings ought to follow in order to take either good or fair decisions. In that case, the distance of actual choices from the norm leads to moral judgments.

The confusion of these two senses of ‘should’ are often justified by referring to a special mental activity, called comprehension. Whatever the admitted link between intelligibility and moral judgments, it is methodologically sane to keep their difference clearly in mind and not to mix them together within a single abstruse notion. In fact, when the two tasks of rendering intelligible and of judging are separated, the boundary between rendering intelligible and explaining appears so evanescent as to cause one to doubt whether such a discrimination has any point at all.

For both meanings, however, a pure theory of choice must be distinguished from the models which may be derived from it for specific situations. A theory is defined as pure because it abstracts specific conditions and applies to all situations. A pure theory of choice may therefore be viewed as the common part of the whole set of models of all possible situations of choice. This is because of this abstraction that a pure theory of choice gets caught in a paradox.

Before stating this paradox, it is convenient to note the connections with pure theories of rationality. A pure theory of choice is not necessarily a pure theory of rationality, in so far as a pure theory of choice may allow for some irrationality. Conversely, a pure theory of choice is deductible from a pure theory of rationality, since the object of a pure theory of rationality is to give a general account of how human beings decide or should decide rationally. Hence, the paradox below holds for both pure theories of choice and pure theories of rationality.

A pure theory of choice should explain or serve as a norm for any choice made by any human being in any circumstances. Nobody would venture to contradict that there are, at least potentially, several theories of choice claiming for the title of being the pure theory. Now a paradox appears when the specific situation of choosing among these several theories is brought up. It has the form of a vicious circle: in order to explain or to rule its own election among candidates for a pure theory of choice, the elected pure theory of choice is needed beforehand.

In the face of this paradox, one may adopt different attitudes. I say “different attitudes” rather than “different solutions”, because this paradox has no proper solution.

When conceiving the pure theory of choice as an explanation, one could hope to escape the vicious circle by having recourse to the test procedure: the elected pure theory of choice would be that which has passed the tests successfully up to present. Ignoring the questions about the misinterpretation of tests and the radical uncertainty of future events, this might seem a satisfactory way out. But it is not. It generates another circle as vicious as the first, since the very rules of the test procedure have themselves to be chosen.

Conceiving the pure theory of choice as either an explanation or as a norm, a first attitude is to let oneself gravitate into the vicious circle seeking endlessly for purer and more general principles, attempting continuously to build more powerful theories, despite fears of falling eventually into the
vacuum after a certain number of revolutions.

A second attitude is to appeal to a sort of a priori device. By assuming an a priori validity of some propositions, it is obviously possible to discard all theories of choice except one. In this case, the vicious circle is broken, by excluding a priori propositions from the set of what must be chosen. In other words the particular situation of choosing these propositions is thought as irrelevant to the theory of choice. But by the same token, the theory of choice thus selected becomes impure, since it is acknowledged to be unable to explain or rule this very situation of choice.

A third and last attitude may be to abandon, once and for all, the idea of a pure theory of choice, that is, to put aside the pretension of a general theory including the situation in which one has to choose the premises of a theory of choice. This latter attitude is theoretically very close to the second one. The only difference between the second and third attitudes is that the third one does not lead to consider some propositions as having an invariable truth value, and, thereby, does not disqualify other theories of choice.

At this stage, it would appear that, besides the content of the various theories of choice elaborated by social scientists, an examination of the attitudes they adopt would be very instructive as would a study of their effects on the critical discussion. Here, I shall content myself with a brief sketch of these effects.

By assuming a priori the truth value of some propositions, those who adopt the second attitude turn some or the whole of their propositions into beliefs. These beliefs, as for any other beliefs, are in themselves highly respectable. But, by declaring them to be a priori true in order to enforce them, their proponents run the risk of excluding themselves from critical discussions of ideas, or worse, impede this discussion.

Those adopting the first attitude are far less dangerous for critical discussions. On the one hand, their infinite quest is a formidable incentive to formulate new ideas. On the other, this quest makes them eager to listen to others’ ideas, which are always susceptible to take them off for further revolutions.

Even though the third and last category of social scientists view a pure theory of choice as foolish, they do not necessarily reject theories of choice, even more or less general theories of this sort. That is why they may have a great interest in a critical discussion of the ideas expressed by others, including the apriorists.

Given, as I hope to have shown, that the very definition of a pure theory of choice involves a paradox, we can suppose that all attempts to elaborate a pure theory of choice is doomed to encounter sooner or later some difficulties of coherency. In spite of its simplicity, this negative result is nevertheless very valuable. It could be of the utmost importance today as the subtlety and complexity of theories of choice and rationality are increasing by integrating many sophisticated logical or mathematical refinements, making it more likely that this paradox fades away in the mist of lost paradoxes.

Notes
3 The argument I refer to can be found, in particular, in Popper's criticism of conventionalism (K. POPPER, The Logic of Scientific Discovery, Hutchinson C'Publ, 1968, Chapter III).