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Commentary on Andreas Welzel: “Dissensus and Common Grounds in Negotiation. A Negotiation Analytic Perspective”

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Welzel’s ambitious effort to combine consistency rationality and social rationality in one model of argumentative negotiation warrants our full attention because of its efforts to integrate disparate approaches to the study of argument. This effort could easily fall prey to the tension between those who are more formally and mathematically oriented in their approach to argument and those who are more socially and verbally oriented in their approach.

What intrigues me about Welzel’s paper is the distant glimmer of an integrated approach to the study of argument. With the idea of synthesis rather than antithesis in mind, I would like to begin by assuming the possibility that Welzel’s approach can be useful to the field and then exploring the question of what would be necessary to extend this model to the study of actual argument behavior, especially across cultures.

1. QUESTIONS

There are three questions that I would like to explore in looking at the usefulness of Welzel’s approach. First, does the model have any way of dealing with the complexity of human argumentative behavior? Second, does Welzel’s approach to rationality succeed in integrating both approaches to rationality in a fashion corresponding to real argument behavior? And finally, what is the nature of the interaction process that makes up social rationality?

1.1 Can the model deal with the complexity of human argument behavior?

Welzel argues that the best way to deal with rationality and negotiation is to start with a model involving mathematics and see how far it goes in explaining argument and negotiation behavior rather than starting with a complex model. On the other hand, the idea of complexity has been used as an argument against both mathematical and verbal models of argument behavior because both models are subject to the criticism of being too simplistic. Game theoretical approaches, at least as explained in the literature, are simple and if the models are made more complex, then they become difficult to deal with verbally. On the other hand, verbal approaches to argument while acknowledging the complexity of human interaction, at the same time, are subject to criticism for failing to

be able to deal with multiple elements of behavior and for leading to conceptual confusion.

Since the complexity of human behavior can push the limits of game theoretical models and lead to conceptual confusion in verbal models, does that mean that we must over-simplify our models or accept the inevitability of confusion? No. I think that Welzel's model, by introducing mathematical tools, allows for the possibility of computer modeling of the complexity of human behavior while at the same time focusing on the interaction process and using verbal methods in the conceptualization and interpretative steps of analysis.

An example of why this is important can be seen in a recent book on Japanese methods of negotiation (Blaker, Giarra & Vogel 2002), which asks the question: are there any distinctive characteristics to the style of Japanese negotiating behavior? The authors' answer is yes in that while the "particular moves are not unique to any country, the mix of tactics employed by diplomats from a given nation adds up to a distinctive composite portrait of that nation's style" (pg. 4). Now if we were limited in our analysis of negotiating behavior to a simple set of strategies and were not able to see the complexity of how they are combined, we might not be able to answer Blaker, Giarra and Vogel's question adequately. We could look at one or two particular examples of negotiation behavior and fit them into a simple model like is often seen in negotiation analysis or verbal descriptions but we would have only part of the picture. On the other hand, if we were able to take advantage of the power of computer modeling to represent negotiation in a complex fashion, we could not only see the complexity of the interaction but take advantage of the strengths of both mathematical approaches and verbal approaches.

1.2. Does the model succeed in integrating consistency rationality and social rationality in a fashion corresponding to actual argumentative behavior and negotiation outcomes?

Welzel's primary claim in this paper is that an understanding of *dissensus* and *common grounds* may profit from the analysis of rationality models. To explore this question, it is necessary to look at two questions: 1) how does social rationality relate to other forms of rationality and 2) how does social rationality play out in human behavior, especially across cultures?

1.2.1 How does social rationality relate to other forms of rationality?

In Welzel's model, consistency rationality uses coherency or consistency to single out those solutions that are known as *good solutions* and then the social rationality principle of acceptability is used in the interaction to reach a final agreement. This still leaves the question open of the relationship of social rationality to bounded rationality. One of the few other researchers beside Welzel to comment on social rationality, Gigerenzer, defines it as "a special case of ecological rationality when environments consist of other agents with which to interact" (2001, p. 48). Gigerenzer views bounded rationality and social rationality as related to each other since ecological rationality is the study of mind or its strategies in relationship to the information in its environments, both physical and social (2000; 2001) and thus ecological rationality serves as an umbrella term for both.

Welzel makes it clear that he thinks that social rationality is different from and superior to the idea of bounded rationality. He believes that they have different understandings of: 1) the problem (social interaction v. individual problem solving), 2) the solution (intersubjective acceptability v. individual aspiration ends), and 3) procedures (a prior solution concepts v. heuristics).

Even though Welzel thinks that social rationality is fundamentally different from the Simons/Gigerenzer idea of bounded rationality, it should be noted that both social rationality and bounded rationality are different in kind from consistency rationality in that they go outside the logical system to relate rationality to something else (in one case, interaction and in the other case, cognitive elements).

1.2.2 How do the normative principles of social rationality relate to human behavior?

There are two aspects to this question that need to be considered. First, the normative principles of the model, acceptability and fairness, have a high degree of variability across cultures. For example, fairness may be defined as equity in a culture that places a high value on individualism, whereas, it may be defined as equality in a culture that places a high value on collectivism. The degree of equity and of equality may also be related to cultural values such as hierarchy (proportional equity) or egalitarianism (simple equality). Thus, there seems to be a wide range of interpretations about how fairness should be applied.

Second, does social rationality have any other *common grounds* besides the normative principles of acceptability and fairness? Welzel's answer is no, but there are other theorists who have suggested normative principles that might be possibilities. The theoretical model that most communication theorists would turn to first is that of Habermas (2000), whose idea of rationality has elements of mutual acceptability but also elements that are related to the world around us, the intentions or goals of the speaker and social norms. In addition, the idea of a rationality of good reasons as developed in the work of Wallace (1963), Booth (1974) and Fisher (1987) is also in the communication literature.

1.3 What is the nature of the interaction process that makes up social rationality?

In his model, Welzel talks about the acceptability standard as being implemented in the interaction, which presumably is an argumentative process where the parties work to achieve a mutually agreeable outcome. To understand how this works, it is necessary to take a look at the interaction process. For Welzel, interaction seems to involve the offering of justifications and reasons to influence others by plausible reasoning about the normative assumptions of acceptability and fairness. The goal is to achieve a mutually acceptable agreement by the parties about which solution they are willing to accept. In some ways this would seem to be social only in the very loosest sense of the term, that is involving two or more people, instead, it is really talking about argumentation.

To examine the nature of this kind of interaction, there are two ways that we can approach it. First, there is a *weak* theory of interaction where the nature of the interaction is described as it occurs in the negotiation process. In taking this approach, one might note the characteristic forms and the characteristic content that appears in the interaction.

Out of this analysis, one might develop taxonomies of strategies and types of argumentative appeals. Furthermore, one could shift between the explicit issue under discussion, and a meta-level analysis of the normative values that are present in the discussion, e.g. which rationality standards ought to apply in the situation under consideration. What makes this a *weak* theory of interaction is not its lack of significance or its failure to tell us about the nature of interaction but instead the fact that any taxonomies developed in such a fashion are not a result of the unique characteristics of interaction but may come from other factors such as cognitive limitations, economic interests, etc.

The second approach, or the *strong* theory, can be best understood by asking the question whether *social rationality* based on *interaction* is analogous to *consistency rationality* and *bounded rationality*? Both consistency rationality and bounded rationality assume that they are dealing with inherent aspects of the universe (consistency rationality) or of humans (bounded rationality). Can we make the same assumption about social rationality? Is there something inherent about human interaction that *bounds* the rationality process or, in other words, what about interaction *bounds* or limits the process of logical consistency? Or to put it another way, what about the interaction can add to the solutions provided by consistency rationality and by bounded rationality models (based on the limitations of the cognitive system)?

There are several aspects of the interaction process that might *bound* the rationality process. First, the nature of information and messages in the interaction process is always *directive* in that it is partial and thereby directs one's views and perspective. This directive nature of interaction *bounds* the consistency rationality exercised by recipients of the information and may influence the way a person looks at things (i.e. their bounded cognitive ways of processing information). As Burke argues, the language that we use is both a "selection" of reality and a "deflection" of it; "terms direct the attention to one field rather than to another" (1966, p. 46). This process can also be seen in the work on framing theory, which looks at various ways that a message can frame a set of information. For example, Neale and Bazerman (1985) found that positive or negative frames provided to negotiators in an interaction process influenced the way that they bargained with each other. While, the work on framing deals with explicit efforts to provide a point of view in a message, the process of *directive* information is always present in a message whether intended or not and therefore can *bound* the rationality process.

Second, interaction occurs through code systems, which *bound* the way rationality can work. Code systems make use of particular channels and media to communicate with others, e.g. phonetically based language codes, tactical based codes of touch, and visually based facial expressions. Each code system has its own limitations and patterns of meaning that vary in terms of its explicitness, simplicity, and understandability. Furthermore, each code varies in the way that it interacts with other codes and in the overall mosaic of information that they provide to another person, e.g. in an individualistic culture, one may primarily attend to the verbal code but an inconsistency in the paralinguistic code can switch the receiver's attention. Thus, code systems bound the information that we receive and the way that we can process it.

Third, analysis of the nature of conversation in interaction provides information about patterns and processes that occur, e.g. turn taking principles. These patterns can

serve to *bound* the way that we think and the rationality that is exhibited in interacting with people. For example, Grice (1975) and Searle (1969) have made clear that there are certain assumptions and implicatures that govern how we communicate, e.g. the cooperative principle.

Fourth, interaction bounds the amount of information that we know about a situation. While many models based on consistency rationality predicate full information on the part of the parties to the negotiations, in reality, this is impossible since all information must be communicated whether by the participants or by some outside agent. Instead, interaction *bounds* the amount of information that we know about the bargaining situation on a continuum from no information to apparent complete information (but not in reality).

If we think about interaction in terms of its *weak and strong* forms, how do they relate to real world bargaining especially in different cultures? A way of thinking about this question is suggested by Lovett (2006), who distinguishes between the idea of rationality as the intentions of actors and rationality as underlying basic causes of human behavior. He sees studies of rational choice as dealing with the underlying causes of behavior and not predictions based on the intentions or goals of actors. If we apply this distinction to the study of the relationship between rationality, bargaining behavior and cultures, we might consider the causes and functions as sketching out a broad framework of how behavior and cultures work and the actions and intentions of actors as using argument based on the causes to give a particular shape to an interaction. In the case of the rational nature of interaction, we might consider the *strong* theory of interaction as specifying causes and underlying aspects of interaction that shape bargaining in any culture while the *weak* theory of interaction provides an approach to understanding the particular argumentative moves of people in their own culture.

2.0 WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE FROM THE MODEL?

Welzel's approach provides a starting point for thinking about the integration of approaches to negotiation and argument across cultures. What I have outlined in this commentary clearly goes beyond what Welzel is suggesting but it does illustrate the possibilities of his model.

[link to paper](#)

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