Paul Clements


Paul Clements’ *Rawlsian Political Analysis* is a very ambitious book. It deals with rational choice theory, the interpretation of Rawls and of Kant, evolutionary theory, cognitive science, game theory, microfinance, the political history of Bihar, and global warming. Its main purpose, however, is to argue for a new Rawlsian theory of choice for social science to replace rational choice theory. It does this by explaining this theory in the first half of the book and by discussing applications in the second part. Clements’ project is both timely and important. It has been clear for some time that the standard account of rational choice in social science has difficulties in explaining for instance distributive choices and how we react to risks. And given the clear historical relation between the theory of rational choice and utilitarianism, it seems a very important philosophical research project to investigate what a Kantian alternative to the standard theory of rational choice would look like. I agree with Clements on the importance of this project, and I applaud the determination with which he pursues it. However, I do not think that this is a successful book.

The problem is that Clements’ theory of choice consists of several different processes leading up decisions, but there does not seem to be a clear way to decide which process will take precedence in a specific choice. The most explicit description of the theory is in figure 1.3 on page 9:

The Kantian model of choice

\[
\text{Interests}_h \quad \text{Principles} \rightarrow \text{Interests}_c, \quad \text{Interests}_h \quad \text{Principles} \rightarrow \text{Choices} \\
\text{Interests}_{h(\text{remaining})}, \quad \text{Interests}_c \rightarrow \text{Preferences} \rightarrow \text{Choices} \\
\text{Principles} \rightarrow \text{Choices}
\]
The first line says that an agent starts out with hypothetical (in the Kantian sense) interests ($\text{interests}_h$), while the second says that the agent does not only have such interests, she can also be motivated by principles, e.g. of justice. This means that she will have categorical interests ($\text{Interests}_c$). The idea here is that agents can be motivated both by their interests and by the principles they hold, not that they have to be Kantians. Moreover, some interests will be incompatible with the agent’s principles, and will not motivate choice. Line three means that on the basis of the surviving hypothetical interests and the categorical interests, the agent will form preferences, which will lead to choice. But is not the only path to choice. According to line four, principles can also motivate choice directly. So there are two paths to choice, through preferences and through principles. Moreover, there are three different ways that interests can ground preferences, either individually or in combination.

This may be an intuitive picture of how people actually make choices, but what is clear is that it would make social science extraordinarily difficult. For any actual choice we would wish to explain, or any decision we would hope to predict, we would need to ask whether it has its basis in interests or principles, and if the former, what kind of interest. Did Thomas give money to the beggar out of principle or out of self-interest? Will Adam pay the price the baker asks out of concerns for fairness or haggle to make himself better off?

Moreover, what happens when there is a conflict between interests and principles? It seems clear that the interests path and the principles path could give diverging answers as to which option would be rational. How will an agent choose when a preference based on $\text{Interests}_{h(\text{remaining})}$ or $\text{Interests}_c$ (feeding one’s children) comes into conflict with a Principle (do not steal)? We could perhaps avoid difficult conflicts of rationality by agreeing with the Rawlsian slogan that the right is prior to the good, but Clements states explicitly that the right and the good are equally fundamental (p. 2). The conflict must be solved in some other way.

One approach would be to say that both interests and principles form the basis for preferences and they in turn imply choice. This would amount to something very close to how the standard theory of rational choice would deal with this problem. But such an approach is exactly what Clements argues against. A different solution would be to say that the agent will choose to comply with principles when the expected value of doing so exceeds the value of acting on interests. Another Kantian political philosopher, Robert Nozick, includes a variable for value in the rational agent’s utility function, as a part of his theory of rationality (Robert Nozick, *The Nature of Rationality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). This could solve the trade-off problem. In behavioral economics, much effort has gone into modeling how people