



Understanding Action: An Essay on Reasons. by Frederic Schick

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BOOK REVIEWS

Schick, Frederic. *Understanding Action: An Essay on Reasons*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Pp. viii+167. \$39.50 (cloth); \$11.95 (paper).

The thesis of this book is that the belief-desire model of action ignores a crucial irreducible element that determines persons' actions, namely their *understandings* of their beliefs and desires, and these understandings "figure on a par with beliefs and desires" (p. 71). Schick constructs a model incorporating understandings and presents a set of formal coherence conditions on rational agents' beliefs, desires, and understandings. He then applies his model to some of the prominent anomalies for the traditional belief-desire (b-d) model, including weakness of will, the Allais paradox, the Zeckhauser Russian roulette problem, and status quo bias problems. To support his thesis, Schick argues for three main claims: (1) many actions cannot be explained as rational on the b-d model without considering the understandings the agents have; (2) understandings are irreducible to beliefs and desires; (3) the augmented belief-desire-understanding (b-d-u) model can account for the anomalies better than the unaugmented model.

The book begins with an example which Schick claims the b-d model cannot explain. The example is from George Orwell's essay "Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War," in which Orwell recounts failing to fire at a fleeing Fascist when he noticed that the man was running along half-dressed and holding up his trousers. The problem for the traditional b-d model is that there are two sets of beliefs and desires, each demanding different actions from the agent, that fit this situation equally well. On the b-d model we explain the action thus: Orwell did not want to shoot his fellow creatures, believed that he could refrain from shooting, and so did not shoot. But equally, Orwell wanted to shoot Fascists, believed that this was a Fascist, believed that he could then shoot, and had before and would in the future shoot other Fascists. These beliefs and desires all held at many times for Orwell, and yet he acted differently at different times, and he did not disavow his actions. Schick's solution is to introduce the notion of how the agent understands the situation; in Orwell's case he understood the immediate situation as a case of shooting a fellow human being. *Understanding as* is different from *believing* for Schick, for he does not deny that Orwell also believed that the fleeing soldier was a Fascist. Thus the agent's understandings pick out only the salient beliefs of the situation for the agent at the time of action. Understandings also apply to desires: an agent can understand a single fact as particularly desirable from one perspective and as undesirable from another at the same time, with only one of the understandings determining the agent's action.

Understandings, then, are not reducible to beliefs and desires because we can keep the same beliefs and desires and yet act differently on them. Thus many more actions become explicable on this account. Here I want to raise problems for the account. On the traditional b-d model we could also say that the same beliefs and desires give rise to different actions, it is just

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that only some of those actions are rational. Others are irrational, such as when we act weakly or without making proper use of our information, or we act impulsively without consulting properly our beliefs and desires. Why does Schick want to expand the set of actions that our model of action counts as rational? The main reason is that he treats the model as primarily a descriptive model, and his augmented model allows him to explain more actions, and more about the actions, as rational actions. Thus we can say that Orwell's not shooting the fleeing half-dressed Fascist is a rational action, and that his shooting other Fascists are rational actions, and Schick can explain the differences by looking to the understandings that Orwell had at each time. On the traditional b-d model we can also explain the actions and how they came to be different, but at most one of them counts as rational on that model. Thus it appears to be a stalemate between the b-d and b-d-u models regarding the Orwell example, if one disregards the normative tag "rational."

So we come to claim 3, that Schick's augmented model better accounts for the standard anomalies to the b-d model. One could see his examples as suffering from one of two problems for his purposes: either they may be accounted for equally well by the b-d model, or they are not well treated by his augmented model. His analysis of the Allais problem as involving regret is of the first sort, since the b-d model can do the same thing by incorporating regret into the utilities. His analysis of status quo biases as rational is an example of the second sort since it is arguable that status quo biases really are irrational.

Addressing the objector who wants to further intensionalize the model, Schick admits that one may want to make different trade-offs than he has made between simplicity of theory and the number of cases that it can account for as rational. This comment goes in the other direction as well, since the trade-offs are of the same sort for making the theory less intensional or, in other words, for retaining the traditional b-d model. That model is powerful and simpler than the b-d-u model. On Schick's model an existence theorem for subjective probability and utility functions that represent agent's beliefs and preferences may be unavailable. Thus much may be given up in accepting the b-d-u model, and if I am right, not much is gained.

This is a mostly well written book. Along the way Schick engages in interesting discussions, including a nice summary of major events in the history of probability theory, and a discussion of Aristotelian minor premises and Kantian maxims as earlier recognitions of understandings. There is one troubling point in the writing of the text. Schick consistently uses the male pronoun as if it were gender neutral, including addressing the reader as "he." I hope that authors will come to understand sexist language as harmful and rude and so choose not to use it.

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