

A Comment on Rationality, Ethical Values and Emotion in MCDA

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In his paper ‘Mindsets, rationality and emotion in multi-criteria decision analysis’, Wenstøp (2005) argues that we should better take into account ethical values and emotions in our models of rationality. More specifically, he studies the extent to which ethical values and emotions can be integrated within multi-criteria decision analysis (MCDA). To this end, he distinguishes three perspectives over values (or ‘mindsets’ as he calls them): consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics and concludes that: (1) As a consequentialist model, ‘the MCDA paradigm fits obviously well with consequentialism’, potentially allowing that corresponding emotions are taken into account in the evaluation of consequences; (2) Deontological values could be modelled as constraints in the optimization process; (3) MCDA is ‘ill fit to handle virtues’.

In this comment, I will agree with Wenstøp about the importance of ethical values and emotions and will point out two key aspects of his article. Then, I will focus on these three conclusions, trying to develop why ethical values could, or could not, be integrated within the approach of MCDA. I will conclude with some comments on how to depart more radically from standard models of rationality.

ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHICAL VALUES AND EMOTIONS

I agree that it is appropriate to better consider ethical values and emotions in models of rationality. At the descriptive, normative and prescriptive levels, standard models of rationality take little account of the extent to which behaviour is influenced by ethical values and emotions beyond self-interest. Based on the maximization of a utility function (multi-dimensional or not), these models focus on the choice of the action that leads to the best consequence for the individual who acts. As such, these standard models of rationality may inhibit our ability to act rationally.

Indeed, it is not necessarily by pursuing our best interest like this that we reach our best interest.

A typical example of this paradox is the tragedy of the commons (Hardin, 1968). In these situations, communities of individuals who self-constrain their pursuit of self-interest end up better off than collections of individuals who maximize it. In this case, values that limit self-interest calculation help the community to reach a better state. Such values influence the choice with reasons that lie beyond the anticipation of the consequences of the action of the decision-maker.¹ As ethical values may do in this example, emotions may also play a role in guiding our behaviours so that we are not fooled by the sole rational anticipation of the consequences of our own

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¹ Here, the ethical justification of such a self-constrained behaviour is that it will lead to a better consequence for all if adopted by *all* actors (such a justification is based on ‘rule utilitarianism’, see, e.g. Norman, 1998, p. 101).

action (Frank, 1988; Tooby and Cosmides, 1994). By integrating ethical values and emotions, we would obtain an *enhanced* form of rationality rather than a *bounded* one. I will now comment on some methodological points of Wenstøp's analysis.

ABOUT WENSTØP'S HANDLING OF THE ISSUE

A powerful aspect of Wenstøp's article lies in the identification of types of values: virtue ethics, deontology and consequentialism. This situates the approach of multi-criteria decision analysis in the broader mindscape of philosophical perspectives over values. If Wenstøp rightly says that we, as individuals, often combine these three types of ethical values when acting, it is also true that MCDA scholars tend to reduce their explanations to the consequentialist type.

Another important point of Wenstøp's article is to initiate a distinction between emotions necessary to the evaluation of consequences criterion by criterion (leading to 'scores' in his terminology), emotions necessary to the relative evaluation of criteria (leading to 'weights'), and emotions related to a feeling of virtue or to the violation of a rule or principle (and not specifically taken into account in MCDA models). This shows that even a consequentialist analysis is not devoid of emotions and that some emotions lie outside the consequentialist perspective. I believe that further research should pursue this analysis in order to categorize, clarify and assess the role of emotions in MCDA models and in their utilisation.

DOES MCDA FIT WELL WITH THE ETHICS OF CONSEQUENCES?

Not sharing the optimism of Wenstøp, I think that even though MCDA is a consequentialist methodology, there are serious difficulties in taking into consideration consequentialist ethical values.

A first ethical question is 'consequences for whom?' In practice, we are not able to take all stakeholders into account (some are not born, some do not speak nor express preferences. . .) and we do not study the consequences for others with always the same depth of analysis (for instance, we will tend to study more our own consequences or the consequences for those we love). Also, we prefer to think that what is good for us is good for

others. Similarly, we tend to ignore the harm we do on others so as not to deviate from our own self-interest.

A second ethical question is 'whose preferences?' A distinction must be made between integrating the decision-maker preferences for the consequences for others into the model and aggregating preferences of different individuals or groups. The decision-maker may tend to consider her own preferences for the consequences on others rather than the genuine preferences of others for the consequences of her actions on them. In the first case, the rational decision may remain a self-interest utility maximization, in the second case, it raises issues pertaining to the aggregation of preferences (e.g. Binmore, 1994), or issues related to the compatibility of different sets of weights (see, e.g. Brans, 2002). In practice, the integration of altruistic consequential considerations raises the issue of the good faith of the actors involved in the modelling process. It is indeed possible to use such extended model as a tool to justify the prescription of a decision that is solely serving the best-interest of the modeller (Le Menestrel and Van Wassenhove, 2004).

A third and more general issue resides in our ability to anticipate consequences. Because we are ignorant of some consequences, and because we know this, there are reasons to act with precaution. Such considerations would necessarily lie beyond consequences and would necessitate a deontological approach (e.g. a precautionary principle as a moral obligation) or a virtue approach (e.g. prudence as virtue).

CAN DEONTOLOGICAL VALUES BE MODELLED AS CONSTRAINTS?

According to a deontological perspective, some actions constitute moral obligations without consideration of the consequences. These could be principles, rules, norms, procedures, charters or codes that have to be respected. Does this mean that such ethical values can be integrated in MCDA as constraints in the maximization process?

A first issue relates to the choice of the deontological obligations to respect. For instance, should a company consider as a constraint for all its international subsidiaries the labour standards of the country where it is incorporated, the local laws, the typical standards of the industry, the

standards derived from the universal declaration of human rights, the weakest of all these standards or the strongest of all these? Also, should the company abide by the letter of the standards or by the spirit of them? As we see, it is a matter of interpretation to identify the rules that a specific action should respect or may violate. There are in general multiple rules that can be respected or violated at the same time and the choice of the rules to be respected is a decision to be taken by the actor (be it an individual, a company, a team, an institution, etc.). Once this choice of self-constraining oneself is taken, we may indeed consider the rules as a constraint and maximize our interest within the rules. But the important decision is precisely to choose that particular rule as a constraint. And this ethical decision is not properly part of the MCDA model.

A second issue lies in the trade-offs between the respect of a moral obligation and the pursuit of self-interest (Wenstøp, 2005). Depending on the values of individuals, the self-constrain that we impose on our actions may more or less stand firm in front of an increase in the self-interest of consequences. Hence, there is a potential trade-off between the action itself (which bears value as a means because of the principles it respects or violates), and the consequences of the action. At the theoretical level, I have proposed a model of such trade-offs where behaviour departs from utility maximization because of process preferences (Le Menestrel, 2006, see also Le Menestrel and Lemaire, 2004). At the practical level, and as Wenstøp notices, prominent scholars of MCDA consider that it is a 'mistake' to evaluate trade-offs between means and consequences, because the value of actions should solely reside in their consequences (see also Keeney, 2002, p. 939, 943). However, these trade-offs do occur and should be part of models of rational behaviour.

In particular for these two reasons, the relation between MCDA models of rationality and deontological values remains a challenge.

IS THE SENSE OF VIRTUE REDUCIBLE TO STANDARD RATIONALITY?

Suppose for instance that two alternatives differ by the shame the decision-maker feels about choosing them. In order to consider the relevance of shame within a MCDA model of rationality, we would need to evaluate each alternative according to its

shame, i.e. we would need to find a score for the shame of each alternative. Further, we would need to evaluate the relative importance of shame with respect to other criteria.

A first problem lies in the need for the analyst to render such a criterion operational. It will be difficult to identify (will the decision-maker avow her shame?), it will be difficult to manipulate (can the cause of the shame be attributed to a specific dimension of the alternative?) and it will be difficult to measure (will the value assigned to the amount of shame in the alternative and its relative importance mean anything?). I believe these difficulties come from the fact that shame is not a property of the alternative but an interpretation of the feeling of the decision-maker. It is more a notion used to interpret her preferences rather than a directly observable dimension of what the decision-maker chooses. Hence, even if shame may be recognized by the decision maker as a reason for influencing her choice of an alternative, in practice the difficulty to render operational this notion as an attribute in a multi-criteria analysis are great and likely to lead to an artificial and useless measurement.

A second problem challenges a very basic tenet of standard models of rationality. The value of shame may not be an increasing (or a decreasing) function of the intensity of shame. Indeed, shame is a feeling whose associated virtue is, according to Aristotle, modesty. Modesty lies in between an excess of shame, that we may call shyness, and a deficiency of shame, shamelessness. Here, virtue is a right mean between two extremes: it corresponds to a 'right amount' of shame. The idea that virtue is not the result of a maximization process but a delicate equilibrium between excess and deficiency not only applies to shame but to other Aristotelian values like fear (whose virtue, courage, is a mean between rashness and cowardice), or giving to others (whose virtue is liberality and lies between prodigality and meanness, which are both vices), and many other values. Indeed, Aristotle argues that one should not even try to maximize pleasure in a virtuous perspective, because it would lead to the vice of self-indulgence. We should strive for a right mean of pleasure that corresponds to the virtue of temperance, in between self-indulgence and insensibility.

In summary, I agree with Wenstøp that virtue ethics raises serious challenges to standard models of rationality, because of the specific nature of the notions at hand (holistic, procedural

and qualitative judgments rather than separable attributes of the consequences) and in the very idea that rationality corresponds to a maximization process.

OPEN AVENUES FOR RESEARCH

We need to study how ethical values and emotions affect actual behaviour. We need to study the extent to which these values can be measured and modelled. And we need to better take these values into account when advising individuals. Whether ethical values and emotions can be treated within a multi-criteria model of rationality hence necessitates research at the descriptive, normative, and prescriptive levels.

Having read Wenstøp's article, it seems to me that his proposal amounts to a form of enlightened multi-criteria approach that remains limited by its consequentialist perspective and by its maximization principle. Eventually, his definition of rationality somehow falls short of his ambition to 'break radically with common notions of rationality'. Although I agree that MCDA can be improved to capture some emotional and ethical dimensions of rational behaviour, I also believe that we should be bolder.

I believe that we may need to depart from the standard assumption of rationality in order to model ethical values and emotions. Epistemologically, standard models of rationality based on a maximization process are derived from models of natural sciences (Sen, 1997). As such, these models reduce rational behaviour to the measurable properties of the objects of choice. They tend to focus on the value of what we choose and miss the values of those who choose. In order to preserve the rigor of models of rationality while extending

them to essentially subjective concerns, we may need new foundations for a scientific approach that combines the measurement of observable properties of objects (for instance as a multi-attribute utility function) with a separate measurement of how these objects are perceived by a particular individual in a specific context.

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