

Social theorists are very fond of notions such as rationality, rational action and rational choice. The assumptions these theories are laid upon state that individuals act in accordance to their best interest, after carefully pondering at all the possible options for action. The underlying motive behind these endeavors is to prove that social life is not all smoke and mirrors, and that, the researcher, through rigorous methods of analysis can map the predictable features of the unknown. The point of this paper is to present the various forms rationality is employed in gambling research.

Every type of reasoning (whether rational, magical or religious) is a social construct adapted to meet the demands of each situation. The question to address is directed towards the relevance of each type of knowledge for the situation and the setting in which the gambler “works”. I argue that there are as many versions of rationality as there are individuals. This approach is consonant with the subjective versus objective rationality debate. Objective rationality assumes that human behavior is adaptive, individuals possess knowledge that they effectively use in order to deal with the everyday problems (Vanberg 2002:11). The flipside of subjective rationality is directed towards the intentionality of human behavior; in order to make sense of other persons’ behavior, individuals make use of a “folk” version of rational choice theory, mentally reassembled from the knowledge they already possess (idem: 10-11).

The next part of this paper deals with the different types of rationality encompassed by gambling research. Economists (Rossett 1965, Cosgrave and Klassen 2001), on one hand, ground their explanation on a model of rational economic action in which individuals are perceived as investors and make versed decisions as a result of calculations of the benefits and risks of various forms of gambling. Gambling represents an economic behavior with “negative expected value”, and this is considered to be “antithetical to the self-interest of rational consumers” (Reith 2007:43). In addition, they apprehend gambling behavior as

being irrational as the sole purpose of businesses and free markets is to generate profit. However, the fact that gambling does not produce profit in itself, but deals with a redistribution of wealth among the players (in games that suppose interaction among players) or among the players and the house (the casino) has caused much debate in the economic field.

Irrationality from the part of the gambler materializes in the illusion of control, delegating gain to personal abilities and skill while losses are attributed to external forces (such as bad luck) or endowing technology (machines such as electronic roulette tables and slot machines) with memory as well as with the ability of performing cognitive processes<sup>1</sup>. A rational choice type of approach implicitly states that gamblers bet in order to win. The researcher is therefore given two frameworks for judging irrationality:

1. The player does not understand the game.
2. The gambler does not know how to make probabilistic calculations.

One could strip the gambler from the human dimension and impose upon herself a sense of discipline and accuracy in choosing the best bets and strategies, gambling would become a socially acceptable activity. However, cognitive research has proven that people do not necessarily calculate in terms of mathematical rigor; instead, they use approximations, estimate or supply themselves with artificial mechanisms aimed at reducing uncertainty (such as the appeal to good luck and higher instances of authority). This proves that it is of little relevance what people should believe, but what people actually believe.

Both economist and cognitive research on gambling are apparently aimed at constructing new worlds where the “outliers” are either removed (deemed as irrational or pathological) or corrected. Objective rationality serves as a normative framework that enables us to envisage the world of perfectly rational individuals, who appear as calculus performing machines, devoid of feelings and driven only by the urge to win. Such a lens, however

---

<sup>1</sup> This is also known as the “gambler’s fallacy”, and represents the belief individuals hold with regard to the probability of a certain event to happen: the probability of an event is lowered when that event has recently taken place, even though the probability of an event is objectively known to be independent from one trial to the next. Quite a nice example of the “gambler’s fallacy” at work is portrayed by Dostoevsky in “The Gambler” in the episode where Granny bets at the roulette table three times in a row on zero (and wins consistently each time), despite Alexey Ivanovitch’s discouragements: “*Can she really imagine that zero will win again?*”.

effective in providing some sort of information, ties Gordian knots by employing artificial constructs in order to explain natural arrangements. The “folk” version of rationality, despite its germaneness to the world it depicts, has its shortcomings when put to work, as observers do not have direct access to personal beliefs, inviting, therefore, arbitrariness (Vanberg 2002).

Using interviews conducted as part of the research for my bachelor thesis, I set out in the next part of this paper to analyze the types of rationality gamblers operate with. However charged with impression management techniques, face work and already standardized (and socially accepted and acceptable) accounts, interviews provide an insight for the disentangling of the way gamblers make sense of their worlds. The first step is drawing a distinction between a rational type of reasoning (scientifically oriented, translated in mathematical operations of calculating probabilities and anticipating outcomes) and an irrational one (magical or religious, designed in order to make sense of uncertainty).

Curiously enough, these types of knowledge are not mutually exclusive, but coexist: all respondents are well acquainted to the mathematical principles that govern the roulette, slot machines or poker, are able to apply the theory of probabilities to the games they play, yet are reluctant in availing themselves to the available “resources”. Rationality as previously discusses has little to do with what is observable in the field. Luck, gods and skill come in stage as organizing principles of life in the casino. Rational reasoning, universal and heterogeneous, however, allows gamblers to develop strategies in order to minimize risks and provide themselves with the illusion of control. The developed strategies, on the other hand, are diverse, unique and successful. Their success stands not in their financial lucrateness, but in conferring gamblers with a sense of stability and certainty.

## ***References***

Cosgrave, Jim and Thomas R. Klassen (2001) Gambling against the State: The State and the Legitimation of Gambling. *Current Sociology*, Vol 49(5): 1-15.

Reith, Gerda (2007) Gambling and the Contradictions of Consumption: A Genealogy of the "Pathological" Subject. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51-33.

Rosett, Richard N. (1965) Gambling and Rationality. *The Journal of Political Economy*, Vol 73 (6): 595-607.

Vanberg, Viktor. Rational Choice vs. Program-Based Behavior: Alternative Theoretical Approaches and Their Relevance for the Study of Institutions. *Rationality and Society*, 2002, Vol. 14 No.1: 7-54.