People generally think and act rationally. But not necessarily in the instrumental/consequentialist sense of maximizing their utility, as standard rational choice theory (RCT) proclaims. Instead, they think and act following the "strong cognitive reasons" they have for doing so. If Cliffs' Notes existed in science, this is how they would summarize Raymond Boudon's new theory of axiological rationality, one much inspired by classic thinkers such as Simmel, Durkheim and, especially, Tocqueville and Weber. The first chapter starts out by arguing that both moral and scientific knowledge are circular. In both spheres, any theory is based on principles which are either (a) ungrounded but treated as true, or (b) grounded on other principles which themselves are grounded on still other principles, in infinite regress, or (c) grounded, in a circular way, on their own consequences. Nevertheless, says Boudon, progress is possible in moral and scientific life alike: new and better ideas in the end drive out old and inferior ones. If someone smells an invisible-hand theory at work here, he/she is right. In the last chapter, the author finally commits himself to the intuition (or is it a belief?) that something like an impartial spectator is walking through history, sifting out, in the long run, those ideas and values that better serve humankind.
In between, the author presents a collection of partly overlapping articles and lectures that jointly make the case for axiological rationality, and against a wide range of alternative theories on how and why we develop our beliefs. Summarily but broadly successfully, Boudon demolishes an impressive number of relativistic (e.g. postmodern or communitarian), naturalistic (e.g. based on an innate “moral sense”) and irrational (e.g. falsely conscious or culture-specific) theories of moral feelings. At greater length but less convincingly, he then sets out to argue why his approach is also superior to RCT.

The main thesis is that beliefs, both normative and positive, can be explained because they make "strong sense" to those who hold them: typically they are based on plausible principles, given the specific cognitive environment. Axiological rationality, though it makes room for instrumental cost/benefit calculus, is broader. It includes, for instance, actions based on non-consequential beliefs: I vote because “democracy is good,” ”stealing is abhorrent” so I refrain from doing it, and so on. Moreover, axiologically rational beliefs are contingent - they may even be wrong. Sometimes better ideas (e.g. universal suffrage; the Earth is round) displace reigning but no less rational ones (e.g. feudalism; the Earth is flat), because the new ideas are more in accordance with plausible, hence forceful, values (human dignity and realism, respectively). And when they do, they may not always change the material world immediately, but they change our mental world irreversibly. Citing Hugo’s beautiful phrase, the author points out that ideas no more flow backward than rivers do.

The book can be assessed at two levels at least: as a general research program, and as a number of specific applications of that program. At the latter level, the strength of axiological explanations of particular phenomena varies widely. Sometimes Boudon makes inroads: his interpretation of feelings of justice, for
instance, is both insightful and consistent (Chapter 6). At other times his “strong sense” explanations seem rather ad hoc. At the very least it is not clear how the axiological model is theoretically superior to RCT: not infrequently it seems less parsimonious, or less refutable, or both. I do not think, for instance, that we make much progress in understanding the intricacies of the notorious “paradox that ate RCT” merely by proposing (p. 66) that people turn out to vote, not to obtain desired outcomes, nor because they like it, but out of principle - they value democracy as a good system, hence they feel they ought to contribute to its persistence.

Or take Boudon’s application of the axiological model to public opinion analysis (Chapter 7). A recent French law instituting the 35-hour working week without loss of pay has been less popular among company heads than among the unemployed and workers (Table 7.1). Boudon suggests (pp. 186-187) that this can be explained not just because the company heads serve their individual interests (as RCT would argue), but also because they think, at least partly, as “role-holders” in charge of their firm’s (including its workers’) future. But how can one refute this? And how much leverage does it add to the more parsimonious RCT explanation? Moreover, the author fails to address two apparent puzzles. Why, despite holding similar roles, are many more executives than company heads in favor of the law? And why, despite being more likely to suffer from the law, do precarious workers like it in equal proportions as salaried private sector workers? RCT could suggest a simple explanation for the first observation (executives receive wages, company heads pay wages), but not for the second.

During the 1990s, many more people in Spain, West Germany and France than in Sweden agreed with the “lump-of-labor” statement that ‘when jobs are scarce, people should be forced to retire early,’ with respondents in England and the US
scoring in between (Table 7.4). Since the Swedish case vitiates a possible “neo-liberal culture” hypothesis, says Boudon (p. 196), it is plausible to assume that this pattern reflects different degrees of training of the respective publics “in the analysis of economic phenomena.” Yet as those familiar with the literature on the three worlds of welfare capitalism will notice, the above results cluster according to welfare regime type. So perhaps it is the incentives offered to individuals by the alternative regimes, not cross-country differences in “sophistication,” that explain preferences. In other words, presented with different work-welfare menus, citizens use the same model (material interests) to arrive at different opinions. By this reading, the first three countries (the conservative-corporatist regime) score highest because, roughly speaking, they are characterized both by starker insider-outsider labor market cleavages and by more generous state pension provisions than the next two countries (the neo-liberal regime), which combine flexible, deregulated employment with private pensions. The social-democratic regime, in turn, offers a better deal on both accounts: the Swedish state is committed to employment promotion and to decent public pensions.

Lastly, compared with the first statement on early retirement, still more respondents in all these countries agree that ‘when jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to their own nationality over immigrants’ (Table 7.5). For Boudon (p. 197), this indicates yet another “axiological” effect: ‘it is easier to refuse to let immigrants into one’s country [refusing a contract] than to change the age of retirement [breaching a contract].’ This explanation is again difficult to falsify. It also misinterprets the survey question: not giving job priority to immigrants need not imply refusing new immigrants. (National response levels on this second statement, incidentally, again cluster neatly according to the welfare regime hypothesis.)
Having said this, at the “programmatic’ level the book has much to offer. Tocqueville and Weber, to name just two, have stood the test of time precisely because they offered original and counterintuitive theories of important phenomena based not on irrational motives or macro-structural variables or *herumspukende Kollektivbegriffe* (which Weber despised), but on the explication and reconstruction of why individuals endorse particular beliefs in any given context. It is therefore easy to side with Boudon when he makes the general methodological case for scientific explanations that are final and that open black boxes, in the sense of showing how the causes of an action reside in the reasons the actor has for adopting it. Written by an outstanding theorist in characteristically assertive fashion, *The Origin of Values* is likely to provoke heated debate across a number of social science subfields.

Pieter Vanhuysse

*London School of Economics*