BOOK REVIEW

José Luis Bermúdez
FRAME IT AGAIN: NEW TOOLS FOR RATIONAL DECISION-MAKING,

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A susceptibility to framing effects, i.e., arriving at different decisions pertaining to how a choice of the same content is presented, has standardly been rendered a mark of the irrational. In "Frame It Again: New Tools for Rational Decision-Making", José Luis Bermúdez offers convincing arguments that being sensitive to frames in this way is often not only compatible with rationality, but may be a requirement for it.

Too much attention, Bermúdez believes, has been paid to the "easy cases" (2). For instance, basketball players are rated more highly in the positive frame ('shots *made*') than in the negative frame ('shots *missed*'), despite this arising from the same datum (23). In the same way, individuals are more likely to buy beef presented as '25 percent *lean*' than '75 percent *fat*', despite leanness being the flipside of fatness (24). Or, in the famous Asian disease experiment, subjects are shown to respond differently to the same dilemma about survival estimates when it is presented in terms of 'lives *lost*' as opposed to 'lives *saved*' (20-21). The increased focus on these cases and many like them in psychological studies, described by Bermúdez in great detail and within various contexts in the first three chapters of the book, have painted the picture of defective human reasoning. It has amounted to "a litany of human irrationality", a narrative within the various social sciences "that human reasoning is fundamentally flawed" (10).

But the litanist, at least substantively, is not Bermúdez's opponent, as she may appear to be at first. Rather, Bermúdez seems to ground his case for the compatibility between the susceptibility to framing effects and rationality on an extended conception of framing effects. His most reoccurring example in the book, breaking away from the seemingly

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narrower conception of relevant framing effects, is that of the Greek king Agamemnon, who frames the possible outcome of bringing about the death of his daughter Iphigenia in two different ways—*Murdering his Daughter* and *Following Artemis's Will*, whereas refusing to bring about her death is presented within a single frame—*Failing his Ships and People*. Bermúdez presents Agamemnon as simultaneously preferring to *Follow Artemis's Will* over *Failing his Ships and People* and preferring to *Fail his Ships and People* over *Murdering his Daughter*, while knowing full well that *Following Artemis's Will* and *Murdering his Daughter* are "the same outcome, differently framed" (7-8).

Bermúdez later seems to agree with the litanists that as far as their observed cases are concerned (those within an 'intensional context', as Bermúdez calls it (99)), individuals often demonstrate irrationality. If it is pointed out to individuals that '25 percent lean' is the same as '75 percent fat', or that survival estimates are in fact equal in the 'lives lost'/'lives saved' frames in the Asian disease case, and they fail to adjust their preferences, then they exhibit irrationality (98). Conversely, in the Agamemnon case and those similar to it (within an 'ultra-intensional context' (99)), Bermúdez argues that it is not irrational to stick to the same valuations even after finding out that the different frames are representative of the same outcome. It might be difficult to shake off the sense that cases within an intensional context, as opposed to those within an ultra-intensional one, are simply of a different kind. After all, Bermúdez gives up rather easily on even attempting to offer 'a single way of thinking what a frame is' (11), given the different ways frames are 'discussed and deployed […] in psychology, economics, linguistics, sociology, political science, and philosophy' (12). What we are left with is the broadest and most inclusive possible understanding of frames as unavoidable aspects of communication, manifesting themselves as 'descriptions' and 'narratives' (12). Yet, despite this conceptual indeterminacy in his account, Bermúdez is still persuasive in that it makes sense to accommodate the seemingly different kinds within the same account. Perhaps this is because Bermúdez's point that frames highlight some reasons while downplaying others, as in the Agamemnon case, is a very commonsense way of thinking about frames, and one which is often not captured by the narrower conceptions of framing effects.

In Chapters 4 to 6, Bermúdez puts forward the gist of his argument. First, in Chapter 4, he explains that litanists are in the business of undermining, through descriptive accounts such as prospect theory (83-89), the predominant normative theory of rationality often known as 'rational choice theory' or 'Bayesian decision theory'. Litanists point out myriad ways in which actual humans fail to live up to the requirements of such a normative theory (67), particularly its requirement of internal consistency

(74). To litanists, susceptibility to framing effects seems incompatible with standard versions of rational choice theory. Having transitive preferences requires that when we prefer A to B and B to C, we also prefer A to C, lest our preferences become *cyclical* (i.e., placing us in an endless loop that seems irreconcilable with rationality) (79). The famous money-pump argument shows that acting on cyclical preferences opens us up to a series of transactions that may well leave us bankrupt; strictly preferring A to B, B to C, and C to A, and agreeing to swap them in a loop can slowly drain us dry (e.g., if A is 1 $, and C is later sold for 0.99 $) (see, e.g. Schick 1986). Breaking with transitivity in such a case seems hardly consistent with rationality.

What about Agamemnon's preferences to *Follow Artemis' Will* over *Failing his Ships and People*, and simultaneously to *Fail his Ships and People* over *Murdering his Daughter*? Bermúdez says there is nothing erroneous about framing the death of Iphigenia in the two aforementioned ways, and that these frames merely reflect "different ways of thinking about the same basic outcome" (81). This is why Agamemnon only has *quasi-cyclical* preferences, which are not an affront to rationality (82). However, another concern about conceptual indeterminacy emerges here. For the most part, Bermúdez's examples of quasi-cyclical preferences are those of agents in the grip of indecision, as in the case of Agamemnon. In Bermúdez's descriptions, these are not preferences of the kind that simply move agents to act. If they were, and were reversible in the way money-pump scenarios work, then perhaps we would be able to conceive cases where agents with quasi-cyclical preferences end up in similar loops.[1] This raises the question whether quasi-cyclical preferences in Bermúdez's examples are in fact quasi-preferences, that is, mere considerations or mere aspects of a complex decision-making situation.

Still, it is on quasi-cyclical preferences that Bermúdez builds his normative account of rationality in Chapter 5.[2] Susceptibility to framing can be perfectly rational, he argues, when frames bring about reasons not previously considered; in such cases, "frame-sensitivity can be both rational and in fact very useful" (94). In the ultra-intensional context, Bermúdez says, "*it can be* rational to have values and preferences that shift according to how things are framed" (100; emphasis in original). He shows

[1] In fact, Bermúdez uses the notion of 'strictly preferring' only once in the book, to explain the original money-pump argument. Quasi-cyclical preferences are never once presented as 'strict preferences'.

[2] Although, as Niker (2021) writes in an earlier review of this book, it is not exactly clear whether Bermúdez aims to extend rational choice theory or replace it with an altogether new theoretical paradigm.

this by way of examples, most notably the case of George Orwell in the Spanish Civil War, who first views enemy soldiers as 'fascists', but then also comes to frame them as 'fellow human beings' when he sees one fleeing half-naked with his trousers hanging (101-105). On Bermúdez's description, Orwell can hold onto both frames even after reaching the decision to shoot (or not to shoot). In such cases, the other frame manifests *ex post* as 'mixed feelings' (105) for not having done otherwise. Yet, this is perfectly compatible with rationality on Bermúdez's account. In fact, he later argues that this kind of quasi-cyclicality might not just be compatible with rationality, but an important requirement for it. Here, some concerns could be raised. It could have been the case that after very short consideration, one frame clearly wins out for Orwell and no residual emotions are produced after the fact; this hardly seems to offend rationality.[3] It is also uncertain how erratically switching back and forth between decisions in response to lingering frames bears on the rationality of an agent.

But Chapter 6 sheds more light on these matters by explaining how we may transition from the claim that framing effects are compatible with rationality to the claim that they may be a requirement for it. Two important factors about rationality are thereby introduced. First, Bermúdez argues that holding onto multiple frames is often the consequence of considering the outcomes of different courses of actions—of displaying *due diligence* before arriving at decisions (121). For agents to think about complex decisions is likely to produce different frames from which to view options and develop a sensitivity to them. If Agamemnon failed to frame the death of Iphigenia in one of the two deeply relevant ways earlier described, but instead operated from a single frame, he would be "missing something very important" about the "complexity of the decision situation" (117). Despite being consistent in a way that the original Agamemnon is not, his failure to assume more than a single perspective amounts to "a failure of rationality" (117).[4] Second, he shows that emotional engagement with a given decision can depend crucially on how that decision is framed, often bringing about rationality-compatible quasi-cyclical preferences (128). Additionally, Bermúdez also mentions that it is a failure of rationality to

[3] Niker (2021) makes a related point to this one.

[4] As in previous cases, this part of Bermúdez's argument might also be somewhat lacking in conceptual depth. Because he does not explain exactly the kind of property rationality is, it is not clear whether Agamemnon's is a failure of rationality, and not some other failure of reasoning, such as the failure of thoughtfulness. Bermúdez only states that "since this is a failure of thought in the service of practical reasoning, it qualifies […] as a failure of rationality" (122).

ground a frame on false beliefs or fail to reject it in the face of countervailing evidence (133).

Chapter 7 explains how the exercise of self-control depends crucially on how rewards are differently framed for agents. In fact, Bermúdez argues that the pull of temptation is difficult to account for on the standard framework of rational choice theory. Instead, we need to appeal to multiple frames and quasi-cyclical preferences to express how agents can prefer larger rewards later over smaller rewards sooner, while simultaneously being tempted by the latter at the expense of the former.

In Chapter 8, Bermúdez turns to rationality in strategic decision-making, namely to how our "actions are interdependent with respect to rationality" (165). In particular, he tests Michael Bacharach's idea that there is a different perspective to rationality when we adopt the "we"-frame, as opposed to the "I"-frame, the latter of which predominates game-theoretical thought experiments. Switching to the "we"-frame does not change any of the values in standard pay-off tables, but "different aspects and properties […] become salient" (176). If agents approach strategic decision-making as *team reasoners*, then they are more likely to arrive at Pareto-optimal outcomes. Agents who are *committed team reasoners* (and are confident that the other person is as well) "would each play their part in the Pareto-optimal strategy profile" (181). However, according to Bermúdez, Bacharach does not manage to prove the rationality (in a normative sense) of adopting the "we"-frame, but merely offers descriptive points for why adopting it is a common occurrence (such as best common interests and strong interdependence) (184-185). Nor is the adoption of the "we"-frame always desirable, as Chapter 9 shows, given all the dark campaigns in human history launched from the "we"-frame (194-195). But more importantly, the Chapter tackles the problem that the perspectives of the two frames cannot be rationally compared—that they are incommensurable, making it impossible to explain why it would be rational to abandon one frame for the other. The mistake of assuming incommensurability, according to Bermúdez, is caused by the loaded terminology of standard reasoning within the "I"-frame ('defection', 'cooperation', 'free-riding'), leaving the impression that "the "I"-frame/"we"-frame distinction [maps] onto the selfish/altruistic distinction" (204). Bermúdez argues that reasoning into the "we"-frame can be grounded in the prior valuing of fairness, although he does not explain why 'valuing fairness' is part of a normative theory of rationality, and not a descriptive claim like those offered by Bacharach, namely that it is a fact that people often value fairness.

In the final two chapters, Bermúdez sketches the profile of a model, frame-sensitive reasoner able to tackle discursive deadlocks. For instance, such a reasoner acknowledges the difference between framing effects within intensional contexts, which require an adjustment of preferences for rationality to be retained, and ultra-dimensional contexts, where it is rational to hold onto quasi-cyclical preferences (217-218). Such a reasoner is able to: 1.) detach from her own perspective and reflect on her mental states "as separate from oneself" (246-247), thereby reducing her affectivity and letting go of emotional baggage (248); 2.) simulate the entire experience of assuming alternative perspectives (254-255); 3.) operate flexibly within multiple frames at once (261); and 4.) understand how frames make competing reasons salient and which values underpin them (264-267). Bermúdez acknowledges that there will be limits to what a frame-sensitive reasoner can and should be expected to achieve, e.g., in the case of holding onto clearly repugnant frames, such as those of serial killers or child molesters (271). Nevertheless, it is not always clear on the picture of Bermúdez's model reasoner how close we must approximate the model to be considered rational thinkers.

Bermúdez's book is very important, not only for remedying some shortcomings of rational choice theory, but also for acting as the bridge between the various disciplines in the social sciences and humanities delving into the matter of rationality. In philosophy, it is a necessary read for rationality theorists as well as moral and political philosophers exploring the ethics of nudging. However, due to its ambition, it adopts a very wide conceptual framework, leaving several loose ends. I have already mentioned some ambiguity about the very concept of 'frames', as well as that of 'preferences'. Other ambiguities, some of which could easily be cleared up in future work, relate to how the crucial concepts in the book come together—'frames', 'framing effects', 'preferences', 'rationality', 'reasons', 'perspectives', 'narratives'. But these conceptual drawbacks do not eclipse the very convincing case for rationality-compatible framing effects on offer.

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