

# The proper role of decision sciences in a democracy

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## Abstract

Decisions are a core subject matter for many economic theories and sub-disciplines. The idea that economic, and more generally scientific insights, should guide policy making has ancient roots, dating back at least to Hobbes seminal exposition of a science of policy, and in a sense even to Plato's figure of a "philosopher king". However, there is nowadays a growing tendency among policy makers to call for scientific knowledge to buttress policy-making and implementation. In this article, we elaborate a framework clarifying the normative status of practices that consist in using insights from decision sciences to support political decision-making in this way in Western, contemporary democracies. We begin by exploring accounts of the role of decision sciences that more or less underlie a large part of the economic literature. In their various guises, these accounts attempt to draw an impermeable divide between factual and normative claims, and to justify the role of decision science as confined to the factual realm. We recall the largely accepted reasons why such models should be considered defective. We then explore an alternative account, which locates the purported role of decision sciences upstream democracy. This account provides us the opportunity to investigate some fundamental issues in the foundations of normativity in a new perspective, which in the end allows us to flesh out a specific version of the third account and recommend it.

*Keywords:* Democracy, Decision Aiding, Ethics of Operational Research, Normative Economic

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## 1. Introduction

RelecteurExterne: Ph. Grill: peut-tre commencer directement par un ex, pour intriquer le lecteur conomiste? YM: je suis circonspect. Si on commence par un exemple reel, il y aura toujours des lecteurs mal intentionnes qui critiqueront le detail de l exemple au lieu du contenu du texte. Si on prend un exemple fictif, ca risque d'etre pris pour une figure de rhetorique et ne pas avoir beaucoup de poids. Par ailleurs, difficile de trouver un exemple qui capture toutes les applications possible du raisonnement, meme dans les grandes lignes

Decisions are a core subject matter for many economic theories and sub-disciplines. In this article, we will use the loose phrase “decision sciences” to refer to all these economic approaches, which take decision-making as their main topic, ranging from operational research to social choice theory, through public choice theory, the microeconomic theory of choice, rational choice theory, multi-criteria decision aiding methodology, and so on.

OC: Many will consider OR and MCDA as not a part of economy. Replace by scientific? YM: Tout dpend d'o on soumet. Si revue d'conomie ou philo co, on laisse comme a. Si on envoie une revue d'OR ou de philo, on change

Some of the studies gathered under this umbrella present themselves as purely academic contributions, concerned only with establishing scientific results. However, as pointed out by [32] and [21], among others, there is a growing tendency among policy makers to call for scientific knowledge to buttress policy-making, often in a so-called “evidence-based” approach. This is a call for knowledge to become advice, and for purportedly scientific propositions to endorse the normative status of prescriptions. Though this tendency might have indeed gained prominence, or rather visibility, in recent years, the idea that economic, and more generally scientific insights, should guide policy making has ancient roots, dating back at least to Hobbes seminal exposition of a science of policy [31], and in a sense even to Plato’s figure of a “philosopher king”. Issues such as whether the wisest should rule

the masses, or how scientific insights can contribute to collective decision-making in different political regimes, are accordingly addressed by a vast literature. In this article, we claim neither to exhaustively review this immense literature, nor to do justice to all the aspects of the issues it tackles. What we want to do is to elaborate a framework clarifying the normative status of practices that consist in using insights from decision sciences to support political decision-making in western, modern democracies.

By talking about “normative status”, we mean that we want to clarify the extent to which these practices are indeed normative, and to articulate a normative account of them. The term “normative” will be taken here in a broad sense, to refer to the large set of issues concerned with elucidating the content of concepts such as ethics, justice, the good and the just, and so on. We emphasize at the outset that, though this understanding is broad, it is not all-encompassing. In particular, in our understanding of “normative” in this article, we exclude purely positive or purely empirical attempts to capture the above mentioned notions. For example, empirical studies aimed at capturing what people in a given group mean when using the term “justice” does not fall within our definition of a “normative” inquiry.

Based on this understanding of “normative”, the question articulated above in terms of “normative status” can accordingly be reformulated as: why and to what extent can one consider that using insights from decision sciences to aid political decision-making is something that ought to be done? A similarly permissive approach will characterize our usage of the terms “values” and “value-judgments”.

We will tackle the above question here only in the context of what we will call “western, modern democracies”. This phrase will also be understood in a very broad sense. We do not want to confine this inquiry to a specific theory or vision of democracy. An immense literature in a large series of disciplines has produced a vast array of competing definitions of democracy. As our rationale will unfold in this article, we will be led from time to time to refer explicitly to several of these understandings of the term “democracy”. But the question that we tackle is not anchored in any of these theories. This question owes part of its significance and importance to the fact that it uses

the idea of western, modern democracies in the largely undetermined sense in which one uses it in ordinary conversation, broadly to refer to the kinds of institutions and political processes that historically emerged and matured in Europe and North-America, and some of the values and principles that are more or less naturally associated with them.

Because the literature on the topics concerned by this article is so vast, one can doubt that anything really new can be written on it. Decision sciences are, however, in perpetual transformation, and so are the political practices in which they are called to play a role. This is why we think that it is not unreasonable to hope that thinking anew these issues can shed new light on them.

This article is divided into eight part. Following the present introduction, sections 2 and 3 explore accounts of the role of decision sciences that more or less underlie a large part of the economic literature. We argue that these accounts are defective. Though they use different strategy, they both attempt to draw an impermeable divide between factual and normative claims, and to justify the role of decision sciences as confined to the factual realm. We argue that these accounts fail, for various reasons that have already been articulated in various strands of the literature. These relatively short parts should be seen as a lapidary review of existing knowledge, rather than as an original contribution. Section 4 explore an alternative account, which locates the purported role of decision sciences upstream democracy. In our view, this account is implicit in many contemporary approaches. However, to our best knowledge, it has so far never been spelled out explicitly. In sections 6 to 7, we explore some fundamental questions of normative theory so as to argue that a specific version of this third model deserves to be recommended. Section 8 delves into more concrete considerations in order to sketch how our approach can overcome what we take to be the most difficult implementation challenge it faces, namely this risk that it might collapse on the pitfalls of disagreements and clashing orders of justification. Section 9 concludes.

## 2. A first defective model: Decision science as pure science

The idea that economics is a value-neutral, purely scientific endeavor, is traditionally associated with [27]’s classical contribution. This approach admits that value-judgments are essentially non-scientific, and that economics as a science should therefore eliminate them. One might think that the proponents of this model would naturally claim that economic science simply cannot produce policy advices without denaturing itself. Numerous authors have however strived to demonstrate that, even in this approach, economic science manages to produce so-called policy relevant results, liable to feed policy advices.

As [5] recalls, the issue of inter-personal comparisons of utility provided a prominent historical exercise for economists engaged in this endeavor. Inter-personal comparisons of utility involve value-judgments because one cannot claim that a given increase in the welfare of one person outweighs or even is equivalent to a given decrease in the welfare of a second person unless one judges the relative worth of the welfare of the two persons. A prominent conceptual trick to produce policy-relevant results despite the ban on the value-judgments involved in interpersonal comparisons of utility is the strong Pareto principle, stating that state of affairs  $y$  is better than state of affairs  $x$  if no one is worse off in  $y$  as compared to  $x$ , and at least one person is better off in  $y$  as compared to  $x$ . But this principle has two important defects. First, it leaves economists incapable to formulate any policy-relevant result in situations where there is no state of affairs that strongly Pareto dominates the others, which is bound to happen quite often.

OC: On s’egare : c’est sans-doute vrai, mais sur un plan tres different de ce dont je pensais qu’on discutait ici, savoir la validit en principe du raisonnement “sans valeur”, plutot que son efficacite pratique. YM: je suis d’accord, on est sur un plan different du reste de la discussion. Pour autant, il ne me semble pas que cette petite phrase coute grand chose, et si l’on veut que le texte ait une portee sur la question de ce que les sciences de la decision peuvent apporter dans les politiques REELLES, ce point me semble important

Second, as famously emphasized by [29], among others, the strong Pareto principle is itself normative. This very idea is certainly largely accepted, but many authors often present this normativity as “minimal”, in the sense that it seems innocuous to admit that most people, if not everyone, accepts this normative principle. We argue that this claim is more debatable than most authors seem to admit. Take for example a slightly unequal situation  $x$  where individual  $i$  is quite well-off whereas individual  $j$  is poor. Compare with situation  $y$  where  $i$  receives a bonanza and  $j$ ’s situation is unchanged.  $y$  Pareto dominates  $x$ , but is considerably more unequal. The idea that everyone would claim that  $y$  is better than  $x$  is far from self-evident. It relies on questionable assumptions about a total absence of aversion to inequality and envy. Of course, one can retort that our argument applies the Pareto principle to wealth, and that if it is applied to some aggregated welfare index integrating aversion to inequality and envy, then it might no longer be the case that  $y$  Pareto dominates  $x$ . But this very rejoinder shows how difficult it might be to set the situation so as to render it evident that everyone will agree on the Pareto principle. We therefore claim that one has to face the fact that, if one wants to claim that the Pareto principle is minimal, one cannot simply claim that it is self-evident, one has to prove it.

We should emphasize, at this stage, that what we just said about the strong Pareto principle is certainly true of all the axioms that the literature usually admits to be normative, but quickly qualifies as *minimally* normative.

Though one should certainly celebrate that there is now a large consensus that the model of economics as a pure science is a mirage, not only because sciences are all anchored in values, be they only epistemic values [20], but also because many economic studies explicitly tackle normative issue, which implies that role of values is all the more prominent in this discipline, the view that decision sciences are anchored in *minimally* normative still plagues decision sciences. We argued that such claims cannot be heralded without justification, which decision sciences seeing themselves as pure sciences do not even attempt to do.

OC: je trouve la section 2 peu utile. YM: je suis d’accord, elle est peu

utile. Cependant, je pense qu'un article qui ne contient que des trucs utiles est indigeste, voire complètement illisible. Il faut parfois dire des choses simples avec lesquels tout lecteur se sentira à l'aise, d'une part pour qu'on ne puisse pas nous dire qu'on aurait du y penser, d'autre part pour être un tant soit peu exhaustif, enfin pour rendre les choses digestes. Je dis ça, mais je ne ne serais pas traumatisé si on faisait sauter cette section

### **3. A second defective model: Decision science as a norm translator**

The failure of the pure science model suggests a way out, which consists in integrating value-judgments as axioms with respect to which economists should take an agnostic stance, and whose implications they should take upon themselves to delineate. This is the approach developed by many authors in the social choice literature.

A typical example of this approach is the literature on “formal welfarism” [12]. The point of this literature is to formalize social welfare functions. The latter are functions allowing to compare several social states of affairs by aggregating individual information in these different states of affairs. The various possible functions have different properties, which in turn capture different value-judgments. By formalizing these functions and properties, the economist does not himself make any value-judgement. But he produces a tool that a decision-maker can use: if the decision-maker endorses a given value-judgement, then the economist can identify the corresponding property and then recommend the function that the decision-maker should use. In so doing, the economist is purely value-neutral. This line of argument fails, however, for at least two reasons.

First, the exercise that consists in equating a value-judgment with an axiom is more difficult than most social choice theorists seem to admit, and is perhaps doomed to be elusive. To explain why, let us take [1]’s Non Dictatorship axiom. This axiom states that there is no individual  $i$  in society such that for all profiles and all pairs of alternatives  $x$  and  $y$ , if  $i$  prefers  $x$  to  $y$ , then  $x$  is preferred to  $y$  at social level. This axiom is expected to be largely accepted as a minimal requirement for any collective decision rule.

But there are two, very different reasons why one can be expected to endorse this axiom. The first reason is that this axiom and its name echo our shared endorsement of democracy and our shared refusal of dictatorship, where “dictatorship” refers to a complex picture of political arrangements, associated in intricate ways with notions such as arbitrariness, illegitimacy, and rule by force, and so on. Our shared refusal of dictatorship, understood in this sense, is also nourished by our culture and historical experiences. But plainly enough, none of these is captured by Arrow’s axiom. This leaves us with a second reason to reject the axiom, one that tightly sticks to its formal articulation, which is that we would reject an arrangement, whatever it might be, that happens to satisfy perfectly one and only one individual, always the same. The second reason is the only one that the axiom strictly speaking talks about. But it is upon the first one that hinges the political relevance of the axiom, because the first does not even talk about political settings or ideas. In our view, this contrast shows that, although Arrow’s axiom does capture shared normative intuitions, it certainly does not capture our shared refusal of dictatorship. Axioms undoubtedly are useful to formalize some aspects of value-judgments. But one cannot expect it to be possible to correctly and completely capture value-judgments or values in axioms. Articulating values is an endless task, using axioms for that purpose is an endless part of this endless task.

One might retort here that most social choice theorist would agree, and most of them eschew making the hopelessly ambitious claim to identify axioms capturing values or value-judgements perfectly. Even if this were true, a second argument should lead us to reject the vision of decision science as a norm translator. One might admit the soundness of an axiom when looking at the axiom itself, while in fact rejecting the implications of this axiom.

YM: Olivier, je te laisse dvelopper ?

Arrow’s impossibility theorem [1] again provides an apt example. Arrow’s argument is based on axioms that the author presents as liable to be endorsed by most of his readers. The point of the theorem and the reason why this result is so powerful, is that a series of axioms which are all accept-



able proves impossible to combine. A natural way out of the conundrum is to question the spontaneous adherence to the axioms, which prove, on due reflection, to be less commendable. This is the way out that Arrow himself suggested.

The above scheme through which social choice theorists pick-up axioms that correspond to the decision-maker's value-judgments therefore fails in both its stronger and its weaker version. In its weaker version, it fails because it is anchored in the unwarranted premise that decision-makers are able to make clear and definitive value-judgments once and for all, in the abstract. In its stronger version, on the top of that it also fails because it is anchored in yet another unwarranted premise: that it is undebatable that axioms can aptly capture value-judgments.

#### **4. A third model: Decision science upstream democracy**

The two models explored above are explicitly defended by some authors in the literature.

OC: Are they? YM: en economie, je dirais que oui. Je cherche des references.

A third model, more powerful than the above two, can be carved out to attempt to overcome their respective shortcomings. Though it is arguably implicit in many decision science contributions, this model has, to our best knowledge, never been explicitly articulated in the literature. We will accordingly devote a bit more space to present and explain it and its philosophical motivation.

The source of this third model can be found in the debates between procedural and substantive approaches to the legitimacy of political decisions [22]. These debates are a cornerstone of the literature on democracy in political philosophy. However, the key-terms of these debates are sometimes used in different senses. A brief clarification is therefore useful. There are actually two debates in the literature which are often articulated using the same terms, in spite of their profound differences. It is therefore useful to recall the basic structure of these two debates.

A first debate deals with the question whether policy decisions deserve to be called democratic depending on the so-called output of the decision, or depending of the process through which they have been taken (input) [34, 2]. Proponent of an input theory of democracy claim that, if a decision has been taken through democratic procedures, then it is democratic, whatever its output. Proponents of output theories take the opposite stance. These two extreme approaches have problematic implications. A radical input theorist would be led to claim that a decision to disenfranchise half the citizenry would be democratic if taken through a democratic procedure.

OC: Not an absurd implication if the theorist also claims that this result is impossible, when proper democratic procedure is applied. YM: je ne comprends pas ce que tu dis la. Si tu mets des conditions sur les outputs acceptables, tu n'es plus dans une theorie de l'input

Symmetrically, a radical output theorist would be led to claim that a benevolent dictator could achieve a democracy.

OC: I see no absurdity here. If the dictator takes all preferences into account, what is the problem? YM: je conçois qu'on puisse ne pas etre choqué par une telle idee. Je ne dis pas qu'il faut l'etre. Je note que la litterature considere que c'est un argument contre ces theories

Most political philosophers admit that such implications are untenable (it is no part of our ambition in this article to take a stance on this issue), and therefore strive to elaborate theories of democracy that reach a commendable equilibrium between input and output. The output element in the notion of democracy then captures requirements that should be imposed to the proceedings of democratic processes from the outside. If these requirements are not fulfilled, the processes no longer deserve to be called democratic.

The second debate opposes purely procedural to substantive theories of democracy. Substantive theories claim that democracy is a matter of values, which can be materialized either in procedures, or in political outcomes, such as for example in rights that are entrenched in law. An example of such an approach is [8], who claims that democracy is first and foremost a set of “core values”, which can be materialized in the proceedings of constitutional courts just like it can be in votes and institutional proceedings more usually

called “democratic”. As opposed to substantive theories, purely procedural theories claim to account for democracy by delineating formal properties of decision-making procedures that are supposed to be purely value-neutral, and from which democracy would emerge. [15] is often presented as the canonical example of such an approach. Purely procedural approaches in that sense are criticized in the literature for being untenable, because it appears impossible to recommend procedural properties while remaining value-neutral. For example, a prominent procedural property is universal voting right. Critics of purely procedural approaches argue that there can be no reason to recommend universal voting right except if this recommendation expresses an endorsement of a value-judgment such as the judgment that human beings are equal and should be treated as such. Symmetrically, purely substantive approaches are criticized because, if there is a substance that defines what counts as democratic (as they claim), then it means that there is not even a need for citizens to vote or express their view in order to achieve a democracy, which many authors take to be contradictory.

These two debates have important similarities, mainly because input theories and purely procedural theories similarly focus on procedures. However, most input theories would be termed “substantive” by proponents of purely procedural theories, because they promote procedural *values*. Substantive theories can materialize in both output and input theories. The second debate is a deeply philosophical one, opposing form to substance or values, the first one is more pedestrian, opposing concrete, worldly procedures, to worldly states of affairs which are no less concrete: patterns of endowments, distributions of income, and so on.

The second, more philosophical debate is the more relevant one from our point of view here. This debate indeed drives a wedge thanks to which decision science expertise can enter the scene by the backdoor and find its place upstream any political process. Indeed, whatever the conclusion of the debate, it interestingly frames the issues surrounding democracy in such a way that a role for decision science becomes visible upstream democracy. In the purely procedural approach, decision sciences can play a role in identifying and characterizing the supposedly pure procedure – without thereby making

any value-judgment. In the substantive approach, decision science can play a role in identifying the substance of democracy – be it a matter of input or output. If a middle way has to be found between these two extremes, in this middle way the proper role of decision science is a bit of the two.

This third model hence appears to be liable to materialize in two, very different guises, depending on whether it is anchored in a substantive or a purely procedural stance. In this article, we will eventually recommend a specific version of this model. But identifying which one is to be recommended will first require some more theorizing, to which the two sections to come are devoted.

OC: Si je te suis bien, tu proposes une autre place la DS que celle envisage par le FW (formal welfarism). Ce nest donc pas contradictoire avec le FW, mais bien sur un autre plan. Je ne vois pas alors le lien avec la critique du FW. Pour le dire autrement, je vois deux questions distinctes : 1) est-ce que DS est utile dans la perspective FW ; 2) est-ce que DS est utile en amont ; et je ne vois pas de lien entre ces deux questions. YM: je ne comprends pas ce que tu dis. Je propose un troisieme modele. Une chose ambiguë dans la premiere version du texte est que le titre pouvait laisser penser que je critiquais ce modele dans ce paragraphe comme je le fais pour les deux autres modeles. A cette etape en fait, je ne fais qu'exposer le modele. Je ne pense pas que les critiques du modele de la section 2 soient operantes pour critiquer ce modele

## 5. Varieties of flight from normativity

The third model just introduced identifies a place where decision sciences can play a role. Let us investigate the kind of role they can play there.

The purely procedural approach seems to offer a possibility for decision sciences to play such a role without compromising with “substance”, that is, without having to make value-judgments. By contrast, in the substantive approach, or in any mixed theory involving procedural and substantive approaches, decision science takes it upon itself to address an openly normative task, and in that case we need an account of how it can endorse this task.

But such formulations are ambiguous. So far, we have taken as synonymous the phrases “making value-judgments”, being “substantial” and being “normative”. What do these phrases really mean? To clarify this matter, it is useful to come back to an analysis of a couple of historical cornerstones of contemporary political philosophy: the stance articulated by [26] and [14].

[26]’s theory epitomizes what [11] called the “flight from substance”. He did not want his theory to make any value-judgment about the kind of state of affair that should prevail in a democratic society. He therefore argued that a policy is democratically legitimate if it is based on a constitution whose justification is acceptable to all “reasonable” citizens. But he did not want to make value-judgments about democratic processes either. He therefore further argued that the very definition of reasonableness should be something for reasonable citizens to pick-up. He thereby attempted to eschew making any value-judgments in his account of legitimacy and reasonableness. This was supposed to be a complete flight from substance, in the sense that this account was supposed to eschew any value-judgment, whatsoever. If such an approach were tenable, it would provide a positive subject matter for positive decision scientists to study without making any value-judgment.

This approach fails, however, for reasons articulated in different versions most prominently by [16] and [11]. Let us start with [11]’s argument because it is simpler to summarize. [11] noticed that, if one admits, following Rawls, that the notion of reasonableness should be selected by reasonable people themselves, there is an “impervious” plurality of groups that could select themselves as being “reasonable”. He concluded rawlsian political philosophers have no choice but to make bold claims about the content of the concept of reasonableness. [16]’s argument is, to a large extent similar. He criticizes Rawls’ presentation of his notions of the “veil of ignorance” and the “overlapping consensus” as *devices* whose real-life functioning can give rise to principles of justice. According to [16], these notions are rather rhetorical tools thanks to which Rawls exposes principles of justice that he deduces from various philosophical notions, such as the one of a moral person, which Rawls presupposes. Rawls’ flight from substance hence abruptly collapses in a retreat back to the substantial inquiry into the nature and

features of a moral subject.

Rawls' attempt is therefore the paragon of the failure of the flight from substance (which is neither a logical flaw nor a failure to unveil illuminating insights, but a failure to strip the argument from its normative anchorage, or "substance"). Whereas Habermas played a key-role in unveiling the problems crippling Rawls' approach, he himself embarked on a flight of his own, which has both important differences and interesting similarities with Rawls' flight from substance. [14]'s usage of the notion of "performative contradiction" is particularly interesting in this respect. Habermas deploys this argument in his presentation of his "discourse ethics", for which he was concerned to provide foundations. In broad outline, this argument states that refusing to accept the purportedly minimal normative discourse ethics would be committing a contradiction. This means that everyone implicitly already admits the tenets of discourse ethics. By falling back upon a supposedly always already entrenched consensus, the performative contradiction argument would allow Habermas to go a step farther than Rawls, in the direction of the flight from substance. By deploying this argument, Habermas not only eschewed taking a stance on what is a good or a bad policy, or on what is a good or a bad procedure, he went as far as striving to show that there is no stance to be taken about the foundations of morals, because we all always already agree on them. This would not only be a flight from substance, but a flight from any element of "advocacy" in normative attitude – where "advocacy" is used here to refer to the attitude that consists in an active espousal of and support for normative tenets *as normative*.

If the performative contradiction argument manages to achieve this purpose, it means a there is material that decision scientists (among others) can study without stepping outside the realm of positive science, but with normative bearings. Unfortunately, the performative contradiction argument fails to evacuate normativity to such a radical extent. Indeed, what if someone happens to reject the tenets of discourse ethics? He commits a performative contradiction, and then? We can try to show him that he committed a contradiction, but what if he does not surrender? We have

no choice but to take a normative stance with respect to his attitude, and claim that he should not have that kind of attitude. Rather than evacuating normativity, the performative contradiction argument hence hides its normative content in its implicit assumption that contradiction ought to be excluded. Can it justify this assumption? It cannot do it simply by claiming that we all already accept that contradictions should be avoided, because this would lead to an infinite regress.

Though, according to the reading just spelled out, the performative contradiction argument can be interpreted as an attempt to completely evacuate normativity, Habermas himself never articulated his approach as a complete rejection of normativity. In some of his writings he argues that it is impossible to develop a perfectly satisfactory positive account of normative behavior, which suggests that he probably did not intend to evacuate normativity altogether. This impossibility to reduce normative discourse to a positive discourse on normativity stems, in our view, from the impossibility to eliminate “advocacy” from normative attitude without flighting from normativity altogether.

OC: Do you mean that if everybody accepts some principle, then that principle ceases to be normative? Then does it apply to Pareto dominance as well? YM: non, ce que je dis, c’est que, si on essaie de fonder une force normative sur un consensus factuel, on se plante

OC: why? YM: why H’s argument fails, or why he did not want it to completely succeed?

The failed models explored above (sections 2-3) strive to salvage decision scientists from a task they don’t want to take upon themselves: make value-judgments, advocate a vision. In this sense, these models exemplify a flight from advocacy. In some of its versions (the ones endorsing pure proceduralism), the third model (section 4) can also exemplify this flight. Our discussion of Rawls’ and Habermas’ attempted flights from normativity however suggested that this flight is a flawed strategy. It mainly renders invisible the normative content of theories and arguments. Instead of clinging to this stance, we suggest that, as decision scientists, we have to take upon ourselves to reflexively identify the normative stance that we take when we

do our job. We have to inquire into the very normative foundations of our deeds and creeds as decision scientists. If the model that sees decision sciences as standing upstream democracy is to hold water, it should take a form endorsing such a normative view – or so, we will argue.

OC: making value judgments advocating a vision. A model in physics advocates a vision (such as heliocentrism) and makes no value judgments. The validity of the model rests upon its falsifiability and its non falsification. (I know it is simplistic, but its the way.) In DS, we have to give up neutrality and embrace advocating; but we must exclude debatable (non consensual) value-judgment. In philosophy of DS, we have to keep neutrality, exclude advocating and exclude debatable value-judgment. I believe our other article shows a possible way to do it for individuals.

YM: the pb here is just that I had not clearly defined the term “advocacy”. Sorry about that!

## 6. Two visions of what ought to be done

RelecteurExterne: P. Grill: tester sur le ralisme moral de Putnam YM: j'ai peur que cela n'embrouille les choses, je pense preferable de juste dire que le terme “realism” est pris en un sens tres particulier dans ce texte Advocacy, in its crudest form, has its drawbacks, however. Though the failures of the flight from normativity suggest that advocacy should not be completely abandoned, it is therefore important to catch a more clearly articulated picture of normativity, liable to help us to understand how and why advocacy can become a problem, and how and why we can retain it. For that purpose, we want to elaborate on a very basic structure of normative reasoning – one that, despite its simplicity, has to our best knowledge never received the attention it deserves in the literature.

There are, we argue, two very different approaches to what ought to be done. The first one we call “moral realism”, and the second one “the quest for justifications”. “Moral realism”, in our definition, is the attitude of people who admit (sometimes explicitly, but most of the time implicitly, and certainly often without being fully aware of it) that they have a special



access to a form of moral truth, and therefore can sometimes claim, without further ado, that this or that is “right” or “good”. Notice that the phrase “moral realism”, understood in various senses, plays important roles in the philosophical literature. We do not claim that our notion encompasses all these senses. Our argument makes sense when one uses our definition of “moral realism”, and we do not make any broader claim. The “quest for justification”, in our definition, is the attitude of people who endlessly keep on arguing about the justification of their stances about what ought to be done: there never is a point when they stop arguing and looking for further arguments and simply say “that’s the way it is”. Advocacy is a problem only when it is in the hands of a moral realist.

Indeed, a worrying feature of moral realism is that either it converges towards a quest for justifications, or it collapses in an apology of violence. Indeed, imagine that, as a moral realist, you face a challenge to your vision of what ought to be done. You can reply by justifying your stance, and in so doing you give up realism and lean towards the quest for justifications. Or you can ankylose on your stance and strive to impose it by force. In that case, either violence is part of your vision of what ought to be done, in which case you are stuck in the apology of violence, or your vision of what ought to be done rejects violence and your moral realism is repudiated. The only stable moral realism is therefore the apology of violence – where “stable” means here that this attitude can survive without converging towards the attitude with which we contrast is, that is: the quest for justification.

OC: a me semble clair que la recherche de justification est bonne, je ne crois pas que a require une preuve. Un philosophe remettrait-il a en question ? Par ailleurs, la violence ne peut pas toujours tre condamnée, cest une autre question mon avis. Il faudrait peut-tre parler de ce quil faut faire dans le cas a priori plus raisonnable o 1) on adopte la voie de la justification et 2) on constate un cul-de-sac. Mais a me semble tre un autre dbat (et compliqu).

YM: je ne sais pas, peut-etre que ce que je dis est trivial. Ce ne serait pas la premiere fois!... ni la derniere

What about the quest for justifications? Is it stable? The quest for justifications can be transient: one can be ready to argue up to a certain

point, and then fall back upon realism. In such a case, the stability of this quest for justification is determined by the stability of the moral realism on which it falls back. What if it is not transient – if it does not fall back upon moral realism? One can claim to take advantage of the structure of reasoning deployed in the substantive vs. procedural debate to reject this possibility. The argument would unfold as follows. If you endorse the quest for justification, it means that you endorse the values underlying the idea that moral stances should be backed by justifications. And these very values are the core of your moral realism.

OC: Il faudrait ici aussi distinguer dans moral realism le cas o on s'appuie sur des choses que personne ne remet en question (tq le besoin de justification).

The quest for justification would hence unavoidably fall back on moral realism. However, the brand of moral realism on which the quest for justification would unavoidably fall back is of a very special kind. By definition, if one sticks to this moral realism by violence, one is no longer embarked in the quest for justification. This moral realism is therefore one that immediately falls back upon the quest for justifications. Hence, though the quest for justifications arguably is underlain by values, those values are immediately redirected towards a quest for justifications. The quest for justifications therefore is stable.

The quest for justifications is, we claim, what we should advocate as decision scientists. Not *because* most people would certainly endorse it. But because it is stable and it is a very basic structure of moral reasoning whose sole stable counterpart is the apology of violence. We claim that we should not be afraid or shy, as decision scientists, to advocate it. There is no reason to flight this advocatory stance, no reason to (hopelessly) attempt to flight this substance, no reason to strive to reduce it to putative positive foundations. Accordingly, a version of the model placing decision sciences upstream democracy that endorses this normative stance has no reason to flight this substance and, quite the contrary, has the means to entrench its own normative stance: it is an embodiment of the quest for justification.

At this stage, the reader might think that this provisional conclusion

is self-evident. We indeed hope that it is, in the sense that our aim was to capture a normative stance that all decision scientists will be liable to endorse – not as a matter of fact, but for normative reasons. What is more questionable is whether decision scientists all see this normative stance as advocacy, in our definition of this term. And a question that remains open at this stage is: what are the implications of endorsing this normative stance? The next section explores this question.

OC: Qqn remet-il a en question, vraiment ? Cest lessence mme de la philosophie que de prtendre que le dbat rflchi est bon. Et il est consensuel que DS ne sadresse pas ceux qui ne veulent pas dbattre rflxivement, il me semble. Ny a-t-il pas un risque denfoncer des portes ouvertes, ici ? YM: possible. En meme temps, comme ca on se fait moins mal qu'en enfoncant des portes fermees...

## 7. The recommended model

The proposition that we defend in this article is hence that, as decision scientists, we should advocate the quest for justification, which provides the right account of our normative stance and the appropriate model for our possible interventions, until upstream democracy is justified. This is unquestionably, openly a normative stance, one that we should take upon ourselves to advocate, by arguing in favor of it, and by enacting it – which, by definition, is the same thing.

This approach faces a difficult problem, however. This problem reflects a basic and very important ambiguity, which actually again reproduces the structure of the procedural/substantive debate. The quest for justification consists in displaying good arguments for the stances we take, judgments we make, etc. But what is a “good” argument: is it one that happens to be accepted, or one that should be accepted? The formal literature on argumentation [10, 6] seems to favor the second option, because it defines arguments as good arguments as arguments that should be accepted if properly understood.

OC: Pas ncessairement, chez Dung. YM: faudra que tu m'expliques. Les 3-4 paragraphes ici sont a completer

And so does, as explained above, the Rawlsian and Habermasian literature, because it is concerned with a counterfactual concept of acceptability: Rawls is not interested in justifications that real people usually accept or will accept, but in justifications that citizens *would* accept, if they were reasonable – that is, if they had the features that moral persons have in his theory.

We have to find a way out of this conundrum without falling back on a variant of moral realism. [22] ventured a partial solution to the problem, based on two tenets.

The first tenet is “incrementalism”. “Incrementalism” holds that the idea that one can be able to capture a definitive list of criteria defining what is a good argument, what is the reasonable, what is acceptable, and so on, is illusory. According to “incrementalism”, one had better work incrementally, to improve step by step justifications, argumentations, etc. This tenet hence consist in accepting that any attempt to specify criteria to capture what makes a justification acceptable is bound to be provisional, and that one can only laboriously improve the blunt concept of acceptability step by step.

The second tenet is “primacy of practice”: instead of searching for acceptability criteria through theoretical reflection, one should take the stance that consists in putting justifications to the test in real-life situations. According to “primacy of practice”, justifiability is not a property of a recommendation formulated by a decision analyst, it is a property of the attitude of the analyst producing it.

These two tenets allow to overcome a very problematic feature of philosophical approaches such as Rawls’ and Habermas’, which is that such approaches seem to admit that philosophical arguments can decide if an argument is a good one, or a justification is an acceptable one, even without a single real stakeholder or decision-maker having the opportunity to make up his/her mind about it, which is bound to look unacceptably disconnected from reality.

This approach allowed to articulate a normative doctrine that can be translated into an answer to our question in the present article. This translation would state that, as decision scientists, our quest for justification

should consist in:

- i. Systematically justifying our recommendations;
- ii. Being ready to defend them against criticisms, even when none are formulated;
- iii. Actually enacting this defense, when we actually face criticisms.

However, as it stands, this approach has two worrying weakness. The first weakness can readily be identified by referring to the literature on epistemic injustice [13]. Some people and group have access to knowledge, others have not. The former are in a position to articulate criticisms, the latter are not. By imposing that decision scientists should be ready to defend their recommendations and enact this readiness, the above approach exposes decision science only to part of the spectrum from which criticisms can come. What if there are no criticisms addressed at us, whereas many could have been, but were not, because of epistemic injustices? Would we still feel confident in claiming that our approach materializes the idea of a quest for justifications in such a case? We do not think so. There is therefore something amiss in the above account.

Can we fix the problem by identifying a specific group of people that should be the source of criticisms, or even a procedure that should be used to encourage the formulation of such criticisms? Such an approach would not work, because it is hopeless to believe that we can once and for all identify a relevant group of people (or set of groups of people) and/or a magical procedure. We need a more astute approach.

Though incomplete, the above account contains the key to the conundrum. Indeed, this account successfully addresses a problem which is, in a sense, structurally similar to the one we are now addressing. We cannot expect to be able to articulate once and for all what a good justification is. That is why the above account does not spell out a purportedly definitive list of criteria, and rather delineates an attitude on the part of decision analysts. The same trick can do the job here again. We cannot identify once and for all a perfectly relevant group of people and/or a perfect procedure.

What we can do is identify an attitude that will be conducive to the quest for justification, and this attitude is a requirement to actively elicit criticisms. This requirement is the missing element in our account to fix its first weakness.

But this account, although completed to fix the first weakness, still has another worrying weakness, which can be captured by raising the question: when can one admit that one has produced *enough* justifications? Imagine that you have embarked in a discussion with a stakeholder who always has new criticisms to raise. In such a situation, in our logic, should one admit that you cannot stop the discussion at some point or another? This would give to your contradictor a serious advantage, which certainly is undue: if he is ill-intentioned, he can condemn you to indefinitely argue in vain.

The key to solve this new problem can be found in Sen's contribution to political philosophy. [30] interestingly distinguished two visions of justice: the transcendental vision and the comparative vision. In broad outline, when applied to the notion of justice, a transcendental vision in his jargon is one that claims to answer questions such as "what is just?", "what does justice consist in?", "which criterion can one use to decide if a given situation is just or unjust?" and so on. By contrast, a comparative vision is one that claims that such questions are unanswerable, and that the point of theories of justice is rather to address comparative questions such as "is situation  $x$  more just or less just than situation  $y$ ?" We do not claim in this article to adjudicate the credentials of an application of this account to theories of justice. We simply want to pinpoint that this structure of argument elegantly solves the remaining problem with the above account. If one admits that one cannot give a definitive answer to the question "what is a good application of decision science in a democracy?", but that this is not too bad, because the only truly relevant question is a comparative one such as "is application  $A1$  better than application  $A2$ ?", then one can appreciate the relevance of the above account.

The comparatist approach is no panacea. It is, in a sense, a deflationary approach, and we should be prepared to live with the corresponding modesty. Besides, it can arouse expectations that it cannot deliver. It is therefore

important to clarify what a comparatist reading of our approach cannot do. It does not provide a metric, no generally applicable mechanical means to compare any two applications without discussions. There is bound to be myriads of hard cases where one application of decision science will appear better than another on some respect, but worse on another respect. We do not claim to solve this problem, and doubt that it can be solved at a general level.

To sum up, the model that we recommend is that, as decision scientists, we should advocate a quest for justification that consists in:

- i. Systematically justifying our recommendations;
- ii. Being ready to defend them against criticisms, even when none are formulated;
- iii. Actively eliciting criticisms, especially from people or groups that we have good reasons to think are not spontaneously liable or willing or able to articulate such criticisms;
- iv. Actually enacting this defense, when we actually face criticisms;
- v. Understanding our own justifiability in a comparative sense.

## **8. Practical pitfalls?**

At this stage, skeptical readers will certainly think that our reasoning is a purely theoretical construct which will in all likelihood face insuperable difficulties if one tries to implement it in practice. We indeed think that practical implementability is a crucial issue. Although we cannot have the ambition in this article to definitely settle the implementability issue in all its dimensions, the present section will delve into more concrete considerations in order to sketch how our approach can overcome what we take to be the most difficult implementation challenge it faces. This challenge is the unavoidable rejoinder that the quest for justification will collapse on the pitfalls of disagreements and clashing orders of justification.

In order to address this important criticism, let us take an example. The choice of this example among myriads of possible examples unavoidably involves some arbitrariness, but we will make a point to ensure that this arbitrariness will not undermine our conclusions. The example chosen is environmental economic valuation. One might think at first sight that this example is very specific. However, this example is less reductive than one might think, and it has interesting features for the purpose of exploring the above criticism. Indeed, in practice, a very vast series of issues are actually gathered under this umbrella, and accordingly focusing on this topic means encompassing applications of economic valuation methods to a very large range of issues [18]. Besides, in recent years, the environment as a valuation object provided the opportunity for researchers to introduce many methodological innovations, which can and possibly will be applied in the years to come to many other kinds of valuation objects [3]. Therefore, environmental economic valuations actually encompass a very large array of methods, perhaps more than any other valuation object. This makes it an especially interesting example to discuss how different economic methods can be applied to similar objects and justified, which can provide relevant tests to assess the credentials of our approach.

The methods most prominently used in this domain are based on measurements of people's willingness to pay (WTP) (we will leave aside here the more anecdotal case of methods based on willingness to accept), as it can be elicited by surveys addressed at individual or revealed by these individuals' behavior on markets [23]. The first case encompasses contingent valuation and choice experiment, while the second one mainly encompasses travel cost and hedonic pricing methods. A prominent alternative which has seen numerous empirical applications to biodiversity in recent years is deliberative valuation [3]. This refers to methods based on choice-experiments or WTP questionnaires embedded in protocols of exchanges of information and discussions. These methods were originally motivated by critical discussions of the ontological assumptions underlying WTP-based valuation methods, and more recently [4] explored their positive philosophical underpinnings, referring mainly to [30]. A third, much less developed method was introduced by



[24]. Based on theories of impartialization [17] protocols and on a reading of [25]’ philosophy, this method attempts to capture the impartial preference of citizens for the funding of biodiversity conservation policies.

As opposed to WTP-based valuation methods, an interesting feature of the literature on deliberative valuation and impartial preference measurement is that this literature explicitly explores the respective normative justifications of the methods. A similar identification of normative justifications for WTP-based methods was attempted by [23], who proposed a typology of WTP-based valuation methods depending on their respective possible normative justifications. These various contributions thereby allow to draw a typology associating each method with a normative justificatory framework: impartial preference measurement is associated with Rawls’ framework, deliberative valuation with Sen’s philosophy, stated preference WTP-based methods with “welfarism” and revealed preference WTP-based methods with “endowment conservatism”. This precise definition of these normative frameworks should not concern us here, and we will accept the validity of these associations for the purpose of the argument. The important point from our point of view here is that, thanks to these elements, one can identify a series of argumentative justifications that can be deployed to defend all those kinds of methods in their application to our example.

One might be tempted to conclude that, seen through the lenses of the quest for justification, all three methods would allow decision scientists to implement and justify them, following our recommended model. The latter would accordingly seem to be entirely irrelevant in practice. More precisely, one might surmise that various people will, in all likelihood, disagree on which justification is convincing: some people will accept the justification underlying WTP-based methods, other will harshly criticize them and champion deliberative methods because they will find the justification underlying them more convincing, and so on. Such a scenario, where various groups of people adhere to different and largely irreconcilable frameworks of justifications ([7]’s “orders of justification”), is indeed considered to be a major phenomenon by some authors in environmental and social economics [9].

Though we take this criticism very seriously, we argue that it misses an

important aspect of our approach. The fact that argued justifications can be carved out for the different methods simply means that the methods can be put to the test of their acceptability by various people or groups. This raises the question: how can one know if a justification is acceptable? A natural but mistaken answer would consist in claiming that a justification qualifies as acceptable if and only if it turns out to be accepted in all the situations in which it can be applied. However, here again, how can one perform that kind of test? At best one can say whether applications of a given methods *have so far been accepted*, but this leaves aside all possible but non actual applications, and replaces acceptability by acceptance (falling in the trap that Habermas had earmarked in his criticism of Rawls).

This insuperable problem suggests that, if our approach were applied to methods, it would indeed collapse due to the empirical fact highlighted by the literature on “orders of justification”: this fact is that various groups typically refer to different and largely irreconcilable orders of justifications, which can (according to some authors at least) be formalized as sets of normative axioms accepted by some groups but rejected by others. Accordingly, the question of whether the justification underlying a given method is acceptable is too general and abstract to be answered. But such a general acceptability of the justification of a method is not what our recommended model is about. Far from being a concrete challenge to our supposedly too abstract account, the “orders of justification” criticism only appears challenging because it raises an all too abstract problem.

Our recommended model, as articulated above, does not refer to methods or methodological frameworks, it talks about what happens in concrete decision aiding processes (understood in the sense spelled out in [33]). Decision aiding processes are concrete sets of continued interactions between decision analysts, decision-makers and concerned stakeholders. Because our recommended model is about concrete decision aiding processes, the important element in our approach is not the putative general justification underlying the methods used, but rather the justification that can be articulated for the specific usages of the methods put to use at this or that stage during the decision aiding process. Coming back to our example of environ-

mental economic valuations, the various methods mentioned about can be used for very different purposes at various stages in concrete decision aiding processes. Stated and revealed preferences studies are often used to feed cost-benefit analyses [19]. However, as emphasized by [23], the very same monetary valuations can just as well be used as arguments to strengthen public awareness of the importance of the object they value [28], or to put a provisional figure on the impact that various kinds of actions can have on various groups of stakeholders, or in many other ways. In these various cases, the justification that can be developed can take advantage of the general justification underlying the method used, but it can also integrate many other elements pertaining the context, and the specific usage of the method within the particular decision aiding process.

Claiming that our approach is impractical because it is hopeless to find decision aiding methods that will prove acceptable with respect to all the “orders of justification” is therefore irrelevant. This irrelevant criticism however suggest another, more powerful rejoinder that deserves to be addressed as well. This possible criticism would claim that, even within a concrete decision process, when a decision scientist sets himself to articulate a justification and fulfill the requirements i-v of our framework, it is highly likely that in most cases he will face at one stage or another someone who will stick to a given “order of justification”, and whatever the decision scientist’s effort to discuss the justification of his recommendation, and the reasons why some of the axioms underlying his interlocutor’s “order of justification” should be abandoned, still his interlocutor will reject his justification.

We perfectly agree that such difficult situations can happen, and are prepared to admit that they might often happen. However, taking such situations to be fatal pitfalls for our approach would be confusing two largely disconnected issues: on the one hand, the issue that we address in this article, which is the one of the normative status of decision science interventions, and on the other hand, the issue of the possibility to generate consensual decisions. If a decision scientist in a concrete decision process articulates a justification for his recommendation but, whatever his efforts, he always faces the stubborn resistance of some groups, one cannot take this failure

of consensus to prove that the decision scientist failed. If he neglected to articulate a justification, then he failed; if he developed a justification but a more justified recommendation was developed by someone else, then he failed; by contrast, if he pursued as far as he could the quest for justification but faced the resistance of someone sticking to moral realism with respect to a given “order of justification”, then it cannot be said to have failed.

We do not deny that issues such as how consensual group decisions can be generated, or in which conditions will there be this or that pattern of moral realism among sets of groups of decision-makers and stakeholders, are important. Quite the contrary, we think that decision science approaches which would be able to tackle such issues would be considerably more justifiable. What we claim is that such issues go well beyond the requirements encapsulated in our recommended model of the proper place of decision science.

## 9. Conclusion

In this article, we have introduced a normative account of the role of decision science in a democracy. For that purpose, we have emphasized the failure of various strategies designed to allow decision scientists to eschew value-judgements, flight “substance” and remain normatively neutral. Such attempts take the crude forms of a failed model of economics as pure science and a failed model of decision science as a transparent norm translator, and the subtler form of a model that endorses pure proceduralism to arrange a place for a purportedly value-neutral decision science upstream democracy.

We have strived to demonstrate that all these models fail, which has led us to delve into an inquiry into a basic structure of moral reasoning, unveiling an important contrast between “moral realism” and the “quest for justifications”. Because this inquiry drove us to recommend the latter, and because the latter can accordingly inform a normatively entrenched vision of decision sciences upstream democracy, we ended up recommending this model

It is clearly part of our hope that this account of the normative stance of decision sciences will not come as a surprise for most decision scientists,

and is rather liable to gather large support among them. However, though we accordingly expect that most decision scientist will agree with us at this stage, we surmise that most of them do not have clearly articulated ideas about the concrete implications of this basic normative stance. This is why the last section was devoted to develop such a concrete account, whose actual implementation might prove more disrupting for decision sciences practices than the cheer endorsement of our abstract normative account.

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