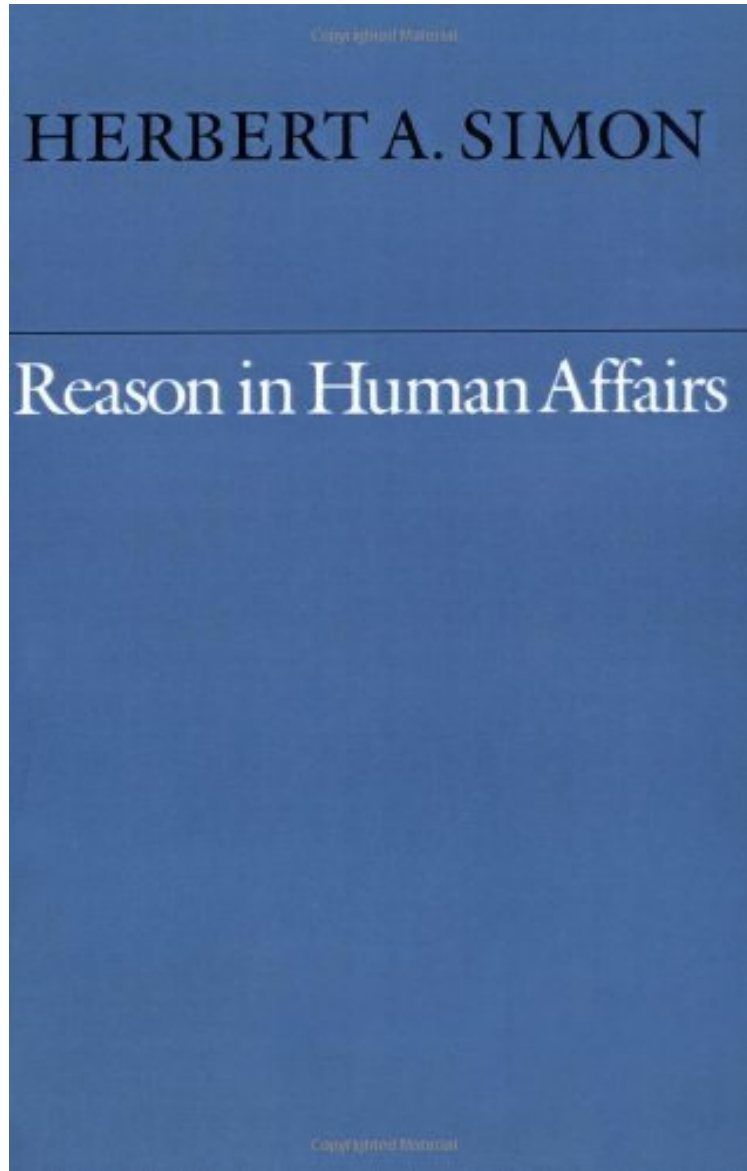


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Reason in Human Affairs

Herbert Simon

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Herbert Simon : Reason in Human Affairs before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Reason in Human Affairs:

7 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Thoughts on optimization in human affairs By Jordan Bell The first chapter presents the idea that in making optimal decisions we should take the costs of making decision into account, and that therefore in making decisions what we actually do is not optimize taking everything in existence and for all eternity into account, but only a small number of variables. This leads to a discussion of the importance of emotions

for focusing our attention. Something that I don't understand is what Simon says on p. 35, that "The intuitive theory, I have argued, is in fact a component of the behavioral theory". It seems like the intuitive theory is just an addition to the behavioral theory, and I worry therefore that I am missing something. In the second chapter, on pp. 66-72, Simon explains how the process of evolution optimizes locally but not necessarily globally. He calls this a "myopic kind of rationality". I think this book is well worth reading, and I intend to read more of Simon's works. The following are two insightful statements from the first chapter. "We live in what might be called a nearly empty world- one in which there are millions of variables that in principle could affect each other but that most of the time don't.... Perhaps there is actually a very dense network of interconnections in the world, but in most of the situations we face we can detect only a most number of variables or considerations that dominate" (p. 20) "If I were in a position where I had to defend the role of the humanities in education, to provide an argument for something like the traditional liberal arts curriculum of the early twentieth century, I would argue for them on the grounds that most human beings are able to attend to issues longer, to think harder about them, to receive deeper impressions that last longer, if information is presented in a context of emotion- a sort of hot dressing- than if it is presented wholly without affect." (p. 32) 13 of 15 people found the following review helpful. Lucid tour of the role of reason in human society by a Nobel laureate and one of the most influential social scientists - but .By Frank T. Manheim Most trade books offer flattering reviews or comments on their back cover. We learn to take these with a grain of salt. However, I find Simon's book to more than deserve its praise. To be sure, it's hubris on my part to utter judgments on the work of a 1978 Nobel Prize winner ("for decision-making processes in economic organizations") and highly respected author and advisor to governments and major businesses. But that's the wonderful breakthrough created by Jeff Bezos at . He took any and all books - no matter the reputation or standing of their authors - and opened them up to be weighed and judged by any and all of us! What could be more democratic - and often interesting and insightful. The four chapter titles may sound forbidding to nonspecialists: "Alternative visions of rationality", "Rationality and teleology", and "Rational processes in social affairs". But once past the entry gate, this slender, 128 page book offers treats for the intellectually curious person who might be intimidated by terms like "teleology" and formal analysis of logic or reason. Simon takes us on a tour of big names, developments and problems of modern society, like artificial intelligence, "behavioral model of rationality", creativity, bureaucracies, evolution, Great Depression, Milton Friedman, management science, Karl Marx, sociobiology. He explains them or gives historical references, and shows their underpinnings and relationships in language, logic, and examples that are mostly easy to understand. Simon is a master of what I call "the leveraged observation". By this I mean examples that yield generalized insights of those one could expect from single examples. For example, Simon illustrates the limitations of purely rational processes with Adolf Hitler's book, "Mein Kampf". Simon found that if, for the sake of argument, we accept Hitler's premises and data - e.g. racial superiority, the scheming of the Jews, etc., his reasoning processes are more than adequate to produce convincing conclusions. The problem, of course, was Hitler's skewed assumptions. The devastating results of Hitler's influence, not only for his victims but also Germany thus underscores the critical importance of examining both underlying assumptions as well as rational analysis in a way that would be harder to establish from less definitive cases, e.g. U.S.'s political gridlock. Having said these good things, my own recent research brings up some chastening reflections on the role of the author and this book in U.S. society. Simon was a polymath, equally adept at theory and applications. He roved over many fields including mathematics and decisionmaking for businesses. Some biographers consider him America's most influential social scientist. What does the fact that my review seems to be the first for a book of exceptional quality and wisdom, published 19 years ago say about the reception and retention of good thinking in America today? Moreover already before his death in 2001 lapses in judgment and ethic had grown in the U.S. business world to levels not seen since the Gilded Age of the 1880s (e.g. ENRON). So what - if anything - has been the role of the social sciences in helping the U.S. understand human interactions and avoid major mistakes. It's a bit discouraging to reflect that even if we had a book containing all the answers to our current economic crisis, it would likely be buried among tens of thousands of books with similar themes. This should really be something for academics to chew on

What can reason (or more broadly, thinking) do for us and what can't it do? This is the question examined by Herbert A. Simon, who received the 1978 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences "for his pioneering work on decision-making processes in economic organizations." The ability to apply reason to the choice of actions is supposed to be one of the defining characteristics of our species. In the first two chapters, the author explores the nature and limits of human reason, comparing and evaluating the major theoretical frameworks that have been erected to explain reasoning processes. He also discusses the interaction of thinking and emotion in the choice of our actions. In the third and final chapter, the author applies the theory of bounded rationality to social institutions and human behavior, and points out the problems created by limited attention span human inability to deal with more than one difficult problem at a time. He concludes that we must recognize the limitations on our capabilities for rational choice and pursue goals that, in

their tentativeness and flexibility, are compatible with those limits.