

## **Value Rationality in Policy Analysis**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The policy analysis literature has increasingly discussed how research and analysis promote value rationality as well as instrumental rationality. This paper argues that existing discussions of value rationality in policy analysis exhibit a bias towards abstraction in their conception of ethical knowledge, and it proposes an alternative conception that makes room for neglected approaches to value rational policy analysis. Drawing from the philosophical literature about ethical reasoning, I argue that good conceptions of policy goals are those that satisfy a test of reflective equilibrium, in that they are consistent with a wide range of firm convictions that analysts and stakeholders have—not just the abstract principles of political theory like justice, liberty, and the rule of law that the policy literature has emphasized, but also concrete judgments about what should be done in particular cases, as well as mid-level normative principles specific to particular policy issues. This view suggests that policy research can (and does) contribute to value rationality not only through canonical forms of moral and political philosophy but also through the development and analysis of case studies, as well as through engagement with discourses of applied ethics.

**Keywords:** Values, rationality, policy analysis

Policy researchers and policy analysts aim to make public policy and management more rational. To make sense of that aspiration—to determine the kinds of analyses that will advance it—they must settle on an understanding of what “rationality” means. Historically, the most influential conception of rationality in policy analysis has been the instrumental (or means-end) conception of rationality, in which determining whether a policy is rational is a matter of determining whether it efficiently and effectively accomplishes given goals; the goals themselves cannot be either rational or irrational (Russell 1954: 8). Thus, the mainstream of policy research has tried to determine how different factors affect specific ends that are presumed to be important to public policy (such as the crime rate, traffic congestion, employment, or democratization), and many policy analysis texts have emphasized the techniques of instrumental analysis rather than techniques for identifying policy goals (Stokey and Zeckhauser 1978; Munger 2000). More recently, however, many scholars have discussed the role that policy analysts and researchers can play in clarifying policy goals (Weiner and Vining 1999; MacRae and Whittington 1997; Stone 1997). From that perspective, the choice of effective means is an important component of policy rationality, but it does not exhaust our capacity for rational analysis. What it leaves out can be called *value rationality*—reasoning not about the best means to given ends but about what the ends themselves should be.

This shift in the policy analysis field reflects a shift in the philosophical literature about practical reasoning, which has also increasingly questioned the equation of rationality with instrumental rationality (Richardson 1997; Millgram 1998; Searle 2001). As I will argue in this paper, however, recent ideas about value rationality in the policy analysis literature have not yet incorporated important lessons from philosophical discussions of value rationality. In particular, I will draw on the philosophical literature to argue that good conceptions of policy values satisfy a test of reflective equilibrium (Rawls 1951, 1971, 1999), in that they are consistent with a wide range of convictions that analysts and stakeholders have—not just the abstract principles of moral and political theory that policy analysts have emphasized but also concrete judgments about what should be done in particular cases and mid-level principles specific to particular policy issues. This idea is an important corrective to existing views of value

rationality in policy analysis, which often exhibit a bias towards abstraction in their conceptions of ethical knowledge.

This enterprise is important because it has implications for our understanding of how research and analysis can help make public policy more rational. On the instrumentalist view, the main way to improve public policy is to find better means of pursuing the goals that already occupy prominent places in policymaking. On the value rational view, important innovations may come about by identifying better conceptions of what the goals should be in the first place. On the particular view of value rationality this paper presents, policy research can improve public policy not only through the analysis and application of abstract philosophical ideals like liberty, justice, and the rule of law (Weiner and Vining 1999; Stone 1997; Anderson 1979; Fischer 1982) but also through case study research that draws vivid pictures of what policy problems and policy consequences look like and through analyses of mid-level principles specific to particular policy fields. As I note in the conclusion, some policy research has already pursued these aims; one goal of this paper is to legitimize that work and clarify the nature of its contribution.

## **1. Values in the Policy Analysis Literature**

Although classic accounts of policy analysis focus almost exclusively on the toolkits of instrumental rationality (Stokey and Zeckhauser 1978), and some recent policy analysis texts continue to say little about the choice of policy goals (Munger 2000), by the late 1970s many scholars already recognized that policy analysts play an important role in helping to define policy goals (Anderson 1979; Rein 1976). An emerging body of literature has examined how they should perform this role.

One influential view holds that policy analysts should consult directly with policymakers to determine what *they* think the goals of public policy should be. This view takes many forms. Evaluation scholars advise analysts to make contact with all stakeholders affected by a policy to “discover all of the outcomes that might affect their assessment of worth” (Mohr 1999: 215). Advocates of Q-methodology suggest that policy analysts should administer questionnaires to policymakers to draw out the meaning they attribute to goals like “fairness” (Steelman and Maguire 1999; Durning 1999). Practicing policy researchers and analysts try to discern the goals that policymakers hope to achieve by poring carefully

over the statements they have made in statutes, program descriptions, and legislative debates (Roth *et. al.* 2000: ch. 2; U.S. Sentencing Commission 2002: ch. 1). Critical theorists and deliberative democrats recommend that analysts should convene broad discussions about policy problems so that all relevant stakeholders can express their values and clarify them through public discussion (Forester 1985).

These traditions rightly give policymakers a central role in defining policy goals, but they cannot stand alone because policymakers often hold conflicted or even incoherent views about policy goals (Rein 1976: 62). For example, a mayor may tell her transportation analysts that she wants to minimize traffic congestion, but she may also believe that (everything else being equal) a short commute in heavy traffic is preferable to a long commute at free-flow speeds. The trouble, which I will discuss in detail below, is that these two convictions conflict with one another (Levine 2002). In a situation like this, an analyst cannot just take policy goals to be what policymakers say they are because policymakers have no fully coherent view about the matter: To honor this policymaker's overt views about the goals of transportation policy is to dishonor other, more concrete commitments she holds. Consequently, the analyst must determine which way of understanding the goals of transportation policy best honors the complex set of convictions that policymakers hold about transportation (Dworkin 1986: 57). In effect, policymakers in these situations have *unfinished* preferences about policy goals (Thacher and Rein 2004), and analysts cannot move on to their instrumental analyses until they have made at least a *de facto* decision regarding how to finish them. Unfortunately, unfinished preferences of this sort are common (Searle 2001: 249-58).

Recognizing that analysts can (and often must) contribute to value rationality in policy choice, some scholars have already examined how they should go about doing that. Most of this literature advises analysts to take guidance from broad and abstract normative ideals.<sup>1</sup> For example, Charles Anderson (1979) argued that all policy choices must be consistent with three unavoidable criteria for

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<sup>1</sup> A useful exception is MacRae and Whittington (1997: 69-70), which suggests that analysts can also draw from more specific ideals—particularly the “ethical values that are implicit in the work of many disciplines and professions. Public health, education, and social work, for example, respectively incorporate the general value criteria of health, learning, and the well-being of the poor.” They do not, however, consider how policy researchers can generate and justify these ideals in the first place, and how analysts can do so in cases where experts have not.

evaluating public action—justice, legality, and efficiency—and Frank Fischer argued that policy goals are subject to what he called “systems vindication”, by which he meant analysis of the consequences that a set of values have for a whole way of life (Fischer 1982). Similarly, when policy analysis texts discuss how analysts should define policy goals, they typically list general political ideals like equality, justice, and liberty that influence policy judgments, asking analysts to consider how policies contribute to or undermine these ideals (Weimer and Vining 1999: 141 ff.; Bardach 2000: 20 ff; Stone 1997). Finally, welfare economic methodologies like benefit-cost analysis rely on an abstract utilitarian ideal—the ideal that policy ought to maximize the aggregate sum of individual welfare. On all of these accounts, value rationality involves an appeal to a “higher principle” (Fischer 1982: 193; cf. Anderson 1979: 714).

In some cases value rationality does take that form, but in many other cases we criticize or defend policy values by testing their consistency with more concrete judgments rather than more abstract ones (Sen 1980: 197). That is sometimes a reasonable approach because we are often more certain about concrete judgments about what should be done in particular cases than we are about the abstract principles that justify them (Jonsen and Toulmin 1988). Regardless, normative analysis should attend mainly to the firmness of our convictions rather than their generality—a distinction that has often been overlooked (Richardson 1997: 138). The rest of this paper draws out the implications of this point for value rational policy analysis. In doing so, it offers a conception of value rationality that encompasses but also extends the conception offered by recent policy analysis literature, viewing Fischer’s “higher principles” as one but only one element of our normative understanding.

## **2. Value Rationality as the Pursuit of Reflective Equilibrium**

When a policymaker or analyst has a conviction about what the goals of a public policy should be, that conviction typically has implications for other convictions at different levels of abstraction. For example, everything else being equal:

- A conviction that the goal of transportation policy is to minimize congestion implies that a 15-minute commute in traffic is worse than a one-hour commute at free-flow speeds, even if the destinations of the two commutes are equally-valuable (Levine 2001).

- A conviction that housing is affordable if it costs less than 30% the occupants' income implies that affordable housing policy has more reason to subsidize a household earning \$20,000 per year whose rent payments (at 35% of income) leave \$13,000 for food, clothing, and other necessities than it does to subsidize the same sized household earning \$10,000 whose rent payments (at 30% of income) leave only \$7,000 for those expenses (Stone 1993).

As these two examples suggest, overt definitions of policy values are typically entangled in a larger constellation of convictions about a policy issue. That larger constellation usually encompasses a range of abstract and concrete commitments, some of them as yet undiscovered because we have not yet considered all the concrete situations or abstract ideals for which our current definition of policy values has implications. In this sense, our normative commitments about the goals of public policy are, in Ronald Dworkin's apt phrase, "complex and structured" (1986: 56).

The structure of our normative convictions provides the basis for value rational policy analysis because a policymaker or analyst's overt understanding of policy goals can be held to answer to other convictions she has, either about the specific policy issue in question or about the obligations of government in general. Value rationality in policy analysis can be conceived as a process of bringing an agent's other convictions to bear on her definition of policy goals in the most satisfactory way.

That process resembles John Rawls's widely-endorsed method of reflective equilibrium (Rawls 1951, 1971, 1999; Daniels 1996; Harman 2003). Rawls argued that we criticize and improve existing views about normative ideals by reflecting on their relationship to a wide range of other abstract and concrete commitments that we hold. In the process, we try to bring everything into harmony by revising convictions that come to seem misguided once we have examined them in the light of our other beliefs. The search for reflective equilibrium begins by identifying a set of considered judgments—normative judgments made under favorable conditions, in that they are not (for example) colored by our own self-interest or clouded by our emotions (Rawls 1971: 47; but see Richardson 1997: 187). These judgments serve as provisional fixed points that a satisfactory conception of any normative ideal strives to account for, though the process of reflection may lead us to revise the judgments we began with. Rawls writes:

People have considered judgments at all levels of generality, from those about particular situations and institutions up through broad standards and first principles to formal and abstract conditions on moral conceptions. One tries to see how people would fit their various convictions into one coherent scheme, each considered conviction whatever its level having a certain initial credibility. By dropping and revising some, by reformulating and expanding others, one supposes that a systematic organization can be found. Although in order to get started various judgments are viewed as firm enough to be taken provisionally as fixed points, there are no judgments on any level of generality that are in principle immune to revision (1999: 239).

This last idea, that initial judgments may change in the course of reflection, is especially important. The method of reflective equilibrium is a process of reflection in that it counsels us to explore hitherto-unexamined relationships among our convictions—to examine each conviction in the light of the others, asking whether other beliefs give us reasons to change the conviction in question. In effect, we aim to discover and resolve previously-unrecognized conflicts among our convictions by searching for reasons in areas of our thought that we have not yet brought to bear on the issue at hand (Richardson 1997: 174 ff.) and, in some cases, that we had not yet even developed (Millgram 1998). If that process leads us to change our definition of a policy goal, the change is rational because we had good reasons to make it, in the sense that other commitments we held more strongly supported the change (though we did not notice these reasons before trying to find a reflective equilibrium). Relying on reasons in this manner is the essence of rationality (Toulmin 1958; Anderson 1979; Richardson 1997: 175 ff).<sup>2</sup>

No algorithm can say how we should resolve the conflicts this process uncovers (Searle 2001: xv). When two convictions conflict, it is up to the person whose convictions they are to decide which one is most firm on reflection and which, if any, should be revised. This need to rely on intuition at some point during the search for reflective equilibrium limits our ability to give a fully explicit justification for many conclusions we reach about values (Richardson 1989: 189). That, however, is a limitation of rationality in general, not value rationality in particular (Searle 2001: 90-1); for example, the same

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<sup>2</sup> Some philosophers have criticized reflective equilibrium as a “coherence” view of reasoning—one that pursues an aesthetic ideal of consistency to no useful end, amounting to little more than the organization of our existing prejudices into a self-supporting whole (Brandt 1979). But the point of reflective equilibrium is not to favor coherence in the abstract; it is simply that when (and only when) one of our convictions conflicts the others, we have a reason to revisit it. In this connection, it is worth noting that the method of reflective equilibrium implicitly assumes that justification focuses on *changes* in convictions, not the convictions themselves, which only require justification—indeed only admit to it—if we have a specific reason to distrust them; we have no alternative but to begin with the convictions we begin with (Harman 2003; Larmore 1987: 158; Scanlon 1998: 70; Dworkin 1996).



limitation plagues inductive and deductive reasoning in science (Goodman 1955: 63-4). In any case, the only way to avoid relying on intuitive judgments about which conviction should prevail in cases where different convictions conflict would be to set out an unrevisable, foundational principle that must always govern reasoning, and that solution seems inconsistent with the spirit of open inquiry. On the approach to normative analysis I am describing, anything is ultimately open to revision if we find good reasons in our other convictions to do so. On the foundationalist alternative, we aim to deduce particular judgments from unshakeable foundations that are not themselves subject to revision (Larmore 1987: 29). It is hard to see what could justify the special status that those foundations would need to have, and that challenge explains why foundationalist approaches to moral reasoning (and indeed foundationalist approaches to all kinds of knowledge) often collapse into skepticism (Harman 2003).

This somewhat abstruse philosophical point suggests a major weakness in the approaches to value rationality in policy analysis I summarized earlier. Each of those approaches implicitly presumes that if we reach some suitably high level of abstraction, we will eventually identify firm normative axioms (e.g. the axiom that policy ought to maximize the aggregate sum of individual welfare) from which all other normative judgments can be deduced as theorems. There is no reason to believe that any such self-evident truth can be found, and even if there were, it would be dogmatic to insist that the truth of any particular principle was so certain that we should not subject it to the kind of questioning suggested by the method of reflective equilibrium (Richardson 1997: 176).

#### *Reflective Equilibrium in Policy Analysis Practice*

Rawls himself used the method of reflective equilibrium to clarify the concept of “justice”, but it serves equally well to analyze less rarefied policy ideals. Recent literature in transportation policy offers an (unintentional) example. Despite its reputation as a particularly technocratic field of policy analysis, one of the most significant developments in the transportation field over the past decade involved a value-rational analysis of what its goals should be rather than a new technique for accomplishing existing goals. Transportation planners have historically presumed that a good transportation system is one that minimizes congestion (or conversely, one that maximizes mobility)—one that has few bottlenecks where

vehicles remain stuck in traffic. For autos, the central evaluative measure used in traffic planning practice is the volume-to-capacity ratio, which is defined for a specific piece of road as the ratio between existing traffic volume to design capacity. A high volume-to-capacity ratio is taken to indicate that some intervention is necessary (for example, an increase in capacity, an increase in public transportation options, or a shift in land uses to change commute patterns), and a reduction in the ratio counts as an improvement. In that sense, mobility is the guiding value of transportation planning. It has dominated day-to-day transportation policy decisions at the local level, in the sense that policy interventions aim to reduce congestion and they are evaluated with respect to how well they accomplish that goal, and it has also guided transportation policy research.

A number of scholars and practitioners have recently argued that mobility is the wrong goal for transportation policy. Edward Banfield made a version of this argument in the 1960s, concluding that the alleged “problem” of traffic congestion was not really a problem at all (Wilson 1999). More recently, scholars within the transportation research community have echoed Banfield’s conclusion. For example, Jonathan Levine has argued that the mobility standard offers perverse advice in simple cases:

Compare, for example, the extreme cases of the fifteen-minute commute that includes eight minutes of delay and the hour-long commute that flies by at free-flow speeds. Though most people would prefer the shorter trip, current planning models and indicator statistics construe it to be the problem because of the congestion it entails. Commutes akin to the longer journey, which most would find the more onerous of the two, paradoxically represent the transportation system working as it should (Levine 2002: 12).

Even if the destinations in the two commutes are equally valuable—for example, even if they represent the locations of two potential jobs that the commuter otherwise finds equally attractive—the mobility paradigm perversely favors the longer commute just because it encounters no congestion along the way.

This muddled conclusion points toward other flaws in the mobility paradigm. As Levine and Garb note, “an axiom of modern transportation planning is the notion that transportation is a ‘derived demand’, that is, people rarely consume transportation for the pleasure of movement per se, but rather travel in order to reach opportunities available at destinations” (Levine and Garb 2002: 2). But the mobility standard is inconsistent with this axiom, since it values free movement rather than the ability to reach destinations. As a result, the mobility standard may generate perverse policy effects, causing

destinations to move further apart in a way that adds to transportation burdens rather than alleviating them. Thus in reference to his two hypothetical commutes, Levine writes: “In our attempts to fix the first kind of trip, we create increasing numbers of the second kind” (2002: 12).

In response to these difficulties, many scholars have argued that transportation analysts should replace their concern for *mobility* with a concern for *accessibility*—roughly, the ease with which individuals can reach the destinations they value highly, regardless of the level of congestion that they experience along the way. This is not the place to explain the meaning of “accessibility” in detail; suffice it to say that an important strand of transportation research today aims to develop appropriate conceptualizations and measures of accessibility and to reassess different transportation and land use policies to determine how well they promote it (e.g. Handy and Niemeyer 1997; Martínez 1995; Miller 1999). This reconceptualization of transportation policy’s goals has shaped general policy research that aims to settle basic issues of theory and measurement, but it has also arisen in more applied policy evaluations. For example, Levine and Garb (2002) elaborate and defend the accessibility standard in the context of their analysis of congestion pricing policies, recognizing that in order to assess congestion pricing adequately, it is first necessary to identify the goals such policies should serve. In the end, Levine and Garb show that any judgment about whether congestion pricing is a good idea depends on the choice of policy goals: Congestion pricing is unambiguously desirable if the policy goal is to reduce congestion, but it is only desirable when it is implemented in specific ways if the goal is to promote accessibility. Consequently, analysts concerned with the assessment and design of congestion pricing policies must engage the debate about whether transportation policy should aim for accessibility or mobility.

The shift from mobility to accessibility as a guiding goal of transportation policy illustrates how policy research can improve public policy not by identifying better means to existing ends, but by identifying better ends to pursue in the first place. Moreover, it illustrates how the method of reflective equilibrium can contribute to this process. The criticisms of the mobility paradigm I just described use concrete and general convictions that are likely to be shared by both analysts and policymakers to overturn an existing view about policy goals: They show that the mobility standard gives perverse advice

in simple cases like Levine’s two commutes and that it is inconsistent with the mid-level conviction that transportation is derived demand. In this respect, this literature has asked transportation analysts to consider implications of the mobility goal for other convictions to which they had not previously connected it. (Indeed, it seems to be precisely because few people had examined the implications of the mobility paradigm for other convictions that this demonstrably defective conception of transportation goals could survive so long.) In that sense, it has promoted a more reflective conception of policy goals—one that can claim to occupy a higher plane of value rationality, though of course that conclusion can always be overturned by new arguments.<sup>3</sup>

The affordable housing example also illustrates how the method of reflective equilibrium can help clarify policy goals. One goal of affordable housing policy is to increase the number of households whose housing is affordable, and traditionally housing policy analysts have defined “affordable housing” as housing that costs less than a fixed percentage of the household’s income (currently the accepted standard is 30%). In 1993, Michael Stone pointed out that the percent-of-income standard does not fit easily with a range of other convictions about housing and social policy: (1) For a variety of reasons (Stone 1993: 2), housing costs typically make the first claim on household income, so other expenditures have to adjust to what is left, (2) A large household requires more money to meet its non-shelter needs than a smaller household, and (3) A wealthy household requires about the same amount of money to meet its non-shelter needs as a poor household of the same size (Stone 1993: 34). The example I gave earlier illustrates how these convictions conflict with the percentage-of-income standard. On that standard, there is more reason to subsidize a household earning \$20,000 per year whose rent payments leave \$13,000 for other needs than to subsidize the same sized household earning \$10,000 whose rent payments leave only \$7,000 for those expenses—a conclusion that conflicts with point (3) (Stone 1994: 450). This error (if it

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<sup>3</sup> In particular, a defender of the mobility paradigm might argue that the accessibility standard adds nothing unless added road capacity affects land use patterns (*e.g.*, by causing sprawl). If it does not, mobility improvements will almost always translate into accessibility improvements, and the distinction is worthless. In that case, mobility would be a better standard just because it is usually simpler for practitioners to operationalize. If successful (*i.e.* if

is an error) may have important policy implications, since major federal housing subsidy programs like HOME and the Low Income Housing Tax Credit tend to subsidize the first kind of household rather than the second (Nelson 1994), and in that sense they may be targeting the less urgent problem.

Finding percent-of-income standards flawed, Stone proposed an alternative that he called the “shelter poverty” standard. According to that standard, housing is affordable just in case it leaves a household with enough income to meet other needs at a minimum level of adequacy, as defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ “Lower Budgets” (1993: 36). Stone did not derive this standard from an abstract theory like utilitarianism or Rawls’s two principles of justice, and he did not argue that it better comports with unavoidable norms of legality, justice, or efficiency. Instead he appealed to the kinds of mid-level principles and concrete convictions I have noted, provisionally arguing that his shelter poverty standard fits better with those principles and convictions than the percentage-of-income standard.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Does Value Rational Policy Analysis Undermine Democracy?*

I have argued that the method of reflective equilibrium offers a useful way for policy analysts to introduce a measure of value rationality into the definition of policy goals. That claim is likely to elicit an important objection: That my argument gives experts too much power to shape public policy. If policy analysts can criticize both ends *and* means, it seems that they will simply invent policy on their own, unconstrained by policymaker views altogether.

The developments in the policy analysis literature summarized at the beginning of section 1 have vitiated this objection considerably. Since the 1970s, most policy analysis scholars have acknowledged that analysts can (and indeed must) help to define policy goals (Anderson 1979; Macrae and Whittington 1997; Weiner and Vining 1999; Bardach 2000). The question is no longer whether policy analysts

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supported by the necessary scientific evidence), this argument would overturn the accessibility standard but not the method of reflective equilibrium; indeed it is an example of that method.

<sup>4</sup> Stone also noted that compared with the 30%-of-income standard, the shelter poverty standard counts essentially the same *number* of households living in unaffordable housing; its contribution lies in the fact that it describes a different *distribution* of those households, one that is more concentrated among large households and the poor (1993: 44). If current housing policy based on the percent-of-income standard expresses a conviction that government can only help a limited number of households, the shelter policy standard is not inconsistent with it.

contribute to the definition of policy goals but how they should do so. I have answered that question in a different way than other proponents of value rational policy analysis, but I believe that if anything, the distinctive features of my view help to alleviate the concern at hand rather than exacerbating it.

The objection I am considering is not specific to the idea of value rational policy analysis but is a generic concern about all efforts to give experts influence over public policy. That concern can be expressed as a dilemma: Policymakers and other stakeholders have views about what they hope public policy will accomplish, and policy analysts should not disregard those views completely because they are helping to make policy for the whole polity, not just for themselves; at the same time, analysts hope to make public policy more rational by bringing analysis to bear on its formulation, so they must have room to make their own independent judgments about whether a policy is rational.

The instrumentalist conception of policy analysis resolved this dilemma by restricting analysts' attention to the means of public policy. On that view, analysts could criticize policies as irrational, but in a way that linked up with policymakers' own views, conceptualized as their "ends". Value rational policy analysis needs a similar account of its logic, one that explains how policy analysis links up with policymakers' views without foreclosing all room for analysts to make their own judgments. It is not clear that recent discussions of value rationality in policy analysis have met this challenge. If we continue to conceptualize policymakers' views about what they hope public policy will accomplish in terms of their "ends", policy analysts can only contribute to value rationality by substituting their own convictions about policy goals for those held by policymakers.<sup>5</sup> In that case, value rational policy analysis will come at the expense of analysts' commitments to pay attention to policymaker views.

The conception of ethical knowledge that I have relied on throughout this paper suggests an alternative idea about the way policy analysis can link up with policymaker views and still leave room for

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, insofar as recent literature suggests that policy analysts play an independent role in defining policy goals (i.e. other than consulting with policymakers to learn *their* definition of policy goals), they suggest that policy analysts must sometimes substitute their own, better-informed and more public-regarding views about the goals of public policy for policymakers' views (MacRae and Whittington 1997: 71). I do not mean to imply that

value rational analysis. Where the instrumentalist conception of policy analysis conceived policymaker views about what they hope public policy will accomplish as fixed and definite “ends”, I have suggested that policymakers have a wide variety of convictions at many levels of abstraction—some best described as ends, others as means, and still others as both or neither (Searle 2001: 126)—and all these convictions are only provisional. In particular, a policymaker’s overt definition of a policy goal is a provisional conviction that can be held to answer to other convictions that she holds. The threefold task of value rational policy analysis, illustrated by the transportation and housing examples, is to surface the relevant policymaker convictions (either directly from policymaker statements or through a sincere attempt at empathetic understanding), to identify unexamined conflicts among those convictions, and to resolve these conflicts in appropriate ways by proposing revisions to existing convictions—including convictions about the definition of policy goals. This effort cannot be value neutral because (among other things) it unavoidably invokes the analyst’s own views about which way of resolving the tensions inherent a policymaker’s complex set of convictions is most desirable or justifiable.<sup>6</sup> That does not, however, mean that the analyst relies entirely on her own views about policy goals because stakeholder convictions play an important negative role: Sometimes the analyst will have good reasons to think that the policymaker would reject a definition of policy goals that she finds attractive, and where possible she should work with convictions the policymaker is likely to endorse (cf. Dworkin 1986: 57). In that sense, the analyst does exercise value rationality, but in a way that joins up with and is constrained by policymaker convictions.

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that is never a good idea. I only mean to point out that my own view of value rationality *also* makes room for other, potentially less-problematic ways in which analysts can rationally redefine policy goals.

<sup>6</sup> This is a crucial difference between my view and the view I discussed at the beginning of section 1—the view that policy analysts should consult directly with policymakers to determine how *they* define policy goals. That view assumes that policymakers already have a fixed and definite conviction about the goals of public policy, and the analyst’s (value-neutral) task is to determine what that conviction is—a task that hardly even merits notice except in cases where policymakers have stated their goals ambiguously. By contrast, I claim that even if a policymaker makes a clear statement that defines policy goals, value rational policy analysis may question that definition if it seems to conflict with other convictions that the policymaker is likely to hold. Thus, a policymaker cannot simply announce or imply that the goals of transportation policy *just are* the promotion of mobility, even if she believes it when she says it and intends to communicate just that. At the least, a defensible statement about policy goals should be generally consistent with the complex of other assumptions, commitments, and practices that this policymaker will support. The difference between my view and the view discussed at the beginning of section 1 resembles the difference between Dworkin’s (1986) “conversational” and “constructive” approaches to interpretation.

All of that said, there is a simpler response to the objection at hand. The argument of this paper does not imply that analysts' authority to *implement* their definition of policy goals should be expanded. Political leaders have final say in defining the goals of public policy, just as they also have final say in determining the means of public policy. My claim here is modest: Just as policy analysts can sometimes offer useful advice that identifies better means to given ends, there are reasons to believe they can also sometimes offer useful advice that identifies better ends to pursue in the first place. Democracy is distinguished from technocracy by the proposition that the polity should have the authority to reject *either* type of advice. Indeed, democracy requires something more robust than the objection at hand envisions. To restrict policy analysis to a focus on means would not, by itself, provide a sufficient bulwark against technocracy—not least because ends and means can rarely be disentangled (Rein 1976; Putnam 2002). The technocratic threat is not best resolved by a distinction between expertly-chosen means and democratically-chosen ends but by a distinction between politically-accountable decisionmaking authority and the advisory system of rational inquiry that provides support for those who exercise that authority. The point here is that that system of rational inquiry investigates ends as well as means (Dewey 1938).

## **Conclusion**

Although recent literature about policy analysis has acknowledged the role that policy analysts and researchers play in helping to make the ends as well as the means of public policy more rational, I have argued that this literature has not fully incorporated important philosophical ideas about how they can do that most effectively. In particular, value rationality is not always a matter of appealing to a “higher principle” such as liberty, justice, or the other abstract philosophical ideals that appear prominently in many policy analysis texts (Fischer 1982: 193; cf. Anderson 1979: 714; Weimer and Vining 1999: 141 ff.). To the contrary: Our normative knowledge consists of convictions at many levels of abstraction, and we will improve our ability to resolve the hard normative questions that public policy confronts if we bring all of these convictions to bear on those questions. That idea is consistent with some statements in the policy analysis literature (Weimer and Vining 1999: 265 ff.; MacRae and Whittington 1997: 69-70), but its logic and implications have not previously been drawn out explicitly.



If this conception of value rationality is attractive, the opportunities for policy analysis and policy research to contribute to value rationality are broader than much of the field has recognized. To date, deliberate efforts at value rational policy analysis have mostly involved the application of general principles from moral and political theory to particular policy issues. It is perhaps for that reason that, as political theorist Robert Goodin observed (1989: vii), explicitly value-rational policy analyses have focused mainly on “matters of conscience” like abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment—issues that connect directly (and often exclusively) with the abstract questions about justice and rights that moral and political philosophy have traditionally emphasized. That is not to say that the more abstract reaches of moral and political philosophy have nothing to offer to value rational policy analysis. As I have described it, the method of reflective equilibrium recognizes that a defensible way of understanding the goals of a particular kind of policy ought to be consistent with a number of highly abstract convictions (Daniels 1996: ch. 2), including convictions about justice and other political ideals. For that reason, policy analysts and researchers should cultivate a clearer picture of what those requirements are so they can incorporate them intelligently into value rational policy analysis (Scott and Hart 1973). Nevertheless, an appropriate definition of policy goals must be consistent not only with general principles, but also with concrete convictions about particular cases and mid-level principles specific to a particular policy issue.

That constraint suggests a role for two kinds of policy research whose importance has not always been appreciated. At the most concrete level, the method of reflective equilibrium requires us to ask whether a provisional definition of policy goals is compatible with the judgments we make about what should be done in particular situations. The difficulty is that we often have not thought through the relationship between normative principles and concrete cases in this way, partly because we have not even imagined the variety of concrete cases for which our principles have implications. Case study research can help bring such cases into view simply by documenting them, and by drawing out their implications for existing views of policy goals. In doing so, such research may help to draw out values of which we were unaware, since we often elaborate and enrich our understanding of what our values are as we encounter new and unfamiliar experiences (Millgram 1998). For this reason, value rational policy

research may often take the form of case studies that shed light on important ideals. One example is Michael Walzer's clarification of what the pursuit of "justice" involves in war, which drew initially on an extensive case study of World War II (Walzer 1971) and then developed further with dozens of smaller historical case studies of wars (Walzer 1978). Many other case studies in the policy literature have served to clarify normative ideals in this way (Selznick 1949; Derthick 1979; Marris and Rein 1982; Flyvbjerg 1998; Thacher 2001). In this respect, the transportation and housing examples offer a limited view of value rationality because the driving "cases" (such as Levine's hypothetical two commutes) are so straightforward. Hypothetical cases of that sort are often valuable, but more extended realistic examples are often essential in normative analysis (Goodin 1982: 8 ff.; Millgram 1998).

At a somewhat higher level of abstraction, a definition of policy goals for the purposes of any particular analysis should also be consistent with mid-level principles relevant to specific policy debates, like the "axiom of derived demand" in transportation policy (Toulmin 1988; Macrae and Whittington 1997: 59-60). Explicit discussion of such mid-level normative principles has recently become more common in a variety of policy fields. For example, although the debate is relatively recent and inchoate, criminal justice research has begun to explore questions about what the notion of "public safety" encompasses and which aspects are most important (Zimring and Hawkins 1997; Skogan 1990: ch. 2; Thacher 2004b). Similar dialogues exist in many other areas of public policy, such as the discussion of "localism" in federal communications policy (Napoli 2001), the discussion of *non refoulement* in humanitarian relief policy (Weiner 1998), and discussions about the virtue of work and the primacy of the family in welfare policy (Ellwood 1988). Because normative analysis has become so closely associated with the most abstract reaches of moral and political philosophy, policy researchers sometimes neglect the practical discourses closer at hand that address many idiosyncratic values that apply to specific policy debates, which are often found in administrative reports, practitioner writings, and journals of applied ethics. Discussions like these, together with the normative case study research just suggested, may offer the most promising opportunities for policy researchers and analysts to contribute to value rationality in public policy.

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