

Free Will and Compatibilism in Decision Theory: A Solution to Newcomb's Paradox

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Abstract : Within decision theory, there are normative principles that dictate how one should act in addition to empirical theories of actual behavior. As a normative guide to one's actual behavior, evidential or causal decision-theoretic equations allow one to identify outcomes with maximal utility values. The choice that each person makes, however, will, of course, differ according to varying assignments of weight and probability values. Regarding these different choices, it remains a subject of considerable philosophical controversy whether individual subjects have the capacity to exercise free will with respect to the assignment of probabilities, or whether instead the assignment is in some way constrained. A version of this question is given a precise form in Richard Jeffrey's assumption that free will is necessary for Newcomb's paradox to count as a decision problem. This paper will argue, against Jeffrey, that decision theory does not require the assumption of libertarian freedom. One of the hallmarks of decision-making is its application across a wide variety of contexts; the implications of a background assumption of free will is similarly varied. One constant across the contexts of decision is that there are always at least two levels of choice for a given agent, depending on the degree of prior constraint. Within the context of Newcomb's problem, when the predictor is attempting to guess the choice the agent will make, he or she is analyzing the determined aspects of the agent such as past characteristics, experiences, and knowledge. On the other hand, as David Lewis' backtracking argument concerning the relationship between past and present events brings to light, there are similarly varied ways in which the past can actually be dependent on the present. One implication of this argument is that even in deterministic settings, an agent can have more free will than it may seem. This paper will thus argue against the view that a stable background assumption of free will or determinism in decision theory is necessary, arguing instead for a compatibilist decision theory yielding a novel treatment of Newcomb's problem.

Keywords : decision theory, compatibilism, free will, Newcomb's problem

Conference Title : ICSRD 2020 : International Conference on Scientific Research and Development

Conference Location : Chicago, United States

Conference Dates : December 12-13, 2020