

DECISION AND PREDICTION: LESSONS FROM THE HAPPY CASES

Pamela Hieronymi

1. Introduction

- a. Consider the happy cases, in which you predict that you will do what you have strong reason to do, in order to better locate what has gone wrong in the unhappy ones.
- b. Ultimate quarry: the idea that prediction and decision... take place in different “standpoints” or that moving between them involves a shift in “point of view.”

2. Prediction and Decision: Reasons and Questions

- a. Example: predicting that you will lose the match vs. deciding to throw the match.
 - i. Prediction: “third-personal” or “theoretical” standpoint/stance/point of view
 - ii. Decision: “first-personal” or “practical” standpoint/stance/point of view
- b. The reasons employed:
 - i. Prediction: ordinary evidence, considerations you take to show it likely you will lose.
 - ii. Decision: considerations you take to count in favor of bringing about your own loss.
- c. The questions on which the reasons bear:
 - i. Decision: the question of what *to* do.
 - ii. Prediction: the question of what you *will* do.
 - iii. The questions are distinguished... by the different sets of reasons that would bear on them.
- d. Two different “routes” to a view of your future.
 - i. You travel the first route by answering the “theoretical” question, whether you *will* lose.
 - 1) a question you could ask about anyone
 - 2) in settling this question, you arrive at a belief, one which happens to be about yourself
 - 3) considerations you use to settle the first question will be those you take to show it likely
 - ii. You travel the second route by answering a different question, whether *to* lose.
 - 1) not about anyone, and so cannot be asked about anyone else (“first-personal”?)
 - 2) in settling this question, you arrive at an intention
 - 3) whatever considerations you use to settle the second question will be considerations you take, in some way, to count in favor of (or against) losing.
 - iii. Strikingly, the decision, no less than the prediction, leaves you with a view of your future—but one grounded in your reasons for acting rather than evidence of likelihood.
- e. Prediction and decision remain stubbornly distinct.
 - i. Illustration: Neuroscientists implant a chip in your brain. They plan to send you for a walk at lunchtime, and you believe them. Your prediction, alone, will not get you walking.
 - 1) If you are to go for a walk *intentionally*—if the neuroscientists are to get you to walk by controlling your mind, rather than just your body—then you will have to go for a walk because you *mean* to; you will have to decide to go for a walk.
 - 2) Thus, if they are to make you walk intentionally, they also need to make you decide.
 - 3) But predicting, believing, even knowing that you are going to make a decision is not the same as making it. Prediction and decision are stubbornly distinct.
- f. The fact that prediction and decision are stubbornly distinct... has been thought to support the metaphor of standpoints.
 - i. Two further claims, which gain support from the metaphor:
 - 1) The deliverances of the theoretical point of view can (or must) be ignored, when making one’s decisions (we act under the Idea of Freedom).
 - 2) (**Target claim**) When you make a decision about something, you must not *then*, or from the same “point of view,” regard it as certain. Insofar as you regard some aspect of the future as certain, it is impossible, irrational, unreasonable, or at least somehow problematic to make a decision about it (at least from the same “point of view”).
- g. Both the metaphor and the claims go too far. Prediction and decision routinely interact.
 - i. Good decision-making often requires making predictions: whether you will likely to choke in the clutch or to forget your password.
 - 1) You might decide to throw the match because you predict you will lose it anyway, and you would like to save your strength.
 - 2) You might decide to go for a walk because you believe the neuroscientists will make you walk and you would rather not wait around any longer.
 - ii. Prediction, as such, is not isolated from decision-making, in some separate “point of view.”

3. Happy Certainty: a challenge to the target claim.

- a. Happy cases: you predict with certainty you will do what you also would have yourself to do.
 - i. Exs: you will take the job or marry your partner
 - 1) You are certain for the same reasons that your best friend or therapist is certain: You know what you care about, what you are like, what you will find convincing, and why.
 - ii. Some cases are the mirror image of Procrastinate: You are certain that your resolve will hold.
 - 1) Your confidence in your resolve could be a crucial part of your reason for deciding to embark down that path—to take the stand, be the whistleblower, or adopt the child.
- b. Happy cases are counter-examples to the target claim that, insofar as you regard some aspect of the future as certain, it is then impossible, irrational, unreasonable, or at least somehow problematic to make a decision about it. You are confident, yet it would be unreasonable *not* to make a decision.
- c. Objections:
 - i. Your certainty is not the same kind enjoyed by your best friend... rather your certainty, from your point of view, will be the *result* of your decision... “practical knowledge.”
 - ii. Even if your current decision depends on confidence in your future resolve, you are not *yet* certain of those future decisions. Rather, you are now certain only that, *if* you decide now to go down the path, then your resolve will hold. (conditional belief)
 - iii. So none of these cases are, in fact, counter examples to the target claim.
- d. Reply:
 - i. Nearby truth 1: If some aspect of your future is impervious to your efforts, then addressing the question of whether to change it is (typically) unreasonable.
 - 1) Instead, adopt the “fatalistic attitude:” acknowledge it is impervious and plan around it.
 - a) Example: Our eventual death.
 - 2) But an outcome can be impervious to your efforts but *not certain*, and imperviousness is sufficient to render decision-making unreasonable. Ex: genetic condition
 - 3) The happy cases: certain but *not* impervious to your efforts
 - a) You believe the outcome depends on your decision-making; you regard it as certain in part because you regard your decision as certain.
 - b) It would be entirely unreasonable, in these cases, to adopt the fatalistic attitude.
 - ii. Nearby truth 2: Decision-making always involves the consideration of alternatives.
 - 1) Ex: deciding whether *or not* to walk.
 - a) yes/no questions always admit of two answers: yes and no.
 - b) You must take there to be two possibilities: settle the question positively/negatively.
 - 2) As support for the target claim:
 - a) When you address the question of whether or not to walk, you must entertain two possible, contrasting futures, each of which you take to depend on your decision.
 - b) Thus, to address the question of whether or not to walk, you must regard the future as open, awaiting your decision.
 - c) But you cannot regard your future as both open and certain (in one point of view).
 - d) And thus, insofar as you regard your walking as certain, you cannot sensibly address the question of whether to walk (without changing your point of view).
 - i) (In fact, if the neuroscientists are to succeed, they will have to get you to give up or lose sight of your firm prediction—at least momentarily.)
 - 3) Reply: the argument relies on a falsehood and an equivocation.
 - a) Falsehood: in order to settle the question of whether or not to do something, you need to “entertain” the future in which you do not. Not in any robust sense.
 - i) Ex: whether or not twice two is four,
 - (1) No need to entertain that twice two is not four. (What would that be?)
 - b) Equivocation:
 - i) You must regard the future as “open” only in that you must regard it as depending, in part, on your decision, as not impervious to it.
 - ii) But it does not follow that it is unreasonable to regard your future as certain—you might regard your decision as certain.
 - iii) Thus, no established contradiction in regarding your future as both *open*, in that it depends on your decision, and *certain*, bc you are certain of your decision.
 - iv) Without showing such a contradiction, there is not yet any reason to insist that we must shift to another “point of view.”

- (1) (And thus the neuroscientists need not prevent you from having confidence in their abilities in order to succeed.)
- iii. Nearby truth 3: The facts that provide grounds for my friend's confident prediction are often the same facts that will ground my decision and therein provide "practical knowledge."
- iv. A clearer counterexample: my confident prediction is based on testimony.
 - 1) Ex: a complicated and momentous decision predicted by my best friend or therapist.
 - a) I fully believe their prediction: "Yes, I know I will."
 - b) Yet, the decision is complicated and momentous, and I have not yet made it: I do not yet see my practical reasons in the way that my friend confidently predicts I will come to see them, and so I have not yet employed them in coming to a decision.
 - 2) If the opponent is correct, then, to make my decision, I must suspend my firm prediction—I cannot decide while maintaining my confidence (or, at least, I must switch to a different point of view).
 - a) But this seems unnecessary.
 - b) More, it seems backwards. ... As I work my way to my decision... my confidence in their prediction could only be reinforced. ("They really do know me well.")
 - 3) More fanciful example: employing the neuroscientists to help me with my exercise habit.
 - a) I lose my resolve, maintain my confidence, make the decision when the time comes.
 - b) The opponent insists that... I must lose, or lose touch with, my confidence in the scientists' abilities. But seems neither natural nor necessary.
- e. Once we allow a confident prediction about a decision need not interfere with making that decision, my confident prediction that I will tell the truth can be among my practical reasons for deciding to take the stand.
 - i. Trouble with Procrastinate: not *simply* that he allows a prediction to infect his practical reasoning.
 - ii. If evidence of one's own *steadfastness* can unproblematically be part of one's reasoning about what to do in the happy case, then any problem with evidence of one's own *weakness*, in the unhappy case, does not lie simply in its functioning as evidence supporting a prediction about one's own future decisions.
 - iii. The problem, it seems, lies in the features of the case that make it unhappy.

4. **The Unhappy Cases: What I predict I will do is not what I would have myself to do.**

- a. Examples:
 - i. I predict the neuroscientists will make me decide to do something I now despise.
 - ii. The Oracle tells me the Fates have determined that I will kill my father.
 - iii. I know my resolve will not hold. (Let my child cry; Procrastinate)
- b. Shared feature: The full set of reasons I take to be powerful would, were I to draw from them the conclusions I take them to support, lead to different futures. Yet there can be only one future.
 - i. *Analogy: I have powerful reasons for inconsistent beliefs. Yet there is only one world.*
 - 1) *Conflicting reasons for belief: avoid contradictory double-vision by suspending judgment.*
 - 2) *Conflicting reasons for prediction and decision: you can delay decision-making—but not forever. Time will move forward and some single version of the future will be realized.*
- c. What is to be done? Possible responses
 - i. Option 1: Find a strategy to make it possible to do what you have most reason to do. (change the prediction)
 - 1) Examples: Disable the neuroscientists' device. Leave your partner to care for your crying child... tie yourself to the mast... raise the stakes, for yourself, for completing the review.
 - 2) You are *planning around* your predicted poor decision.
 - a) You have not taken the *fatalistic* attitude towards your future decision—you have not treated it as an outcome impervious to your choices (it was not—you avoided it).
 - b) But, you are treating it as, in a way, fixed. And that indicates unhappiness.
 - i) When all is well, you treat futures decisions as ones you can, now, optimize.
 - ii) If you need to treat some future decision as one you need to avoid or shore up with extra incentives, you treat it as though it is not yours to optimize.
 - c) There is a kind of disunity here—you cannot count on your future self, so to speak.
 - d) I regard this disunity as a familiar defect of agency, weakness of will.
 - ii. Option 2: Simply resist the prediction. (Go not gently!)

- 1) Good strategies are not always forthcoming. It is not clear how to avoid the Fates.
 - a) (Note that Oedipus' resolve never wavered—the Fates had to resort to deception.)
- 2) Should Procrastinate likewise simply resist?
 - a) Whether simply resisting is a good recommendation depends on what is at stake.
 - b) For Procrastinate, simply doubling down on resolve seems irresponsible.
- iii. Option 3: Take the next best outcome. (Procrastinate declines)
 - 1) Concede the most desirable outcome, while avoiding the poor decision.
 - 2) Procrastinate... unifies his anticipated future by conceding, to the prediction, his view of which outcome he has most reason to (aim to) realize. But he avoids the poor decision.
- iv. Option 4: Concede the outcome *and* the poor decision. (Go gently into the prediction?)
 - 1) Sartrean “bad faith proper”
 - a) Pretend the prediction settles the matter, without your input, so to speak.
 - b) Treat your decision as if it has the independence of prediction, does not require upkeep.
 - 2) Stephen White's Pierres
 - a) Problematic Pierre: includes his poor decision in his next best plan.
 - b) Unproblematic Pierre: Also includes the poor decision in his next-best plan, where the plan is designed to minimize the damage the poor decision will cause.
 - i) Upshot: Including a poor decision in a next-best plan is not always bad faith.
 - c) Why is Problematic Pierre problematic?
 - i) White: an “anti-opportunism” constraint: Pierre that he treats his own weakness as allowing him an opportunity to indulge his temptation.
 - ii) Or: reasoning to the next-best cases should be constrained by the reasons you would have yourself act on if you could count on yourself.
- v. Option/outcome 5: No next-best plan, but now facing the temptation you believe you will not resist. What now?
 - 1) If you do anything intentionally, you will make a decision.
 - 2) If your prediction proves correct, you will decide poorly.
 - a) The reasons for action you believe(d) most powerful will not be those you employ.
 - i) Either you will, at least temporarily, change your beliefs about your reasons
 - ii) or you will do what you believe you have to have most reason not to do.
 - (1) Reasons you employ, in deciding, will not be those you recognize, in believing.
 - b) Disunity, but no need to adopt a different “point of view.”
 - 3) Simply ordinary cases of weakness of will, no more puzzling for having been predictable.

5. Conclusion

- a. Clarity is gained, and unclarity lost, by retiring the metaphor “points of view” or “standpoints” and replacing it with an appeal to different questions and different sets of reasons that bear on them.
- b. By distinguishing the question of whether you will act from the question of whether to act, we can both explain the stubborn distinctness of prediction and decision and allow them to interact.
- c. We then see that predicting our own decisions, and even incorporating those predictions into our plans, is not in itself problematic.
- d. Rather, problems arise when what we predict we will decide and what we would have ourselves to decide fail to align.
- e. By resisting the over-broad visual metaphors, we also avoid painting all these unhappy cases with the same critical brush.
 - i. Although all such cases display some sort of disunity, and so display some defect of agency,
 - ii. not every case in which one concedes to a prediction is an attempt to evade responsibility.
 - iii. Some cases are doing the best one can, given one's defects, acknowledging and taking responsibility for them.