Self-Control and Rationality

Abstract

(985 words)

Rational self-control appears to conflict with decision theory's standard of utility maximization for rational choices. This paper presents the apparent conflict by, first, characterizing rationality, self-control, and rational self-control and then presenting decision theory's standard of utility maximization. Two points are pivotal: (1) the sensitivity of rationality's requirements to a decision problem's features and (2) the distinction between an exercise of self-control and acts to which it leads. Rationality displays sensitivity to circumstances by not requiring utility maximization in a decision problem without an option of maximum utility. The distinction between an exercise of self-control and acts to which it leads makes room for a rational exercise of self-control that generates an irrational act.

After the preliminaries, the paper considers cases that seem to show that rational self-control conflicts with decision theory's standard of utility maximization. The first case arises in Edward McClennen's (1990) treatment of resolute choice. In a sequential version of the Prisoner's Dilemma, one player may cooperate with another because of the other player's commitment to cooperate with her later. When the time comes for the second player to cooperate with the first, the second needs resolve to honor his commitment because not honoring his commitment maximizes utility. McClennen holds that the second player's honoring his commitment is rational despite not maximizing utility because the act belongs to a

plan that maximizes utility and so is rational. In reply to McClennen, I argue that execution of a plan is rational if all its steps are rational and that maximizing utility at a step in a sequential Prisoner's Dilemma is rational; a rational plan does not require a non-maximizing cooperative act. In fact, the players rationally cooperate only if they have opportunities to escape their Dilemma by, for example, binding themselves to cooperation. They may do this by entering a contract that gives the second player an incentive to cooperate after the first has cooperated. The Dilemma therefore does not show that rational self-control may violate the standard of utility maximization. It shows only that rational self-control may bind an agent to an act that is not utility maximizing in the absence of the binding.

Adam Elga's (2010) treatment of sequential choice suggests a counter-example to the paper's claim that a sequence of choices is rational if it contains only rational choices. He constructs a case in which for an agent with imprecise probabilities, it is rational according to common standards to reject each of two gambles although rejecting both gambles is irrational. I argue that the case does not refute the paper's claim about the rationality of a sequence of choices because in the case the choices to reject the gambles, although rational in isolation, are not both rational when each is taken in the context of the other.

Another case arguing that rational self-control may fail to maximize utility comes from Frank Arntzenius, Adam Elga, and John Hawthorne (2004). It is the case of Satan's apple. Satan has divided an apple into an infinite number of pieces, each desirable. For each piece, Eve decides whether to take it. However, if Eve takes all the pieces, she is banished from the Garden of Eden, a penalty that outweighs the benefit of taking the whole apple. Exercising rational self-control, Eve turns down pieces of the apple after taking some large number of

pieces. However, turning down a piece fails to maximize utility because taking the piece does not bring banishment by changing the number of pieces taken from finite to infinite. Rational self-control leads to an act that does not maximize utility.

This case does not show that rational self-control violates decision theory's standard of utility maximization. I grant that Eve rationally binds herself to a stopping point, after which she begins refusing pieces offered, and that binding herself to a particular stopping point does not maximize utility. However, the standard of utility maximization does not govern her selection of a stopping point because no option maximizes utility; for each stopping point, a later one is better. Also, the exercise of self-control that binds Eve to a stopping point differs from Eve's turning down a piece after she passes her stopping point. Eve's turning down a piece violates decision theory's standard of utility maximization, but it is not the same as her rational exercise of self-control. Rational self-control in this case, Eve's binding herself to a stopping point, complies with decision theory's standard of utility maximization. Finally, although refusing a piece of the apple fails to maximize utility in the absence of any binding, Eve may bind herself to a stopping point by changing the consequences of accepting a piece offered after her stopping point so that refusing the piece maximizes utility. Then neither the binding nor the acts it prompts violate the standard of utility maximization.

The paper ends by demonstrating the impossibility of conflict between rational self-control and decision theory's principle of utility maximization. The principle of utility maximization governs a decision problem without restrictions on the nature of the options in the decision problem. Although the principle of utility maximization assumes idealizations about agents and their decision problems, the idealizations about decision problems

accommodate options of any type; the options may include exercises of self-control. The case for utility maximization, which rests on the rationality of following preferences rationally held all things considered, applies to decision problems concerning acts of self-control. Nothing about such acts undermines the principle's support. Although acts of self-control may have distinctive consequences, general methods of comparing options still apply. Rational acts of self-control conform to, and do not conflict with, the principle of utility maximization.

References

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