VIII Strength of Will: Normative Issues

MORE ON AINSLIE’S CONDITIONALS

If I hold out now, I will hold out in the future.
If I don’t hold out now, I won’t hold out in the future.

Could these give us information about what I am like? Problem: is it accurate information?

An extreme case: Newcomb’s problem. A bizarre billionaire offers you a choice:

(1) Box A
(2) Box A and Box B

Box B contains $1000, placed there the night before. Box A either contains $1m, placed there the night before, or else nothing. The billionaire is a brilliant predictor of people’s choices (with a 99.9% success rate). When he decided last night what to place in Box A, he contemplated whether you would choose one box, or both. If he thought that you’d greedily choose both, he placed nothing in Box A. If he thought that you would choose only one, he placed $1m in Box A. But that, of course, was yesterday, and nothing you can do now will affect what is in the boxes. Should you choose one box or two?

Less extreme: self-signaling behavior. Hardworking Calvinists. People keeping their hands in cold water for longer if that indicates a strong heart (Quattrone and Tversky, 1984). The difficulty is that if they see themselves as self-signaling, they interfere with the very signals that they think are giving them information. But in the temptation resisting case does that matter? There isn’t any further state that the behavior is supposed to be evidence of. If someone behaves apparently altruistically because they want to think of themselves as an altruist, then maybe they are not truly an altruist. But if someone refrains from smoking because they want to think of themselves as someone who can refrain from smoking, then they really are refraining from smoking. Compare simple self-presentation behavior.

TWO OTHER PUZZLE CASES

The reciprocal suitcase deal (compare Broome’s wolf case).
The self-torturer (note that this case, like that of Ann, seems to involve the idea not simply that desire changes as time changes, but that it changes in response to other behavior).

BRATMAN’S TROUBLEMAKING PRINCIPLES

The Linking Principle: I shouldn’t form an intention that I now believe I should, at the time of action, rationally revise.
Or, more precisely:

If, on the basis of deliberation, an agent rationally settles at \( t_1 \) on an intention to \( A \) at \( t_2 \), if (given that) \( C \), and if she expects that under \( C \) at \( t_2 \) she will have rational control of whether or not she \( A \)'s, then she will not suppose at \( t_1 \) that if \( C \) at \( t_2 \) she should, rationally, abandon her intention in favor of an intention to perform an alternative to \( A \). (Bratman, 1998, 64)

*The standard view*: My ranking now should depend on the ranking that I will make at the time.

**TWO PUTATIVE SOLUTIONS**

(i) **Sophistication**: accept linking principle, and standard view.  Problem: you'll give into temptation

(ii) **Strong resolution**: accept linking principle, but reject standard view, in favor of the idea that one’s ranking now should not depend upon the ranking that one would give at the time of action, but instead at the time of forming the resolution.  Problem: seems to make too little of our agency at the time of action.  (More like a machine that is locked into the plan.)

**BRATMAN’S SOLUTION**

Add another condition onto what is needed for rationality: you must meet the *no regret condition*:

(i) were you to stick with the resolution, then at plan’s end you would be glad about it;  

and  

(ii) were you to fail to stick with it, then at plan’s end you would regret it.

Does this help with the toxin case, and the other cases?

**THE CASE OF YURI**

Yuri has managed to fall in love with both Tonia and Lara. When he is with Tonia he is convinced that she is the one, and vows his undying commitment; unfortunately things are just the same when he is with Lara. Worse still, his life is so structured that he keeps spending time with each of them. As one commitment is superseded by another, and that by another, trust is lost all round. Clearly it would be rational for Yuri to persist in his commitment to one of the women, and to restructure his life accordingly; all of them recognize that. However, the no-regret condition isn’t met. We can imagine him as a naturally contented type, who will not feel regret whichever he ends up with; in which case the second clause of the condition would not be met. Or we can imagine him as a naturally discontented type, who will feel regretful either way; in which case the first clause will not be met. Or we can imagine him as ambivalent, fluctuating between regret and happiness however he ends up; in which case neither clause will be stably met.
TWO VERSIONS OF THE LINKING PRINCIPLE AND A PRINCIPLE LINKING THEM

Weak Link: I shouldn’t form an intention that I now believe I should, at the time of action, rationally reconsider and revise.

Strong Link: I shouldn’t form an intention that I now believe that if I were, at the time of action, to reconsider, I should rationally revise.

Rational Reconsideration Principle: If I now believe that if I were to reconsider at the time of action I would reasonably revise, then I should reconsider at that time.

A COUNTEREXAMPLE TO STRONG LINK

You are defending your ship. Your instruments tell you that you are being attacked from somewhere in a 30° arc to the North East. If you waited and calculated you could find out the exact position of the attacker. But you are anticipating further attacks that will need your attention. Rather than waiting, finding the exact position of the attacker, and responding with a single missile, you form the intention of launching, when the optimum time comes, a barrage of missiles to cover the whole arc. In effect you trade missiles for time to attend elsewhere.

THE RATIONALITY OF STRONG RESOLUTION

There is a difference between (i) reconsidering a resolution, deciding that it would be rational to revise and then not revising; and (ii) not reconsidering even if, were you to reconsider, you would think it rational to revise. The former is irrational; the latter is not. Does this make rationality too fragile? Not if reconsideration is an involved business. Perhaps you only come to a judgment about what is best subsequent to the formation of an intention.

EXPLAINING WHAT IS RIGHT ABOUT THE NO-REGRET CONDITION

Regret as indicating substantial mistake concerting one’s choice (not constituting formal mistake).

BACK TO KAVKA AND THE OTHER PARADOXES

Maybe we are in fact not so constituted that we could form the intention; but that doesn’t show that it would be irrational. Consider how we would bring up in children in a world in which there were many toxin cases.

Now think about how we morally bring up children. We teach them not to reopen the question of what to do once they have promised. And more generally we teach them not to reopen the question of what to do once they have knowingly induced someone to rely on them. Perhaps this is a central moral skill.

What about Newcomb cases? There things are somewhat different, in that there is no prior commitment. But suppose we got people to commit to a Newcomb policy; and suppose they committed to one-boxing. Would they then be irrational if they failed to reconsider that policy when the time came to act?