

Introduction

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The purpose of this introduction is to present the two themes discussed in this book, their relations to each other and to the book's title, as well as to explain the reasons for the symposium and this publication. Decision-making raises both empirical and normative issues. How are decisions made? On what grounds? How ought decisions to be made? What are the difficulties? How can or should they be avoided or minimized?

Theme 1:

Examples of difficult decision-making

We make decisions every day, sometimes based on rules of thumb and how the situations at hand are usually dealt with, at other times on the basis of scientific evidence. Some of these decisions concern simple issues, others can lead to radical changes in our lives, and several can even be a threat to the existence of humanity. Some decisions can concern a choice between small risks for a major disaster and big risks for a minor disaster.

“Maximize expected utility” is a well-known slogan in decision theory and a key to rational decision-making, applied and developed by Frank Ramsey—and, in this volume, discussed by Nils-Eric Sahlin. But there are obstacles to rational decision-making which need to be understood. If we want to be able to predict preferences, we need to understand the importance of how the problems are presented and how our minds work, in particular the psychological principles governing perception of decision problems. A single child in need will generate and receive a lot of

compassion but the compassion will not increase proportionately when the number of children in need increases.

In a multicultural society there are frequently different and diverging views about what we know, the scientific evidence, as well as concerning what practical experience is relevant in a particular situation. Moreover, there is not always agreement about basic values and how short- and long-term interests of those involved are to be balanced against each other.

There is no shortage of challenges at present. They include the climate crisis, pandemics such as Covid-19, fake news and economic crises, the use of artificial intelligence in warfare and to manipulate political processes, as well as the current situation in the Middle East. Attempts to deal with such issues illustrate the interplay between scientific and other evidence, practical experience and values in decision-making.

The relations between scientific evidence and practical experience in decision-making need to be clarified. This also holds for the relations of these concepts to ethics and to different kinds of values. Values that are generally accepted in a culture tend to be invisible for people in that culture; it is easy to overlook assumptions that are commonly taken for granted. Ideas that are generally accepted tend to be self-evident points of departure for making decisions. What is morally problematic for some is, as we know, not always problematic for others.

Thus, we have good reasons not only to distinguish between different traditions in ethics, such as Kantian, utilitarian or human rights-based approaches. Our decisions and choices are influenced by the alternatives we see, how they are described, and how we suppose that their consequences will affect us, our children and grandchildren—and their children and grandchildren. What are the risks? What are the possibilities? What risks are acceptable, and on what grounds are such decisions taken?

In the discussions of such issues, we need to distinguish between known probabilities for a certain outcome and risks due to knowledge gaps and uncertainties; the latter are often referred to as epistemic risks. The distinction between these kinds of risks, and particularly between epistemic risks and others, has been explored, analysed and applied in different contexts by Nils-Eric Sahlin.

The case studies, in the contributions by Paul Slovic, Wändi Bruine de Bruin, Martin Peterson, Göran Hermerén, Johannes Persson and Nils-Eric Sahlin, present examples of difficult decision-making in a variety of

areas, such as (respectively) rationality in nuclear strategy, the climate crisis, the Flint water crisis, care of extremely preterm-born children, local knowledge and solar radiation management.

There are several explanations of the difficulties for (rational) decision-making suggested by the case studies presented in the first five papers. They include uncertainties of several kinds, knowledge gaps, unstable values and value conflicts, including controversies over the ranking orders of values.

Theme 2:

Epistemic justifications of difficult decisions

The second theme, presented in the contributions by Monika Gruber, Kevin Mulligan and Pascal Engel, as well as by Nils-Eric Sahlin, explores some fundamental philosophical ideas raised by questions such as: Should decisions be based on knowledge, defined—as already proposed by Plato in the dialogue *Theaetetus*—as true and justified beliefs?

This raises fundamental questions concerning how to understand beliefs and the relations between beliefs, knowledge and truth, as well as their relations to actions. Other questions are also suggested and discussed, including: What are the objects of beliefs? How are degrees of belief to be determined? Can there be probabilistic knowledge? Can local knowledge be analysed in terms of justified true beliefs?

Moreover, what role could or should various ideas about rational decision-making or different interpretations of the precautionary principle play in this context? What are Ramsey's views on these matters, and what can we learn from them? What are the objections to Ramsey's views, and how can they be dealt with?

A particularly important point of departure for the analysis of decision-making and the problems discussed in the second theme of this book is Ramsey's famous essay 'Truth and probability', written in 1926 and published in 1931.¹ This essay is generally regarded as the first complete theory of rational decision-making. It provides an answer to the question of how we should make decisions. The central idea is that the rational decision-maker maximizes (subjective) expected utility.

Can this theory be applied to the examples of difficult decision-making presented in this book? If the answer is negative, as suggested in some of

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the contributions, why is that, and what are the alternatives? If this book can stimulate discussions of these complex and difficult issues, it has served an important function.

Note

1. The essay was first published in Ramsey 1931 and republished in Ramsey 1990.

References

- Ramsey, Frank P. 1931. *The Foundations of Mathematics and Other Logical Essays*, ed. Richard Bevan Braithwaite, London: Kegan Paul, pp. 156–198.
- Ramsey, Frank P. 1990. *F. P. Ramsey: Philosophical Papers*, ed. David Hugh Mellor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 52–109.