Decision Making and Problem Solving
Questions and Activities

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Decision Making

1) Decision making requires us to consider our options. It’s easy to overlook some of the options that we have. What traits or habits of mind might prevent you from considering all of your options? How could you overcome these trait or habits of mind?

2) Decision making requires us to consider the possible consequences of our options and we’re advised to consider how our actions might affect us and the world around us. Do our actions always affect the world around us (for example, other people)? If not, when don’t they? If so, why?

3) Decision making asks us to imagine how good or bad each consequence of our actions would be. Plan to do some activity that you enjoy, and write down, on a scale of 1 to 100, how much you think you’ll enjoy that activity. Then do the activity and write down, on a scale of 1 to 100, how much you did, in fact, enjoy it. Was your prediction accurate?

   Now plan some (non-harmful) activity that you don’t particularly enjoy, and write down, on a scale of -1 to -100, how unpleasant you think that experience will be. Then do the activity and write down, on a scale of -1 to -100, how unpleasant it actually was. Was your prediction accurate?

   What, if anything, can you learn from this little experiment in consequence prediction?

4) Decision making asks us to predict how likely each consequence would be, and we noted that it’s easy to confuse the intensity or proximity of a consequence with its probability.

   Describe a case where it’s easy to think that a very good, or very bad, consequence is more likely than it actually is.

   Describe a case where it’s easy to think that a consequence in the relatively distant future is less likely than it actually is.

5) In thinking about the nature and probability of the consequences of our actions, we’re encouraged to take advantage of other peoples’ experience. Sometimes we can do this by speaking to them, but sometimes other peoples’ collective wisdom is actually written down for us. If we’re wondering about the consequences of buying a particular car, for example, we can seek out publications designed to give consumers important information about the advantages and disadvantages of particular makes and models. If we’re wondering what kind of approach to adopt toward a given condition, we can research the efficacy of different therapies in order to discover how effective completing therapies are and to learn about possible negative side-effects. Nonetheless, sometimes people make important decisions about purchases or healthcare without attempting to get this information. Why do you think that is? What can you do to make it more likely that you’ll acquire the information necessary to make the best possible decisions in these areas?

6) We’ve seen that when we weigh our options, we should consider both the nature and the probability of the consequences and allow more probable consequences to weigh more. We’ve also seen an expected utility formula that can help us to do this. What are some advantages to using this expected utility formula? When might you decide not to use it?
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7) We’ve seen that we use the decision procedure discussed here for important decisions that we don’t need to make every day, and that we should entrust other decisions to wisely cultivated habit. We’ve also noted that we can use this method to help us decide what habits we want to cultivate. Explain, with an example of your own choosing, how this method can help us to decide what habits to develop. Do you think that thinking about habit development in this way would make it any easier to actually develop the habit? Why or why not?

8) We’ve seen that we should use the decision procedure discussed here only for decisions that are appropriately made on the basis of probable consequences. What are some decisions that you think shouldn’t be made on the basis of probable consequences?

9) Otherwise intelligent people can make some really bad decisions. They can decide to binge drink, for example, or to drive while intoxicated, or to spend more than they earn. Consider a case (actual or imagined) of someone making a bad decision and identify where his or her thinking “misfired.” At what point in the decision making procedure is this person going wrong?

10) Everyone has vulnerable points – mistakes of thought or behavior that they’re particularly apt to make. Review the decision making procedure and identify where you’re most likely to go wrong. What practical measures can you take to reduce the likelihood that you’ll make a mistake at that point?

Problem Solving

11) Although problems can help us to formulate the ends that we want to achieve, we’ve noted that it’s often more helpful to focus on the end that we want to achieve than it is to focus on the problem itself. Think of an example to illustrate why thinking about the goal that you want to achieve can be more useful than thinking too much about the problem.

12) Although problems can make us aware of the ends that we want to achieve, the ends that we want to achieve are frequently (and perhaps always) what lead us to identify a situation as a problem in the first place. If someone didn’t really care about finding their work fulfilling, for example, then the fact that they don’t find it fulfilling wouldn’t constitute a problem. In this sense, the ends that we want to achieve are logically prior to our identification of a given situation as a problem.

So, what’s worth wanting? Are all ends objectively equal, and is our choosing some ends over another simply a matter of personal preference? Or are there some ends that we, as rational agents, should want?

13) We’ve seen how sometimes a solution to a problem can be worse than the problem itself. Describe such a case, actual or imagined.