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Assessment: one-person version of the game

A One-Person Version of the Devil's Game

Paradox Grade: 4

The reason I like this paradox, and the reason I think it deserves a higher paradoxicality grade than its multi-person counterpart, is that it suggests that an individual person might be thought of as a kind of collective—a collective consisting of her different "time slices"— and that collectives consisting of time slices are just as subject to Collective Tragedy as collectives consisting of ordinary individuals.

In other words: there are scenarios in which you will predictably end up in a suboptimal situation, even though each of your time-slices behaves rationally.

How should we respond to this result?

As before, my own view is that there's nothing to be done. We need to learn to live with it. If your decisions are the decisions of your time slices, you may end up doing things that are predictably suboptimal, even though you never behave irrationally.

Problem 1

1/1 point (ungraded)

The Devil offers you a deal: spend a day in Hell, and you will get two in Heaven.

You value a day in Heaven just as much as you disvalue a day in Hell. And, you value two days in Heaven twice as much as one day in Heaven. Also, you do not value immediate pleasures over future pleasures, or disvalue immediate pains over future pains.

Given your values, would your present time-slice act rationally if it accepted the Devil's deal?

☒ Yes, it would act rationally.

☐ No, it wouldn't.



Explanation

Here is an argument for thinking that your present time-slice ought to take the deal. Suppose you value the status quo at 0, and that you value a day in Heaven at 10. It follows from the setup that you value a day in Hell at -10 , and two days in Heaven at 20. So taking the deal has a positive net value: $-10 + 20 = 10$. So if you think the rational thing to do is to choose from amongst the options available to you the one with highest net value, your present time-slice should take the deal.

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i Answers are displayed within the problem

Problem 2

1/1 point (ungraded)

Suppose that you do accept the deal above.

Towards the end of your horrible day in Hell, the Devil sidles up to your telemarketing cubicle and offers you another deal: stay in Hell tomorrow and you get two more days in Heaven, for a total of four days in Heaven. (You value four days in Heaven twice as much as you value two days in Heaven.)

Given your values, would your current time-slice act rationally if it accepted this deal? (As you consider your answer, note that by iterating this strategy, the Devil could get you to spend an eternity in Hell...)

☒ Yes, it would act rationally..

☐ No, it wouldn't.



Explanation

As in the previous question, taking the deal has positive net value. So if you think the rational thing to do is to choose from amongst the options available to you the one with highest net value, your present time-slice should take the deal.

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