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# Commentary on Wein

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**In Response to:** Sheldon Wein's *Decision theory as a primary part of Critical Thinking Courses*

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Professor Wein makes an interesting suggestion in this paper. It happens to be one to which I am supportive as I have periodically used Decision Theory in my own Critical Thinking courses. From my own experience, I have found students to benefit from exposure to decision theoretical techniques, especially given that these techniques are widely used in the various disciplines from which our students tend to come. This is a point I share with Wein, as we will see. The tease at the beginning of the paper, however, would have surely raised a few eyebrows. And it is unfortunate that Wein does not follow-up on his inclination that "the time devoted to decision theory ought to be greater than that devoted to such matters as argument evaluation or fallacy recognition."

Wein's argument, I take it, offers a number of reasons for the instructor of an introductory logic course/critical thinking course to incorporate substantially decision theory:

- 1) Decision theory aids in understanding differences between intrinsic and instrumental values.
- 2) The concept of maximizing expected utility is useful.
- 3) Game theoretic problems are more like what the student needs or will be exposed to later on.

Wein claims this last reason also ties in nicely with student interests. Indeed, the Prisoner's Dilemma pops up in a number of disciplines, as does the Tragedy of the Commons. Students do tend to take an interest in these. That students take an interest in these topics ought not to be the fuel that drives us to teach decision theory in introduction to logic courses. (I will give Wein a fair bit of latitude here: at a number of institutions an introductory logic course is far from the type of course many of us here would suggest as a critical thinking course. That is another debate for another session.)

Wein's strategy in this paper is to clarify what he calls a "fairly neutral interpretation" of introductory logic courses. Presuming that we accept this interpretation – an interpretation that broadly and idealistically informs the reader of the goals of such courses – we are led down a path that is supposed to show how decision theory fits in nicely within logic courses, whether informal or formal. Logic, on Wein's account, can be normatively construed. That is, under varying circumstances, the agent will be able to consider what she OUGHT to believe. Decision theory, of course, picks up from here and offers the agent the tools to determine what she OUGHT to do. On the formal side, Wein points out the degree of rigour to which decision theory has been developed. This he claims should appease the formalist among us. But this is hardly the point for formalism. For the formalist, the rigour is a result of adopting a formalist position and not the other way around.

For the informal logician, Wein claims nothing is different, and although we are here at this conference attesting to the fact that argumentation theory has "come a long way." Nonetheless, although decision theory has "analogously" come a long way, I am sure that many informal

logicians will want to be "rationally persuaded" or examine the "warrant" in adopting decision theory in their courses.

The point about rigour aside, Wein's principal point for adopting decision theory is that "most of our students are less interested in what one should *believe* than they are in what one should *do*." Students aren't academics, for whom what one ought to believe truly matters. Wein concedes that we should not simply "pander to the present interests of our students" and so the task left is to show that decision theoretic skills help shape the very same skills acquired in becoming a critical thinker. In fact "learning to be a rational decision-maker is likely to enhance one's other critical thinking capacities more than learning to be a critical thinker is likely to enhance a student's ability to make rational decisions." That is, the extra-decision theoretic benefits outweigh the extra-critical thinking benefits. This is an incredible claim to make and one for which I would like more clarification. Either there is some empirical evidence for this or there must be a strong "argument" showing that the sorts of things taught in argument analysis are ultimately reduced to decision theory. Neither of these is proposed and, in the end, Wein's paper, as well as the reader, would benefit from this. Further, the distinction, if there is one, between *believing* and *doing*, as goals for students, will need to be bridged.

Let me re-iterate that I am quite sympathetic to Wein's suggestion. Science, social science, business, nursing, and engineering students can all benefit from learning decision theory. And I suppose that the majority of our students come from one of these disciplines. However, decision theory is often taught in math, business and/or economics programs. What has Wein offered here that should persuade us to attempt to convince typically philosophy chairs that we *ought* to include decision theory in critical thinking courses? The answer to this question has been hinted in the paper but hasn't been explicitly answered. If the appeal to decision theory is, as Wein claims, that it accomplishes much of the same things as critical thinking, then why alter our courses? Surely it can't just be because a number of fascinating topics arise (and they do), for an imaginative critical thinking instructor should be able to come up with equally fascinating topics.

In conclusion, Wein's topic is worthy of exploration. He has embarked on a discussion that is philosophically and logically relevant. Nonetheless, it would be helpful to see just how introductory decision theory can be used and examples could have been brought in to show their relevance, as well as their interest factor for both students and instructors. Recall that Wein is urging us to *do* something, namely to adopt decision theory in introductory courses. On his own analysis then, a decision theoretic analysis should convince us of doing so.