
Assessing actions in decision-making: Assumptions and related risks

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Résumé

Human actions can be represented in different ways like concepts, theories, or models. In causal analysis of actions, these are described by focusing on their effects (Pearl, 2009; Hitchcock, 2012). Moreover, formal assessments-or evaluations-of actions are causal analyses measuring their effects in order to easily translate physical values-such as amounts of greenhouse gas emissions emitted during actions-into practical values-such as the undesirability of actions given how they contribute to climate change (Gardiner, 2006; Broome, 2012). Formal assessments are increasingly used in decision-making processes to make decision-makers consider the effects of actions before deciding to carry them out (Stern, 2007). Assessments are often seen as tools helping to accurately determine how desirable alternative decisions are in relation to practical goals; hence, they are often asked to be communicated to decision-makers in forms that are easy to understand and to use-mostly quantitative and uniformized ones.

However, assessments only contain what assessors want them to contain, in the ways they want to conduct them. They rest on numerous assumptions about (1) which actions and causal links should be studied and about (2) what actions and causal links are. For this reason, when using formal assessments as ways of assigning accurate values to actions, decision-makers risk overlooking numerous aspects of those same actions (Jasanoff, 2004). This critique has been long raised by researchers like Sagoff (2008) regarding cost-benefit analysis and Shue (2014) or Winsberg (2018) regarding climate policies.

In this presentation, I propose to highlight these problems from the point of view of analytical philosophy, combining approaches from ethics, epistemology, and decision theories. I will look at specific case studies through which actions have been studied in assessments to be integrated into decision-making processes (e.g., climate scenarios, energy policies). I will show how, in these contexts, assumptions on which action assessments were based and how the use of these assessments may have negative impacts on decision-making. I will defend that these problems are less due to assessments being seen as the most accurate epistemic tools available by decision-makers, but to the way these are presented, the sense in which they are expected to be usable, and how decisions are related to their results. This echoes the concerns raised in recent epistemological debates on the role of models in decision-making (Morgan, 2012; Cartwright & Montuschi, 2014). Based on that, I will propose new ways to make and present formal assessments in decision-making processes.

Mots-Clés: Action, assessments, decision, making

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