

# Confession of a causal decision theorist

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## 1 Introduction

Start with two questions:

1. Suppose that you care only about speaking the truth, and are confident that some particular deterministic theory is true. If someone asks you whether that theory is true (and you must answer either 'yes' or 'no') are you rationally required to answer 'yes'?
2. Suppose that you face a problem in which (as in Newcomb's problem) one of your options—call it 'taking two boxes'—causally dominates your only other option—call it 'taking one box'. Are you rationally required to take two boxes?

Those of us attracted to causal decision theory are under pressure to answer 'yes' to both questions. The first 'yes' seems obvious, even prior to commitments to any particular decision theory. And the second 'yes' reflects a core commitment of causal decision theory.

It has been shown that many existing decision theories are inconsistent with answering 'yes' to both questions (Ahmed 2014a, §5, §7, Ahmed 2014b, §5.2.1). My aim is to give a simple proof that the same goes for an even wider class of theories: all 'suppositional' decision theories (according to which the value of an option is its expected value on the supposition that it is selected). Such theories include ones described in Ahmed (2014b), Gibbard

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and Harper (1978), Jeffrey (1965), Joyce (1999), Lewis (1981), Skyrms (1980), Stalnaker (1981), and many others besides.

So causal decision theorists must either answer ‘no’ to one of the above questions, or else abandon suppositional decision theories.

## 2 *Suppositional decision theories*

Many evidential and causal decision theories are unified by a guiding idea: The value of an option is a weighted average of the values of the possibilities compatible with that option. Weighted how? By the agent’s probability function on the *supposition* that the option is realized.

More precisely, these theories can all be expressed as the requirement that one select an option  $A$  that maximizes

$$U(A) = \mathbb{E}(v, P^A) \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \text{expectation of } v \text{ with respect to } P^A,$$

where  $A$  ranges over one’s *options* (assumed to be disjoint propositions), propositions are taken to be sets of possible worlds,  $v$  is one’s *value function* (a function from possible worlds to real numbers), and  $P^A$  is the result of starting with one’s probability function  $P$  and *supposing*  $A$ . The function that maps  $P$  to  $P^A$  is a *supposition function*, required only to be such that for all probability functions  $P$  and all propositions  $A$  in the domain of  $P$ , the following condition holds:  $P^A$  is a probability function with  $P^A(A) = 1$ . Different decision theories understand the supposition function in different ways. Call theories in this family *suppositional decision theories*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Joyce (1999) explicitly formulates a suppositional decision theory that has evidential and causal decision theories as special cases (see also Lewis (1981)). The above definition of a supposition function is slightly more permissive than the one in Joyce (1999, Ch 6), in order to maximize the generality of the impossibility proof below. There is some technical

Prominent and popular suppositional decision theories abound:

- Evidential Decision Theory (Jeffrey 1965) is gotten by letting the supposition function be *conditionalization*:  $P^A(\cdot) = P(\cdot|A)$ .
- Counterfactual causal decision theories (Gibbard and Harper 1978, Stalnaker 1981) are gotten by letting the supposition function be *counterfactual supposition*:  $P^A(\cdot) = P(A \square\rightarrow \cdot)$ .
- K-partition causal decision theories are defined in terms of a privileged partition  $K$  of 'dependency hypotheses', each of which specifies causal dependencies between options and outcomes.<sup>2</sup> For such theories, the supposition function is *imaging relative to K*:  $P^A(\cdot) = \sum_{K \in K} P(K)P(\cdot|AK)$ .<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the above, a wide range of decision theories count as suppositional. For example, suppose that one takes a counterfactual-based causal decision theory and replaces the normal counterfactual conditional with another conditional satisfying a few undemanding constraints.<sup>4</sup> The

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messiness associated with the case of  $P(A) = 0$ , orthogonal to present concerns, that I am here ignoring.

<sup>2</sup>Theories differ on the exact characterization of  $K$ , whose members are also sometimes termed 'states' or 'act independent states' (see Joyce (1999, 165) for a survey). One influential proposal has it that each member of  $K$  fully specifies 'how the things [one] cares about do and do not depend causally on [one's] present actions' (Lewis 1981, 11). Note that since each suppositional decision theory uses a single supposition function, a K-partition theory counts as suppositional only if it entails that K-partitions for different decisions always induce the same supposition function. I consider relaxing this assumption at the end of §6.

<sup>3</sup>I use concatenation to denote conjunction, so that 'AK' denotes the conjunction (intersection) of propositions  $A$  and  $K$ . The stated definition of imaging assumes that the partition  $K$  is countable and that  $P$  is countably additive and has as its domain a suitable algebra of propositions, assumptions I adopt going forward.

<sup>4</sup>To ensure that a conditional picks out an imaging function by way of a counterfactual causal decision theory, it is sufficient that it be a 'centered conditional' (Joyce 1999, 64)

result would be another suppositional theory. Or suppose that one takes a partition-based theory and modifies the partition of act-independent states. Again the result would be a suppositional theory.

Though a wide range of decision theories count as suppositional, none of them are consistent with answering 'yes' to both of the questions at the start of this paper. Or so I shall argue, by describing two cases.

### 3 *Betting on the laws*

Here is the first case (which differs only in minor details from one in Ahmed (2013, 291)):

*Betting on the laws:* Let  $D$  be the proposition that some particular deterministic regularities are exceptionless laws of nature.<sup>5</sup> For example,  $D$  might be the proposition that the laws of nature include (a deterministic formulation of) Newtonian mechanics. Your total evidence favors  $D$  over its negation, and so  $P(D) > 1/2$ , where  $P$  is your probability function. You must choose between endorsing  $D$  by raising your hand (option  $A_1$ ) and denying  $D$  by not doing so (option  $A_2$ ). You are certain that your choice has no causal influence on whether  $D$  is true or on the state of the world in the distant past. You care only about endorsing truths and denying falsehoods on this occasion, as reflected by your value function  $v_1$ , pictured here:<sup>6</sup>

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which satisfies 'Conditional Contradiction', 'Harmony', and 'Conditional Excluded Middle' (Joyce 1999, 168).

<sup>5</sup>Why 'exceptionless'? To close off the potential escape route of claiming that a system of deterministic laws can obtain even though some violations of it occur (Braddon-Mitchell 2001). 'Deterministic regularity' is here understood so that  $D$ , together with any full specification of the state of the world at any one time, entails a full specification of the state of the world at all times.

<sup>6</sup>This table represents no more than the following: that  $v_1(w) = 1$  for any world  $w$  in

|       |     |           |
|-------|-----|-----------|
| $v_1$ | $D$ | $\bar{D}$ |
| $A_1$ | 1   | 0         |
| $A_2$ | 0   | 1         |

One verdict seems obvious about this case:

(Bet) 'Betting on the laws' situations are possible, and in any such situation you should choose  $A_1$  (endorse  $D$ ).

Even prior to one's commitment to a particular decision theory, this verdict is attractive. For Bet to be false, either the 'Betting on the laws' situation would have to be impossible, or else it would have to be that even though you reasonably have  $P(D) > 1/2$  (and you are sure that your bet has no causal influence on whether  $D$  is true), you are not rationally required to bet that  $D$  is true. Neither option has much independent appeal (Ahmed 2013, 292).

#### 4 *Newcomb on the past*

The second case requires a bit of setup. Say that a proposition is a *1900-proposition* if it fully specifies the state of the world at the first moment of 1900 (for short: 1900), and specifies nothing more. Any 1900-proposition is *about* 1900, in the sense that it is true at either both or neither of any two possible worlds whose states at 1900 perfectly match (Lewis 1980, 272–273, Ahmed 2014b, 123). Any disjunction of 1900-propositions is also about 1900 in that sense.

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$A_1D \cup A_2\bar{D}$ , and  $v_1(w) = 0$  for any  $w$  in  $A_1\bar{D} \cup A_2D$ . (Notation: a horizontal line above the name of a proposition represents negation.) Subsequent tables for value functions are to be interpreted similarly. Note that unlike many decision tables, the 'value tables' in this paper are not meant to convey or presuppose that the partition of propositions labeling the columns has any special status.

By the definition of determinism, any conjunction of  $D$  with a 1900-proposition entails what the state of the world is at all times, and hence (let us suppose) entails which option you now choose.<sup>7</sup> In particular, some 1900-propositions  $N$  are such that the conjunction  $ND$  entails that you raise your hand now. Let  $H$  be the disjunction of all such 1900-propositions (Ahmed 2014a, 5).

$H$  is a disjunction of 1900-propositions, and hence is about 1900. Since 1900 is in the distant past, and you are certain that your choice has no causal influence on the distant past, you are certain that your choice has no causal influence on whether  $H$  is true.

That concludes the setup. Here is the second case (almost identical to one described in Ahmed (2010, 123n5)):

*Newcomb on the past:* Let  $H$  be the proposition about 1900 defined above.

The proposition  $D$ , your options, and your probability function  $P$  are all the same as they are in 'Betting on the laws', but your value function  $v_2$  (pictured below) differs in that you only care about the following: You greatly prefer that  $H$  be true (that is worth  $M$  utiles to you, where  $M > 0$ ), and you slightly prefer that you not raise your hand (that is worth  $T$  utiles to you, where  $T > 0$ ).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>I assume that states of the world are rich enough, and your options individuated coarsely enough, so that any two  $D$ -worlds whose states perfectly match at all times are alike with respect to which option you now choose—in other words, alike with respect to which of  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  are true. I also assume that  $D$  is compatible with each of  $A_1$  and  $A_2$ , thereby setting aside some scenarios in which the laws of nature (on their own) impose bizarrely strong restrictions on how you move your hand.

<sup>8</sup>Since in 'Betting on the laws' and 'Newcomb on the past' you have the same probability function but different value functions, in at least one of the two situations you are ignorant or incorrect about your value function. In response to the worry that such ignorance compromises verdicts about what it is rational to do in the situations, there are at least two options. (1) One might hold that rationality requires one to maximize expected utility even when one is less than omniscient about one's values. (2) One might model the whole

|       |       |           |
|-------|-------|-----------|
| $v_2$ | $H$   | $\bar{H}$ |
| $A_1$ | $M$   | $0$       |
| $A_2$ | $M+T$ | $0+T$     |

In this case the same sort of causal dominance reasoning supports  $A_2$  as supports taking two boxes in a standard Newcomb problem (Nozick 1969). Indeed, the above table represents the payoffs in a standard Newcomb problem if one reads  $H$  as the proposition that the opaque box has \$1 million,  $M$  as one million,  $T$  as one thousand, and  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  as the options of taking one or two boxes respectively (and if it is assumed that you care only about whether the opaque box has \$1 million and whether you take one or two boxes).

In a standard Newcomb problem there is a causal dominance argument for taking two boxes: 'The \$1 million is either there or it is not, and you have no causal influence on whether it is. Either way (and no matter what else is true), taking two boxes gets you a better outcome than taking just one. So you should take two boxes.' Generalized and made more precise, the idea is that when choosing between options  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  (each of which is compatible with each of  $H$  and  $\bar{H}$ ) you should choose  $A_2$  whenever: (a) you are certain you have no present causal influence over whether  $H$  is true, (b) you strictly prefer every  $A_2H$  world to every  $A_1H$  world, and (c) you strictly prefer every  $A_2\bar{H}$  world to every  $A_1\bar{H}$  world. These conditions are satisfied in 'Newcomb on the past' just as much as they are in a standard Newcomb problem. So those who are sympathetic to the spirit of causal decision theory are under some pressure to endorse:

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setup with probabilities defined over a space of 'coarsened' elementary possibilities each of which is silent about the subject's values. Doing so would remove the need to say that in either situation the subject is mistaken about her values.

(Two-box) 'Newcomb on the past' situations are possible, and in any such situation you should choose  $A_2$ .

### 5 *Trouble for suppositional causal decision theories*

Here is where the trouble begins. There are sound arguments that several prominent counterfactual-based causal decision theories are committed to denying Bet (Ahmed 2014a, §5), that a number of other decision theories are similarly committed (Ahmed 2014a, §7), and that so are causal decision theories that operate by way of a particular conception of 'causal reach' or objective chances (Ahmed 2014b, §5.2.1).

Still: the above arguments, however compelling, attempt to play a game of whack-a-mole, ruling out theories one by one. So a friend of causal decision theory might hope that some undreamt-of suppositional decision theory is immune to the arguments and consistent with both Bet and Two-box:

(Suppositional) Some suppositional decision theory—perhaps one yet to be formulated—delivers correct verdicts about all 'Betting on the laws' and 'Newcomb on the past' cases.

Contrary to the above hope, however, the following proof shows that Bet, Two-box, and Suppositional are jointly inconsistent (cf. Solomon 2021, §4).

For the proof it will be convenient to have additional representations of the value functions in 'Betting on the laws' ( $v_1$ ) and 'Newcomb on the past' ( $v_2$ ):



|       |      |            |            |                  |
|-------|------|------------|------------|------------------|
| $v_1$ | $HD$ | $H\bar{D}$ | $\bar{H}D$ | $\bar{H}\bar{D}$ |
| $A_1$ | 1    | 0          |            | 0                |
| $A_2$ |      | 1          | 0          | 1                |

|       |      |            |            |                  |
|-------|------|------------|------------|------------------|
| $v_2$ | $HD$ | $H\bar{D}$ | $\bar{H}D$ | $\bar{H}\bar{D}$ |
| $A_1$ | $M$  | $M$        |            | 0                |
| $A_2$ |      | $M+T$      | $T$        | $T$              |

Note that any  $D$ -world in which you raise your hand is a member of  $H$  (since any such world was in a state at the start of 1900 that together with  $D$  entails that you raise your hand), and so  $A_1\bar{H}\bar{D} = \emptyset$ . Similarly  $A_2HD = \emptyset$ . That is why the corresponding cells in the above tables have been left blank.

Suppose for contradiction that Bet, Two-box, and Suppositional are true. Then by Suppositional, some suppositional decision theory delivers correct verdicts about 'Betting on the laws' and 'Newcomb on the past'. Since the subjects in those cases have the same probability function  $P$ , we may write the values of the suppositional probabilities of this theory for both cases as follows:

|           |      |            |            |                  |
|-----------|------|------------|------------|------------------|
|           | $HD$ | $H\bar{D}$ | $\bar{H}D$ | $\bar{H}\bar{D}$ |
| $P^{A_1}$ | $a$  | $b$        | 0          | $c$              |
| $P^{A_2}$ | 0    | $d$        | $e$        | $f$              |

where  $a$  through  $f$  are real numbers in the unit interval,  $a + b + c = 1 = d + e + f$  (by the definition of a supposition function), and the 0 entries are forced because  $A_2HD = A_1\bar{H}\bar{D} = \emptyset$ . (This table represents no more than that  $P^{A_1}(HD) = a$ ,  $P^{A_1}(H\bar{D}) = b$ , etc. In particular it does not represent that its columns correspond to dependency hypotheses.)

On the one hand, by Bet and Suppositional,  $\mathbb{E}(v_1, P^{A_2}) < \mathbb{E}(v_1, P^{A_1})$  and so

$$d + f < a. \tag{1}$$

On the other hand, by Two-box and Suppositional, for all  $M, T > 0$ :

$$\begin{aligned}
 \mathbb{E}(v_2, P^{A_1}) &< \mathbb{E}(v_2, P^{A_2}) \\
 Ma + Mb &< (M + T)d + Te + Tf \\
 M(a + b - d) &< T(d + e + f) \\
 a + b - d &< T/M && \text{Since } d + e + f = 1 \\
 a + b - d &\leq 0 && \text{By continuity of the reals} \\
 a &\leq d - b. && (2)
 \end{aligned}$$

Combining (1) and (2) we have that  $d + f < d - b$ , and hence that  $f + b < 0$ . But that contradicts the assumption that  $f$  and  $b$  are each nonnegative.

#### 6 Which assumption should be rejected?

In the face of the above result, decision theorists must reject at least one of Bet, Two-box, and Suppositional. How might each rejection be motivated?

Start with Bet. One way to reject Bet is to claim that when determinism is true, one's present choice *does* have causal influence over what laws of nature obtain. Bales (2017, §4.3.1) expresses sympathy with this thought, assuming a deflationary Humean analysis of the laws of nature.

A second way is to give up causal decision theory (strictly so-called) in favor of 'non-backtracking counterfactual dependence decision theory' (Hitchcock 2013, 139). One could then reject Bet on the grounds that one's present choice has not causal but 'non-backtracking counterfactual' influence over what laws of nature obtain. (For example one might endorse a version of the partition-based decision theory of Lewis (1981) in

which causal dependence is replaced by counterfactual dependence, and counterfactuals are given a 'miracles' semantics (Lewis 2014).)

Turn now to Two-box. Evidential decision theorists are of course happy to reject it. But in addition, inspired by Dorr (2016) and Loewer (Unpublished) one might argue as follows: No attractive theory of counterfactuals entails (roughly speaking) that both the past and the laws are counterfactually independent of one's present actions. Given this conflict, we should adopt a 'causal-counterfactual' decision theory backed by a species of counterfactual according to which the laws are counterfactually independent of one's present actions, but the past is not. Such analyses of counterfactuals can be motivated by statistical mechanics (Albert 2000, 2015, Kutach 2002, Loewer 2007). The resulting decision theory would underwrite the denial of Two-box. Furthermore, any counterintuitiveness of rejecting Two-box should be tolerated because the subject in 'Newcomb on the past' has such eccentric values (Dorr 2016, 267).

Another way to reject Two-box is to adopt a hybrid theory that rejects causal dominance reasoning in some special cases (such as 'Newcomb on the past') while endorsing a version of it in many others. To arrive at such a theory one might exclude 'unreachable' possibilities from expected utility calculations. For example, Sandgren and Williamson (2021) spells out a way of excluding conjunctions of acts and dependency hypotheses thought to be inconsistent with the laws of nature.<sup>9</sup> And Kment (Unpublished) proposes (roughly) to calculate the utility of each option by first conditionalizing on this claim: that choosing that option is compatible with all truths beyond

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<sup>9</sup>The theory in Sandgren and Williamson (2021) is not intended to on its own handle cases like 'Betting on the laws'. Rather it is intended to be deployed alongside strategies that reject Suppositional (Sandgren and Williamson 2021, n. 19, Williamson and Sandgren forthcoming, §6).

the decision-maker's causal influence.

Another way to reject either Bet or Two-box is to argue that the cases figuring in them are not genuine decisions. Assume for the moment that the causal relations between acts and outcomes in any genuine decision can be represented by a suitable partition of dependency hypotheses. Then to show that a situation fails to be a genuine decision it is enough to show that no suitable partition exists. Joyce (2016, 225) and Williamson and Sandgren (forthcoming, §5.2.1) pursue this line, offering arguments that no partitions suitably represent 'Newcomb on the past' and 'Betting on the laws' respectively. In each instance candidate partitions are rejected because they violate an 'Act-State Independence Principle' according which dependency hypotheses are counted as counterfactually independent of options.<sup>10</sup>

The above authors only argue against a restricted range of candidate partitions. That leaves it open that a partition outside of that range might be adequate. But the following argument (in the spirit of Solomon (2021, §2.1)) suggests that casting a wider net is unlikely to help.

To begin the argument, recall (from the discussion of K-partition theories in §2) that there is a canonical way for a partition of propositions to pick out a unique supposition function. So we can impose constraints on partitions by imposing constraints to the supposition functions that they pick out. Next note that causal decision theorists often enjoin us to compare options

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<sup>10</sup>In fact Joyce (2016) addresses 'Betting on the past' (Ahmed 2014a), but similar considerations apply to 'Newcomb on the past'. 'Act-state Independence' is Williamson and Sandgren's term; Joyce's principle  $N_2$  is similar (224). Note also that Williamson and Sandgren offer the above argument as just one of several alternative strategies, and that Joyce's view is more nuanced than the one described above, addressing not 'genuine decisions' but rather 'genuine Newcomb problems'. What matters most in the present context is the denial that 'Newcomb on the past' is the sort of decision to which a causal dominance argument applies (226). Such a denial would be a reason to reject Two-box.

while holding fixed our opinions about matters beyond our influence. In a suppositional decision theory, doing so amounts to treating a proposition as *suppositionally independent* of your choice whenever you are certain that you have no causal influence on its truth.<sup>11</sup>

Now turn to 'Betting on the laws' and 'Newcomb on the past'. In those cases you are certain that your choice has neither causal influence on the truth of  $H$  nor causal influence on the truth of  $D$ . So in modeling the cases it is natural to require a supposition function such that given your probability function  $P$ :

- (i)  $H$  is suppositionally independent of your choice, and
- (ii)  $D$  is suppositionally independent of your choice.

Unfortunately, given that  $P(D) > 1/2$  we can prove that no such supposition function meets those conditions.<sup>12</sup> It follows that no partition picks out a supposition function that meets those conditions. That is reason to think that no partition of dependency hypotheses adequately represents both cases.

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<sup>11</sup>Definition: Proposition  $X$  is *suppositionally independent of your choice* (relative to  $P$ ) if for each of your options  $A$ , your probability for  $X$  remains unchanged by supposing  $A$ :  $P^A(X) = P(X)$ . Solomon (2021, §2.1) motivates the requirement that propositions causally independent of your choice are suppositionally independent of it, and applies that requirement to propositions about the past and the laws of nature. The above definition of suppositional independence is slightly more demanding than the definition suggested by Joyce (1999, 162), but the two notions coincide for supposition functions determined by a K-partition.

<sup>12</sup>Proof: let  $P^{\cdot}(\cdot)$  be the result of applying an arbitrary supposition function to your probability function  $P$  in 'Betting on the laws' or 'Newcomb on the past'. Specify the values of  $P^{\cdot}(\cdot)$  as in the last table of §5. We will show that if conditions (i) and (ii) are satisfied, then  $P(D) \leq 1/2$ . By (i),  $P^{A_1}(H) = P(H) = P^{A_2}(H)$  and so  $a + b = P(H) = d + 0$ . By (ii),  $P^{A_1}(D) = P(D) = P^{A_2}(D)$  and so  $a + 0 = P(D) = 0 + e$ . By the definition of a supposition function,  $d + e + f = 1$ . Using the substitutions  $d = a + b$  and  $e = a$  in this sum, we have  $(a + b) + a + f = 1$ , so  $a = 1/2 - b/2 - f/2 \leq 1/2$ . Hence  $a = P(D) \leq 1/2$ .

In the light of this result one might reject Bet or Two-box on grounds that 'Betting on the past' or 'Newcomb on the laws' are not genuine decisions. Alternatively, one might assume that the cases are genuine decisions and take the above argument as a reason to reject Suppositional.

How might Suppositional be rejected? Bales (2017, 122–124) hopes for an attractive new decision theory consistent with analogs of Bet and Two-box, while cautioning that coming up with a suitable theory 'might be a substantive challenge and might require substantial changes to existing accounts'. Benchmark theory (Wedgwood 2013) is a notable non-suppositional decision theory consistent with Bet and Two-box, though it faces its own challenges (especially the proposed counterexample in Bassett (2015, §4.1)).

Other approaches for rejecting Suppositional include adopting a species of counterfactual whose semantics involves impossible worlds (Nolan 2017, Schwarz 2014, Williamson and Sandgren forthcoming, §5.1.1), and interpreting rigidified descriptions in novel ways (Williamson and Sandgren forthcoming, §5.2). Both approaches give up fairly fundamental framework assumptions, so their ultimate attractiveness will depend on whether alternative foundations can be constructed to support them.

A final approach worth exploring is a theory in which different supposition functions operate in different contexts (cf. Solomon 2021, n. 21). Such a theory might recommend both that an agent facing 'Betting on the laws' treat the laws (but not the distant past) as suppositionally independent of her present choice and that an agent facing 'Newcomb on the past' treat the distant past (but not the laws) as suppositionally independent of her present choice. A challenge for this approach is to specify exactly how the appropriate supposition function depends on what decision an agent faces. It is not obvious how to do so in general, especially for hybrid choice

situations that combine elements of ‘Betting on the laws’ and ‘Newcomb on the past’.

## 7 Conclusion

There are viable ways to reject each of Bet, Two-box, and Suppositional. Each way faces its own challenges and I won’t try to choose between them here. But as a causal decision theorist I must confess: the independent appeal of each premiss makes me wish I did not have to choose.<sup>13</sup>

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