

Options as mentalia

When I make a choice, I am faced with a set of options. But how come my options are the ones they are? And what does it take for something to be an option? Despite being often overlooked, the generation of a decision set is a necessary feature of intentional action. The nature of decision sets is of relevance across diverse areas including but not limited to philosophy of action, work on moral responsibility, and philosophy of economics. However, in theorising about intending, choosing, and acting, the presence of a salient, well-defined decision set is a starting point rather than the topic of inquiry. Philosophical work on options and decision set generation is scarce (though see Kalis, Kaiser, & Mojzich 2013; Smith 2010; Hedden 2012; Jeppsson 2018; Chappell 2008), and most of it is normative. To remedy this, this paper develops a systematic, descriptive account of options and their generation.

In what follows, I take an agent to be an entity with the capacity for intentional action or, at minimum, for endogenous selection among competing courses of behaviour. I take a decision set to be a set of items that an agent chooses from. Rather than clumsily speak of decision set constituents (DSCs), I will refer to DSCs as options.

On a view that is widespread across the decision sciences, options are simply any alternatives or behavioural trajectories available for an agent in the world. This is an influential approach taken as a premise across multiple literatures: for example, the notion of overall freedom (Pattanaik & Xu 1990) is associated with the number of alternatives available for the agent in the world. In behavioural economics (Glimcher 2011), with its popular notion of ‘nudging’, alternatives are thought of as being ‘out there’ in the world (Thaler & Sunstein 2008) rather than contingent on

the agent's mental life. The notion of revealed preferences, which is widespread in economics, also takes options – understood as the objects of preference and choice – to be out in the world (although see Thoma 2021 for an unusual, contrary view). For example, when an economist infers that readers prefer best-selling books over those that do not sell, they take the agents' decision sets to include all the books being compared.

Conceiving of options as mind-independent and agent-external makes for very large sets of options. For example, someone choosing where to take their partner for dinner has all the restaurants in town in their decision set. There are, however, several reasons to believe that decision sets are smaller than the range objective alternatives, unless the set of such alternatives is very small to begin with. The most obvious of these is epistemic: the person choosing the restaurant might not know all the restaurants in town. As such, the sets of items that agents, in fact, decide among must be in some sense *subjective*.

There are two ways that that we might construe of subjective decision sets.

- a. Subjective decision sets are made up of 'external options'. The set of external options is winnowed down by some mechanism(s) contingent on the agent's mental life, such as epistemic constraints (Caplin & Dean 2015; Smith 2010) or 'sensitivity mechanisms' (McClelland 2020).
- b. Embrace mentalism about options. Options themselves are mind-dependent. Subjective decision sets are made up of options as mental content, specifically, as mental representations of courses of behaviour.

Alternative A, however, does not fully capture the scope of options agents decide among. Options are sometimes products of our imagination, misapprehension, recollection, or creative synthesis.

A painter deliberating on what to create is not selecting from things that are found in the world as such. Rather, she is envisioning something new. Such options are best understood as *mentalia*, rather than as something discovered in the world. Rather than taking some options to be mind-independent possibilities and others to be mental representations, I will offer a unified account on which *all* options are *mentalia*. This allows us to consider options as mental states and to apply what we know about the cognitive processes associated with mental representations (see, e.g., Johnson-Laird 1983; Smortchkova, Schlicht, & Dolega 2020) to understanding decision sets and their constituents.

On the positive account developed here, i.e., mentalism about options, options are construed as mental representations, that is, as mental states with semantic content. However, not all mental representations are options. Instead:

Options are mental representations of courses of behaviour with first-person guidance that agents take to be feasible for themselves.

If we construe of options as mental representations, then option sets are finite. This contrasts with the infinite range of actional opportunities afforded by the mind-external world. Since agents must generate a finite set of representations (one that fits their cognitive bandwidth), mentalism about options gives us a naturalistic account of the finitude of decision sets.

Our past and present circumstances influence option generation through multiple mechanisms: through the availability of information, and by modulating agents' conceptions of the world and of themselves, including what agents take their own capabilities to be. Option mentalism predicts that if agents can generate a mental representation of a given behavioural trajectory, but that

trajectory does not emerge as an option, then the option omission results from a negative feasibility assessment. This allows us to disambiguate two ways in which individual background factors, such as disadvantage, shape choice. Even in the presence of salient information that allows someone to *imagine* becoming a doctor, their self-model might forestall the emergence of this behavioural trajectory as accompanied by an ascription of feasibility, and therefore preclude it as an *option*. By contrast, if a behavioural trajectory cannot be imagined, then option omission results from the limitations of the information that the agent is operating with.

The account of options as mentalia offered here captures the subjective, agentic nature of decision sets, elegantly explains how choice from a manageable set of options is possible in complex environments, and yields a conceptual basis against which future work on decision and choice can be developed.