

Radin's Razor and the Fallacy of Prediction

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Abstract:

In light of an unpredictable pandemic, numerous attempts have been made to use past conditions to assume or predict future actions, consequences, and events. The attempts have often been such that they can be stated in the following form:¹

- (a) *S is confident H will happen in the future IFF (i.e. if and only if)*
- (i) *H has happened before*
 - (ii) *There has been a clear pattern of H happening under T circumstances*
 - (iii) *T circumstances are currently taking place*

For example, Francis has held that the following gives the necessary and sufficient conditions to predict the near future:²

- (b) *S knows that P IFF*
- (i) *S is aware P has happened before*
 - (ii) *S is currently in a situation where P has always happened in the past*
 - (iii) *S can confidently predict P will happen in the future*

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Introduction

I shall argue through Radin's Razor that (a) and (b) are both false in that the circumstances stated therein do not add up to a sufficient condition for any indicator of future events.

Radin's Razor is a type of thought fallacy that says because things have been a certain way in the past, they will be that way, or at the least, follow a similar trend in the future.

In reality, the future has no dependence on the past whatsoever. We can try to find a connection to future actions based on past historical events or reactions, but these are coincidental and have no bearing on each other.

Anything that happens in the past cannot and will not be a clue as to what will happen. History does not repeat itself, as the old saying goes. History, at best, goes in accidentally similar cycles at times that the human mind tries to connect as related. But when an unpredictable event that has never happened before takes form, the accidental cycles are interrupted and it is clear there was no pattern to begin with.

Radin's Razor becomes blatantly obviously during coronavirus. To say that A will result in B and things will probably be the same in the future because it has in the past is a misrepresentation of reality.

CASE I

In 2019, the economy is on the way up, so Jim will invest in building his business. He chooses to do this because in the past, the economy has only taken a turn down due to the stock market crash of 1939, or the housing crisis of 2008, and it doesn't look like those things will happen. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the economy will continue to rise, and Jim can invest more money into his business, knowing the economy will keep on thriving.

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Then, in 2020, coronavirus plagues the world population — a completely unforeseeable phenomena that sent the economy from an upward trend into a downward spiral almost overnight.

This unpredictable event makes Jim's business vulnerable because he assumed events of the past could predict how the future would be. As a result, Jim took out a loan on a new building that he can no longer pay off, despite predicting he could.

The past has virtually no bearing on the future. A novel virus made the economy slow to a standstill, and Jim is still none the wiser about what will happen in the future based on this event itself. To say the economy might bounce back after a few years once there is a vaccine for the virus, based on the economy coming back from the housing crash of 2008, is simply a blind guess by anyone who utters it.

Radin's Razor is the false assumption that because things are looking up, and things have gone up in the past in similar circumstances, the economy will continue to rise. It assumes too, that humans have fixed errors of the past, such as the mortgage industry, to avoid crashes similar to 2008.

In reality, the future is always uncertain, no matter what steps analysts take to try to predict risks that could or could not happen. The truth is, a completely unpredictable and devastating event, such as coronavirus, is always a possibility that humans do not factor in because they have not seen something like that happen before.

CASE II

Linda's parents always give her a cookie every night after dinner at 8 pm. For the five years of her young life that she has been conscious enough to remember, Linda has received a cookie from her mother and father at this exact time. Linda expects tomorrow night, she will get a cookie from her parents.

Linda's parents then get into a car crash on the way home and wind up staying in a hotel for the night, calling a babysitter for young Linda. Her parents are therefore not able to give her the cookie for the first time in her life. The child assumes she will receive the cookie, but an unexpected event prevents that from happening.

Linda falsely assumes when her parents are back, they will resume giving her the cookie. However, from that day forward, her parents, without explanation, never give her a cookie at night again.

Linda has fallen for Radin's Razor, because she surmises that the only change in routine is the car crash and hotel stay, rather than other unpredictable outcomes that come from the event.

Linda believes the past will continue into the future because that is the way it has always been. In reality, anything can start or stop at any moment with no reliance on past events.

The human mind looks for patterns: if something happened in the past, the mind wants to be able to see a trend of this possibly happening again in the future. The brain constantly searches for patterns because it makes learning easier. This type of learning makes the mind believe a specific event will happen at a particular point in time.³

However, using Radin's Razor we can see that future prediction is impossible, because there are infinite possibilities, including ones that we cannot fathom until they happen.

NOTES

- i. Gettier, Edmund L., 1963, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?", *Analysis*, 23(6): 121–123. doi:10.2307/3326922. s
- ii. Francis, Ian, *100 Flights A Collection of Essays Written on Airplanes*, (Miami, Florida, 2020).
- iii. Arkady Konovalov, Ian Krajbich. *Neurocomputational Dynamics of Sequence Learning*. *Neuron*, 2018; DOI: 10.1016/j.neuron.2018.05.013