

25. Kelly 2004, Acting for the sake of the past

Kevin Dorst
kevindorst@pitt.edu

PHIL 0450

You **honor sunk costs** \approx you take the fact that you (or others) have invested resources into achieving a goal as a reason in favor of it.

Examples: Ski trip. War sacrifices.

The conventional wisdom (e.g. Hastie and Dawes):

- 1) **Descriptive claim:** People often honor sunk costs; and
- 2) **Normative claim:** Doing so is irrational.

Why (1)? Look out how people make decisions!

Why (2)? The past is the past! The factors that should determine your decision are the things you can *change*. You can't change the past, so it shouldn't affect your decision.

Kelly: either (2) is false, or we lack evidence for (1).

E.g. memory-wipe pill.
Problems:
Evidential effects
Outcome effects

Changing the past

Actions now and their future consequences *can* change the (proper interpretation of) the past. And that proper interpretation can matter!

- Doctor working to save a stabbing victim determines whether the attacker committed assault or murder.
- Historical events that achieve their true significance much later.
- Within a life, later events can alter the whole narrative structure.

Survival of boy who becomes dictator.
Met partner because you failed exam.

Generally: often seems reasonable to have **redemptive preferences**: prefer that past sacrifices not be in vain.

Your friend dies suddenly. While going through her things, you discover a manuscript she was working on secretly. Do you try to get it published? Surely how much time/energy/care she invested in it could affect your decision!

Claim: redemptive preferences are rational when the original project was of independent value.

It's rational to care about persons and their projects—including your own!

Upshot: "Honor sunk costs" understood in a *wide* or *narrow* way.

→ If wide, plenty of evidence for (1), but (2) is false.

→ If narrow, (2) is true, but little if any evidence for (1).