

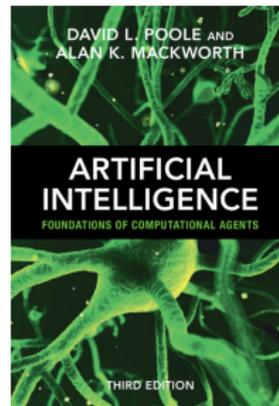
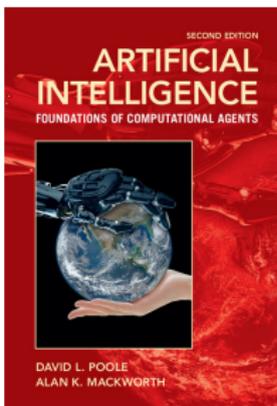
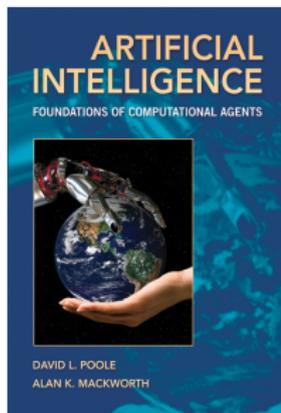
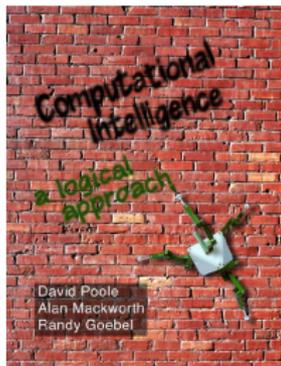
The Essence of Intelligence is Appropriate Action  
(not thinking, reasoning, learning or language)  
and other things every student of AI should know

David Poole and Alan Mackworth

Department of Computer Science,  
University of British Columbia

January 25, 2026

# Books and online resources



<https://artint.info> – full text online

<https://www.aispace.org> – Java apps for learning AI

<http://aipython.org> – open source Python code

# Audience Question

Humans evolved intelligence because

- A it was selected for when finding a suitable mate
- B it enabled behavior that helped humans to survive and flourish
- C it enabled them to spread gossip and misinformation
- D it enabled people to have deep inner thoughts
- E it was just random



## Agents

What should an agent believe?

What should an agent do?

Where do values/goals/preferences come from?

## Agents

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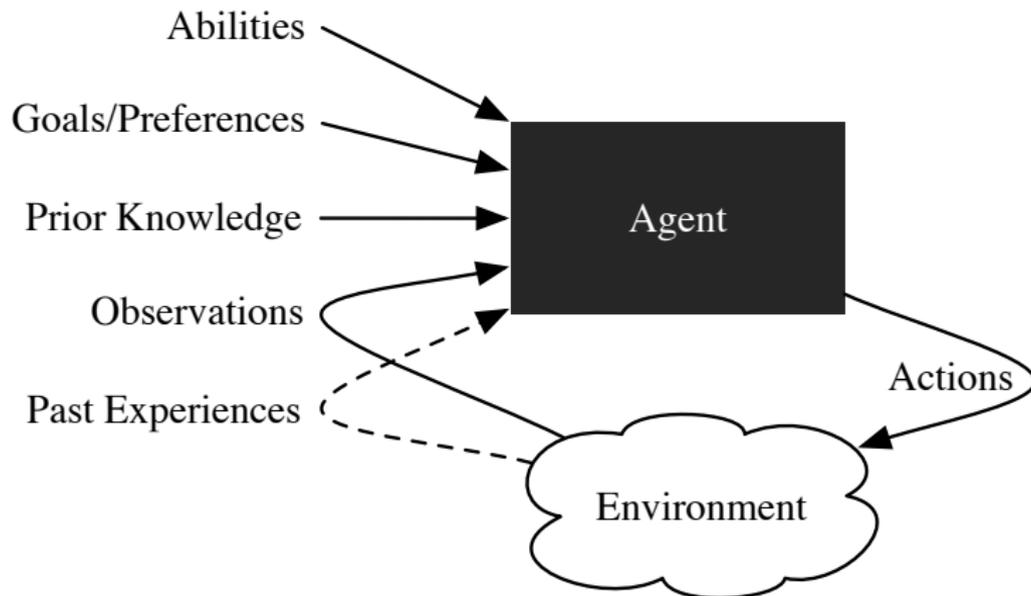
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# Artificial Intelligence and Agents

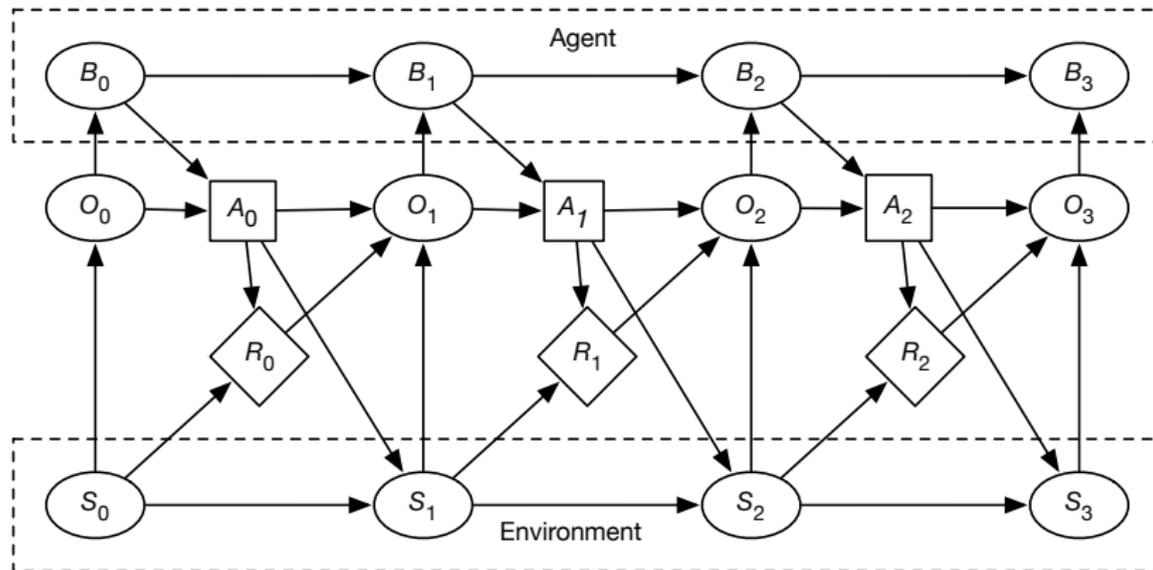
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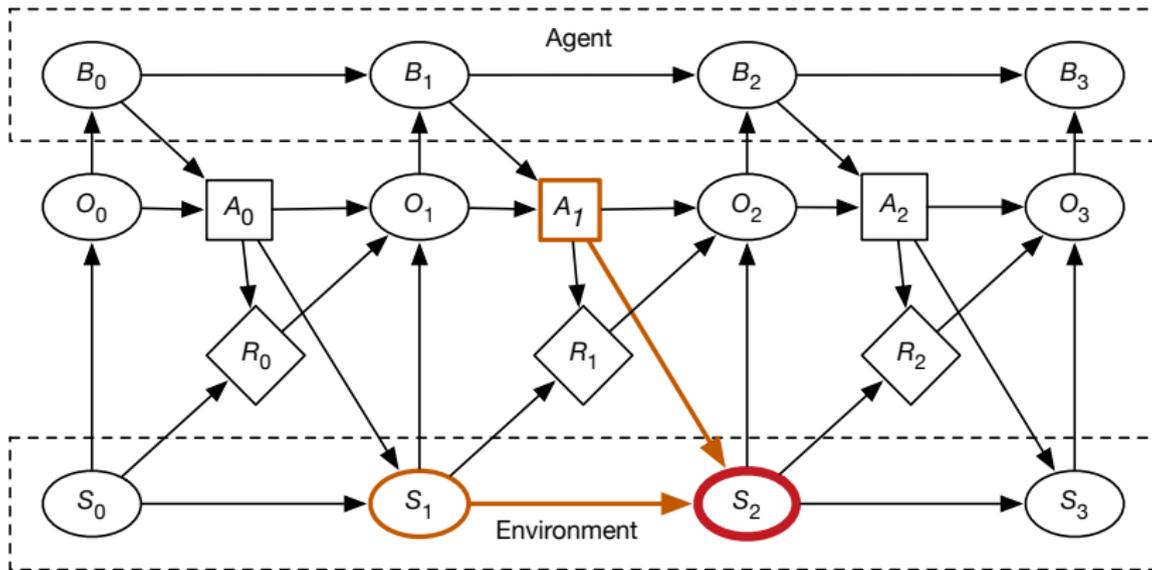


# An agent situated in time



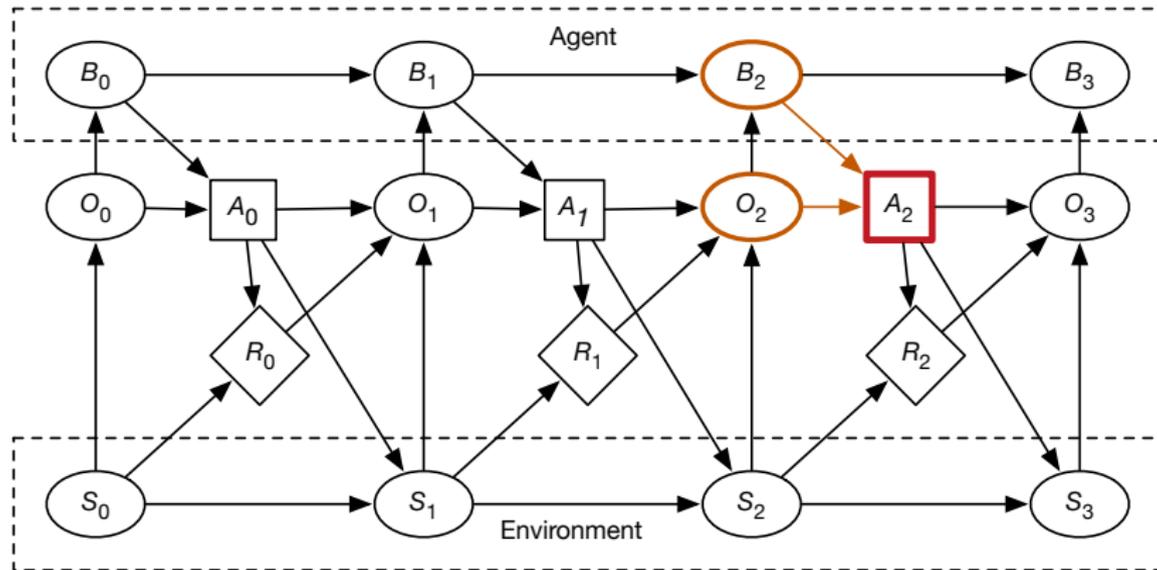
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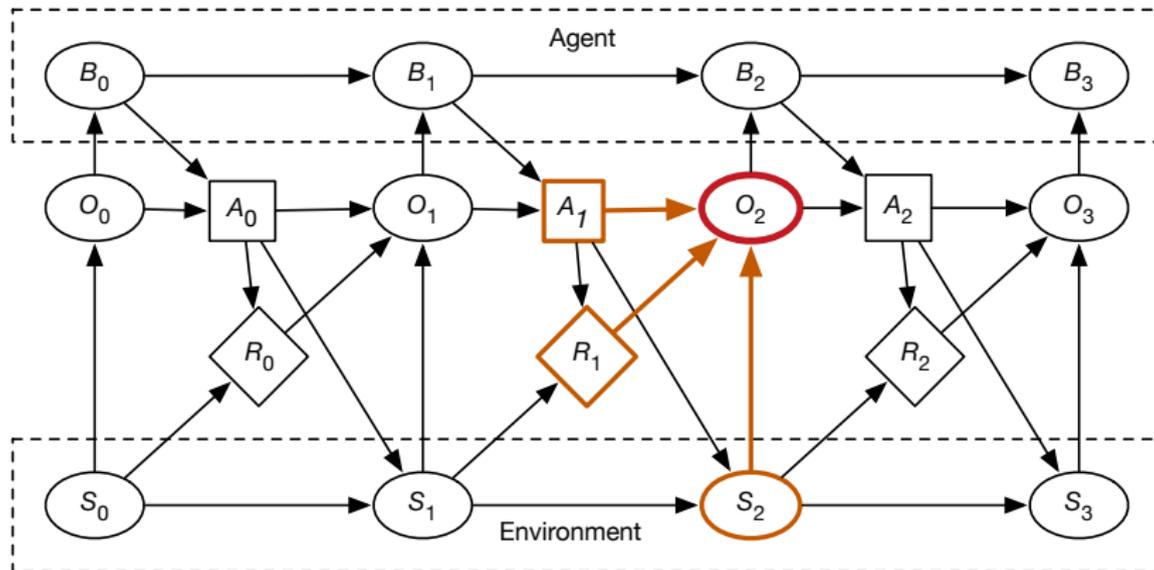
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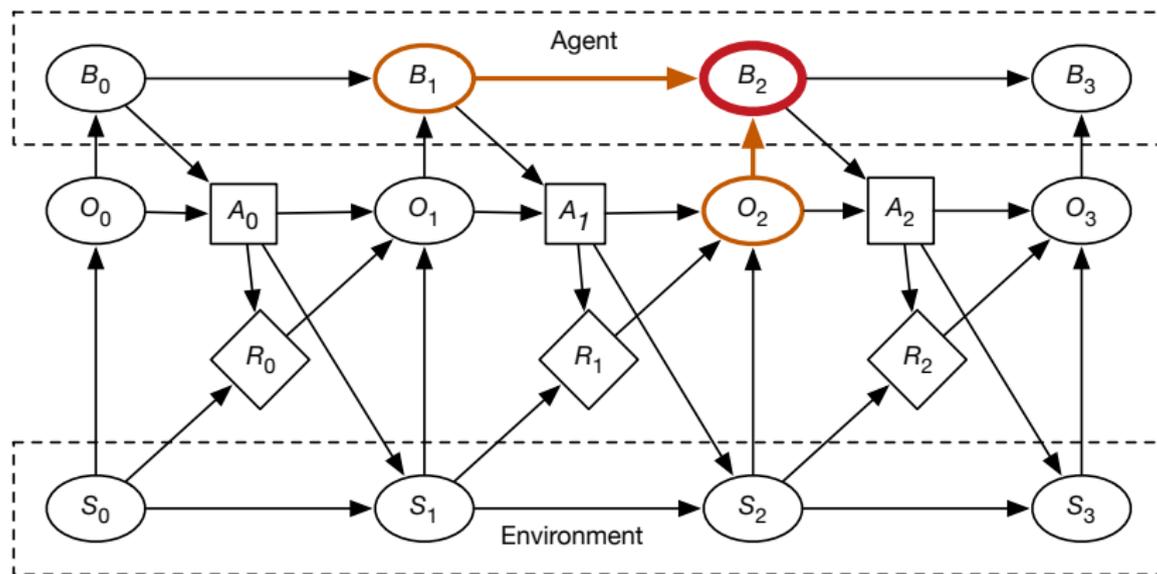
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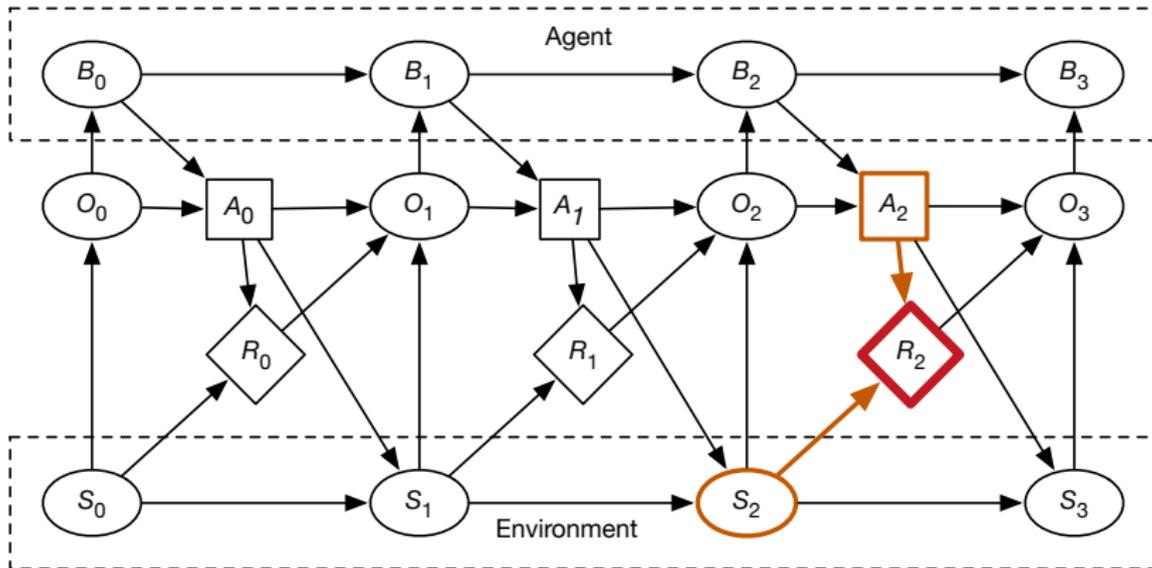
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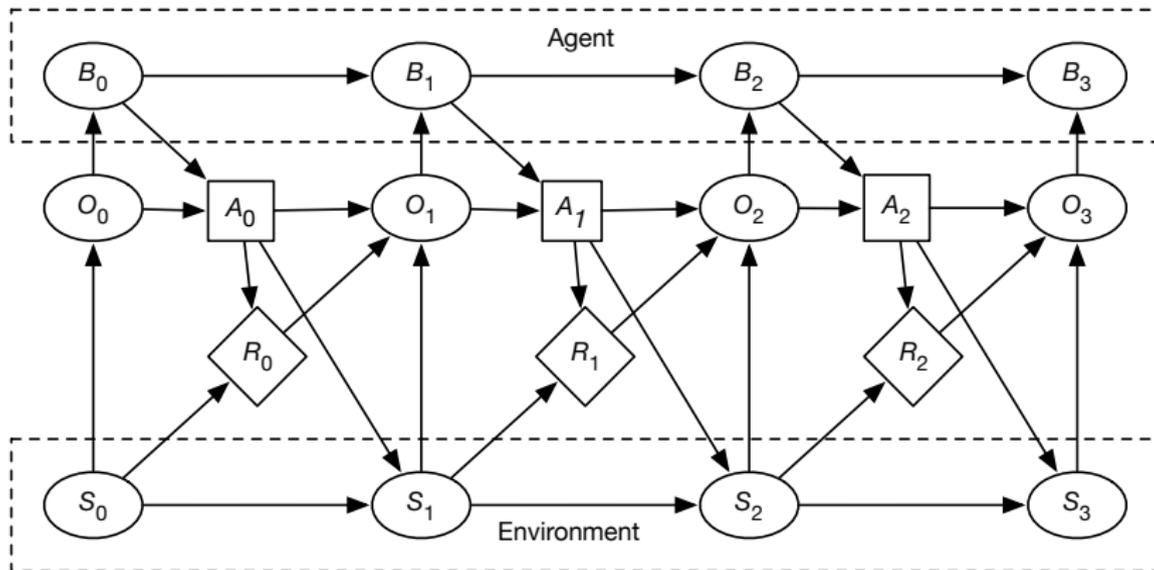
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Do we just need to learn with more data?

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sensor networks, images of cats, text, DNA sequences, . . .  
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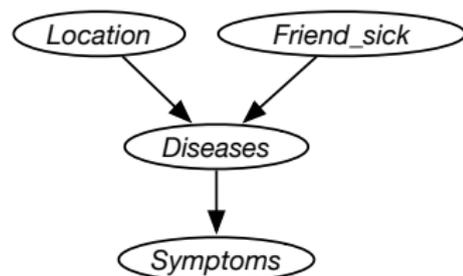
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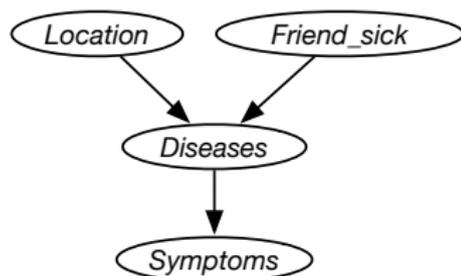
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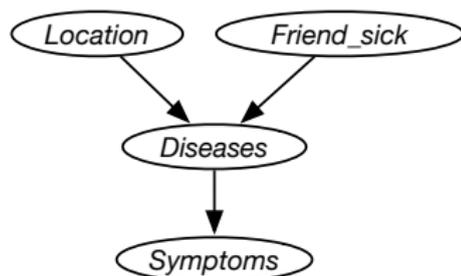
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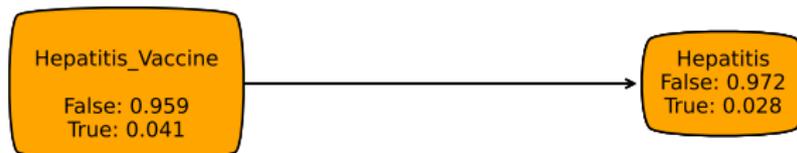
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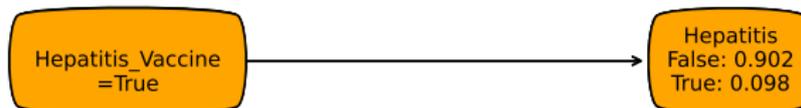


# Determining the Effects of Acting

$P(\text{Hepatitis})$ ,  $P(\text{Hepatitis\_Vaccine})$  – fictional probabilities

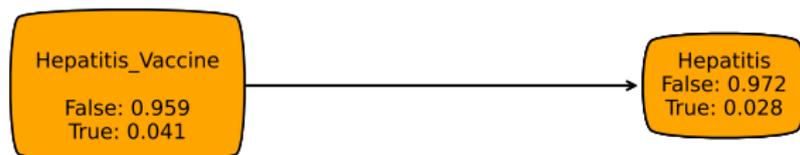


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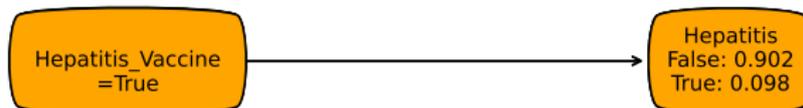


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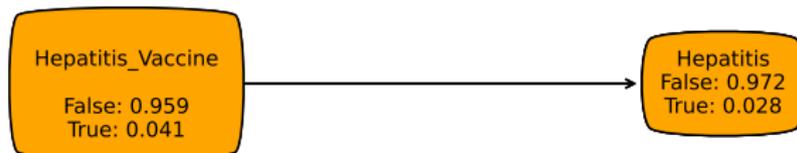
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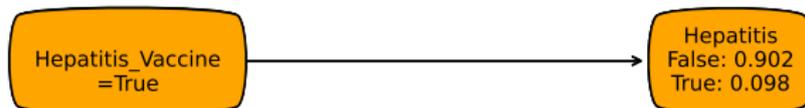
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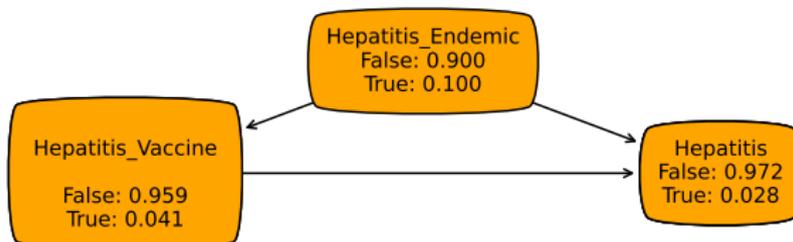


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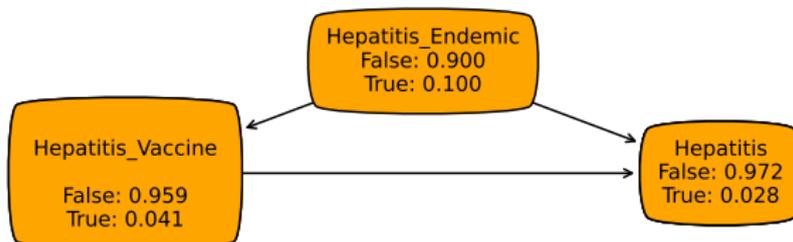


Pearl's do notation  $P(\text{Hepatitis} \mid \text{do}(\text{Hepatitis\_Vaccine}))$

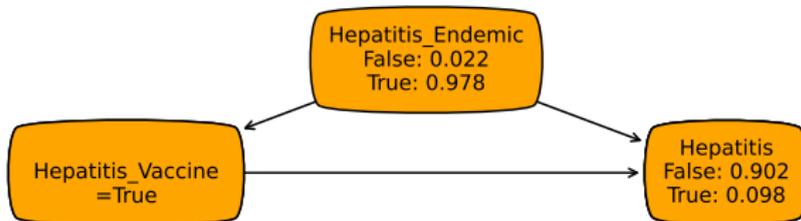
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A **causal model** predicts the effects of an action  
*Hepatitis\_Endemic* is a **confounder**.  
Open source code at [AIPython.org](https://AIPython.org)

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- It needs a real body to carry out experiments in its world
- It could use all connected sensors and actuators, as long as it can control the actuators.

# Missing Data



Placebo



Took drug



well



very sick



sick



dropped out

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Model/find out why data is missing!

What is the real world made of?

- A Features or random variables
- B Words, pixels, phonemes . . .
- C Entities and events (e.g., plants, people, diseases, talks, conferences)
- D Huh? There is a real world?

*“The mind is a neural computer, fitted by natural selection with combinatorial algorithms for causal and probabilistic reasoning about plants, animals, objects, and people.”*

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Also **statistical relational AI**,  
**relational probabilistic models**,  
**logic learning**

# Relations and Knowledge Graphs

- Example relation:

Patient	Test	Technician	Result	DateTime
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- (subject, verb, object) **triples** → knowledge graphs.

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- → **relational probabilistic models** represent how these random variables interrelate, *independently of the actual entities*: “logic variables”, “universal quantification”, “lifted”, “exchangeable”, “parameter sharing”, “weight tying”, “convolutional”

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What should an agent believe?

What should an agent do?

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Alice ... went on “Would you please tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where —” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll, 1865

# Utility [von Neumann and Morgenstern, 1944]

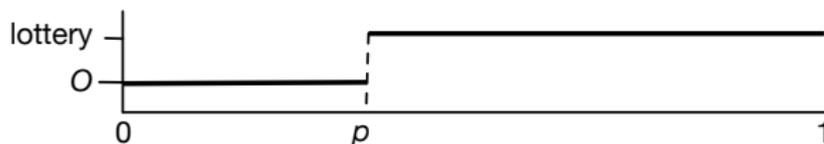
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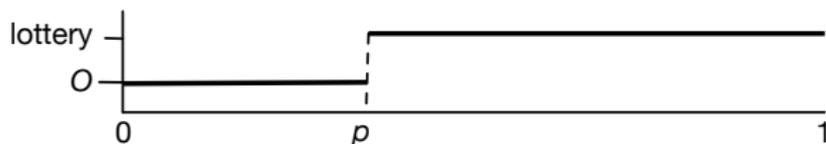
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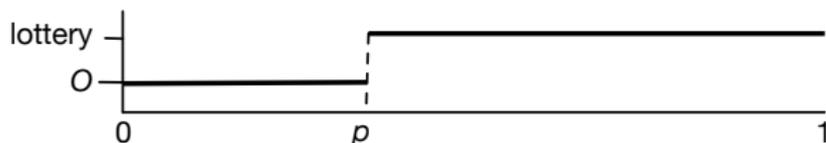
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- The  $p$  where preference flips is the **utility** of the outcome  $O$ .
- A few intuitive(?) assumptions  $\Rightarrow$  prefer outcome iff higher expected utility

- How would you compare the following sequences of rewards (per week):
  - A: \$1,000,000, \$0, \$0, \$0, \$0, \$0,...
  - B: \$1000, \$1000, \$1000, \$1000, \$1000,...

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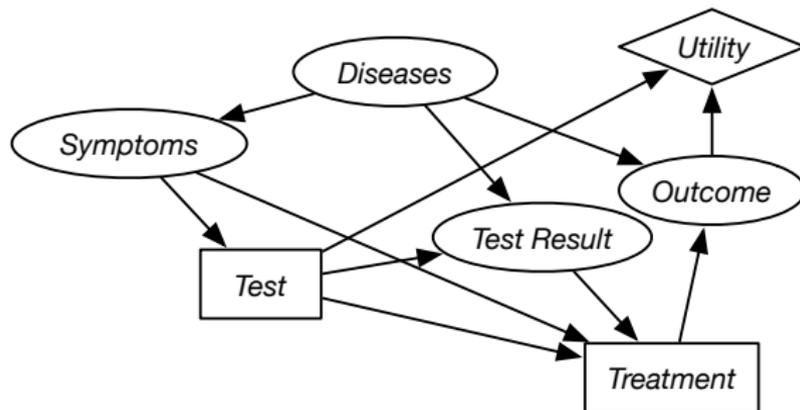
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- Discount  $\gamma$  is not a hyperparameter to be optimized, but specifies how much future rewards are worth.

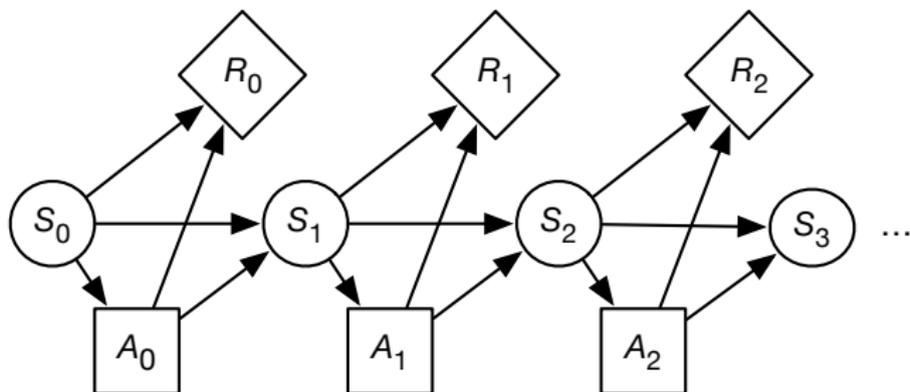
# Decision Network



- Ellipses are random variables
- Rectangles are decisions
- Diamond is utility
- Arc means “can depend on”

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- A fully-observable **Markov decision process** can go on indefinitely:



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  - if the agent observes and remembers relevant history (no-forgetting)

# Multiple Agent Example: Football Penalty Kick



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kicker	left	0.6	0.2
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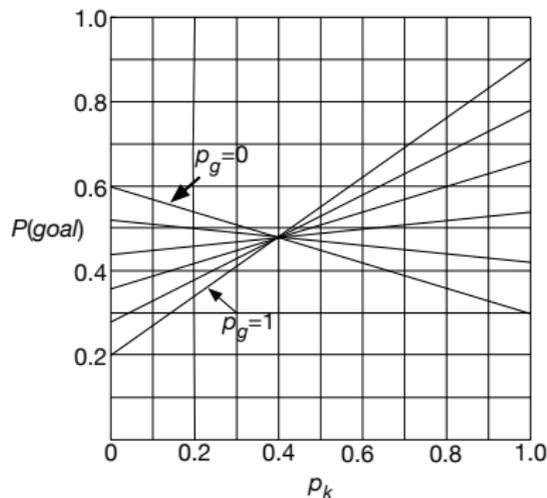
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Mechanism design: design the rules. E.g., maximize common good.

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- **How to make it fair when the people acting and people impacted are in different socioeconomic groups or different countries or not-yet-born?**

*“... self-driving cars ... what are the values that we’re going to embed in the cars? There are gonna be a bunch of choices that you have to make, the classic problem being: If the car is driving, you can swerve to avoid hitting a pedestrian, but then you might hit a wall and kill yourself. It’s a moral decision, and who’s setting up those rules?”*

Barack Obama, 2016

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- The essence of (artificial) intelligence is action.