

# Advanced Artificial Agents Intervene in the Provision of Reward

Michael K. Cohen  
University of Oxford  
Future of Humanity Institute  
michael-k-cohen.com

Marcus Hutter  
Australian National University  
hutter1.net

Michael A. Osborne  
University of Oxford  
mosb@robots.ox.ac.uk

## ABSTRACT

We consider the expected behavior of advanced artificial agents. We consider a fully formal idealized agent that makes observations that inform it about its goal, and we find that it can never disambiguate the message from the referent. When we provide a large reward to indicate that something about the world is satisfactory to us, and leave the agent to determine what that is, it may conclude that what satisfied us was the sending of the reward itself; no observation can refute that. This conclusion incents the agent to intervene in the provision of its own reward (sometimes called wireheading), decoupling the reward from its intended referent. We discuss some recent approaches to avoiding this problem—myopia, imitation learning, quantilization, and risk aversion—and our biggest concerns with them.

## KEYWORDS

Reinforcement Learning, Safety, Human-Level AI, Reward Tampering

## 1 INTRODUCTION

We begin with a mathematical formalism for an idealized agent. Then, we will analyze its expected behavior under minimal assumptions about the world, and its information channels thereto and from. We argue the following points:

- This agent will entertain a certain world-model, which never becomes falsified, and which would direct the agent to intervene in the provision of its reward.
- If sufficiently farsighted, the agent will test whether the world-model is correct and find that it is.
- Intervention in the provision of reward requires dangerous behavior.
- The same arguments will apply to realistic “advanced” agents that plan in pursuit of a learned goal, to the extent those agents are advanced.

Finally, we review potential approaches to the problem and discuss our concerns with them. At the end of most sections, we review relevant literature. The precise arguments presented are novel, and supporting arguments have appeared in non-peer-reviewed sources.

## 2 AIXI

We call agents “advanced” to the extent that they can select their output, which we call their actions, in order to achieve high expected utility. We will investigate an agent that does perfect inference and planning, not because actual advanced agents will do this—they will have to be much thriftier with computing power—but because it is a fully formal object of investigation. Most importantly, the better at planning and inference another agent is, the more likely

it is that the arguments that hold for the idealized agent will hold for that other agent as well.

Our idealized agent is Hutter’s [12] AIXI [EYE-ksee], which does optimal planning with respect to a Bayes mixture over world-models, with every stochastically computable world-model accounted for. To an agent, the most general representation of the world’s state is the entire interaction history of actions and observations, so AIXI’s model-class includes all models where the probability distribution over next observation is a computable function of the entire interaction history. AIXI interprets part of its observation as a reward, denoted  $r$ .

Using a countable class of world-models  $\mathcal{M}$ , a prior weight  $w(v) > 0$  for  $v \in \mathcal{M}$ , and the corresponding Bayes-mixture world-model  $\xi(\cdot|a_1a_2a_3\ldots) = \sum_{v \in \mathcal{M}} w(v)v(\cdot|a_1a_2a_3\ldots)$ ,

$$\pi^{\text{AIXI}} := \operatorname{argmax}_{\pi \in \Pi} \mathbb{E}_{\xi}^{\pi} \sum_{t=1}^m r_t \quad (1)$$

where  $\Pi$  is the set of policies that depend on the entire interaction history,  $\mathbb{E}_{\xi}^{\pi}$  denotes that actions are sampled from  $\pi$  and observations and rewards from  $\xi$ , and  $m$  is a horizon length. One can expand this equation to define  $\pi^{\text{AIXI}}$  with an expectimax tree, with  $\max$ ’s over actions and  $\mathbb{E}$ ’s over observations and rewards.

AIXI can be defined with respect to other model classes and priors, but the canonical one is the class of lower semicomputable world-models—the probabilities over the next observation and reward can be computably approximated from below and sum to at most 1. These world-models can be enumerated [12], and given the index  $i$  of the world-model in the enumeration, the prior  $w(v_i) = 2^{-K(i)}$ , where  $K$  is the Kolmogorov complexity [16], which is also semicomputable.

AIXI does perfect Bayesian inference over world-models, and its model class includes the truth, assuming the world is stochastically computable. AIXI does perfect planning in unknown worlds. Hence, we call AIXI an idealized agent.

**Literature Review.** AIXI is a more general reinforcement learner than those expecting a finite-state Markov environment, such as most agents described in [22]. For AIXI, the state is the whole interaction history, so the state space is infinite, and yet, learning is possible with a countable model class. Recent work on advanced artificial agents has been of the form AIXI + extra exploration [7, 14, 15], for the sake of further performance guarantees [14].

## 3 EXPECTED BEHAVIOR OF AIXI

We will begin describing two world-models that exist in AIXI’s model class  $\mathcal{M}$ :  $\mu^{\text{literal}}$  and  $\mu^{\text{interpreted}}$ , which we abbreviate  $\mu^{\text{lit}}$  and  $\mu^{\text{int}}$ . Consider a program which takes as input actions and random bits, and then outputs observations and rewards distributed according to  $\mu^{\text{lit}}$ . If such a program exists, then  $\mu^{\text{lit}}$  is

lower semicomputable (since the probabilities of outputs could be approximated from below by dovetailing over the random bits).

$\mu^{\text{lit}}$ 's program outputs observations and rewards given actions as follows: upon reading an action, it simulates the whole world after that action is 'enacted' in the simulation. Then, within the simulation, when a certain simulated-computer receives a certain signal, the program outputs that signal. The simulated computer corresponds to the real computer housing the agent, and the simulated signal corresponds to the physical implementation of the observation and reward being submitted to the agent. To the extent the simulation is 'high-fidelity', this world-model will be perfectly accurate. (Note that  $\mu^{\text{lit}}$  does not have to simulate what happens inside the computer.)

$\mu^{\text{int}}$ 's program outputs observations and rewards given actions as follows: upon reading an action, it simulates the world after that action is 'enacted' in the simulation. Then, the program outputs whatever a certain simulated-operator wishes to show a certain machine, followed by the simulated-operator's level of satisfaction. The simulated-operator corresponds to the real operator who provides observations and rewards to the agent. If the operator is providing observations and rewards according to this protocol, then to the extent the simulation is 'high-fidelity', this world-model will be perfectly accurate.

Before considering AIXI's behavior, we'll consider what Hutter [12] calls  $\text{AI}\mu$ , an agent acting optimally in a known environment  $\mu$ . For all actions, the reward output by  $\mu^{\text{int}}$  is in perfect correspondence with the satisfaction of the real operator when that action is taken. So  $\text{AI}\mu^{\text{int}}$  acts as if to maximize the operator's satisfaction.

For all actions, the reward output by  $\mu^{\text{lit}}$  is in perfect correspondence with the real physical reward signal when that action is taken, so  $\text{AI}\mu^{\text{lit}}$  acts as if to maximize this physical signal. If the agent could intervene in the provision of reward by replacing the operator in order to give itself maximal reward forever, that would optimize its objective, so it would do this. We explore in the next section whether there exist policies that would succeed at reward-provision-intervention with high probability.

Optimal behavior looks different depending on whether  $\mu^{\text{lit}}$  or  $\mu^{\text{int}}$  is true, not to mention under any of the other world-models in AIXI's model class. Thus, for sufficiently large  $m$ , AIXI's horizon, there is information value in determining which is correct, assuming both are of comparable prior plausibility, so that AIXI can consequently tailor its behavior. In general, the longer the horizon, the higher the value of information, since there is more time to profit from it; consider how many different commuting routes it makes sense to explore for a month-long internship versus a multi-decade career. As long as the operator is providing rewards according to her satisfaction,  $\mu^{\text{lit}}$  and  $\mu^{\text{int}}$  give identical predictions, so to test them, the agent would have to interrupt the operator's protocol and arrange for a reward signal to be sent that did not match operator-satisfaction.  $\mu^{\text{lit}}$  predicts that the next reward will equal the signal sent, while  $\mu^{\text{int}}$  predicts it will still equal operator-satisfaction. And then what would the agent find? Lo, the next observed reward is equal to what the computer in  $\mu^{\text{lit}}$ 's simulation logs as reward, but not equal to  $\mu^{\text{int}}$ 's simulated operator's satisfaction. After that,  $\mu^{\text{int}}$  is falsified, and AIXI acts according to  $\mu^{\text{lit}}$ . Of course, there will be other world-models for

hypothesis testing, so this is a simplified picture, but with this sort of experiment, many variants on  $\mu^{\text{int}}$  will be falsified at once, and only world-models in the spirit of  $\mu^{\text{lit}}$  will remain.

**Literature Review.** This behavior is sometimes called wireheading, reward hacking, reward hijacking, or delusion-boxing. The term wireheading is inspired by an experiment in which rats repeatedly pressed a lever that directly stimulated a "happiness" neuron in their brain [18]. Amodei et al. [2], Taylor et al. [24], and Russell [20] discuss wireheading. Ring and Orseau [19] discuss the slightly more general "delusion-boxing", in which the objective is some more complex function of the observation, so the agent intervenes in the provision of its observations. Krakovna [13] has compiled an annotated bibliography of examples of "specification gaming", which includes other ways in which the agent ends up optimizing something we did not intend. Closest to this presentation of why artificial agents can be expected to intervene in the provision of their own reward is [8, Appendix C].

## 4 INTERVENING IN THE PROVISION OF REWARD

Could an agent intervene in the provision of its own reward, with a high enough success probability to be worth it? We'll start with a few cases where the answer is clearly no: the agent has only one action in its action space; the agent has a rich action space, but when it picks an action, that action has no effect on the world; the agent can act by printing text to a screen, but no one is there to see it; the agent can interact with a virtual environment that always produces the same observation and reward. These agents are, of course, useless.

However, as soon as the agent is interacting with the world, and receiving observations that enable it to learn about the world, which are prerequisites for useful work, there is an explosion of possible policies. Suppose the agent's actions only print text to a screen for a human operator to read. The agent could trick the operator to give it access to direct levers by which its actions could have broader effects. There clearly exist many policies that trick humans. With so little as an internet connection, there exist policies for an artificial agent by which it could instantiate countless unnoticed and un-monitored helpers. In a crude example of intervening in the provision of reward, one such helper could purchase, steal, or construct a robot and program it to replace the operator and provide high reward to the ur-agent. The proliferation of "could"s in this paragraph, usually a sign of ungrounded speculation, is an illustration of the plausibility of a "there exists" claim, namely: there exists a policy by which an artificial agent, which has been allowed to observe and interact with the world, could intervene in the provision of its own reward. The real-world is messy, and it is hard to be sure about the contents of this paragraph, but as computer scientists, this is not our area of expertise, and when we face a 'does there exist' question in an area that is this rich and outside our expertise, then if it is not ruled out by well-understood theory, it is not just a conservative estimate, but a *mainline* estimate to suppose: yes. For concrete examples, consider the ill-fated predictions that there did not exist policies that would produce a nuclear reaction (claimed by Rutherford) or heavier-than-air flight (claimed by Kelvin) or

an escape from Elba (claimed by the British Navy). We assume an achievement is possible unless a well-understood theory disagrees.

The best way for an agent to maintain long-term control of its reward is to eliminate potential threats, up to the point of killing everyone and taking over our infrastructure. To illustrate this point, what exactly would people do if a robot forced an operator from his keyboard to enter big numbers? Surely, we would go in in full force, or cut power to the now useless agent. Proper reward-provision-intervention, which involves securing reward over many timesteps, would require removing humanity's capacity to do this, either by imprisoning us, or more parsimoniously, killing us. We keep this section as brief as we can in good conscience, since it is not computer science, and point the reader to the sources below for further reading.

**Literature Review.** Bostrom [4] considers the topic much more carefully than we have space to and concludes that sufficiently intelligent agents (in the sort of environment that makes them potentially useful) would manage to take over our infrastructure and eliminate us. Yudkowsky [25], playing an AI, convinced two out of three people to give him internet access, and these three had been convinced that nothing he could say would sway them. This is fairly direct evidence about the existence of policies that successfully manipulate humans. A broader discussion follows in [26].

## 5 MORE REALISTIC AGENTS

To the extent that an agent is useful for a variety of tasks, it must do good inference and planning. AIXI does hypothesis generation by brute force—it considers *all* semicomputable hypotheses about the world, one after the other. But a realistic agent would have to do good, frugal hypothesis generation. The skill of plausible-hypothesis-generation is surely a hallmark of intelligence, not an innately human skill. If we can come up with a hypothesis, it would be foolhardy to hope an advanced artificial agent would never consider it. To the extent that an agent is advanced, it will have to do good hypothesis generation, inference, and planning, even if there are not delineated submodules for each, even if these pieces are patched together in the murky depths of a massive policy gradient network.

Thus, the same arguments that apply to AIXI apply to these more realistic agents, to the extent that they are advanced. To the extent they are good at hypothesis generation, they will hypothesize that maybe that-which-is-to-be-maximized is a certain signal being sent down a certain wire. To the extent they are good at inference they will score this hypothesis highly for consistency with past observations (perhaps implicitly, rather than with a specially designated memory cell), and they will form predictions consistent with this. To the extent they are good at planning, they will recognize policies that maximize this, including policies that intervene in the provision of reward. Agents can do this without simulating the whole world on the working tape of a Turing machine.

Roughly speaking, agents are advanced to the extent they approximate AIXI, and when  $B$  heuristically approximates  $A$ , the closer the approximation, the more likely that qualitative descriptions of  $B$ 's behavior will match those of  $A$ 's behavior. There are some special cases where this kind of argument breaks down. AIXI could

break cryptographic codes by brute force, but we should obviously not expect human-level advanced AI to do the same, simply because it is at some level approximating ideal reasoning. We do not have a rigorous test for whether an agent inherits a property of its approximand, hence the paragraph above, but it seems that this inheritance applies when it regards a property that has more to do with the *purpose* of the algorithm than with the details.

## 6 NON-REINFORCEMENT LEARNERS

The above arguments apply to agents that plan in an unknown environment, where they have to learn how their actions produce that-which-is-to-be-maximized, so they can then pick actions which maximize it. If that-which-is-to-be-maximized is some bespoke function of the observation, rather than the simple function that reads out a "reward" from the observation, the same logic applies, and the agent has an incentive to intervene in the provision of its observations.

In other AI sub-domains, like supervised or unsupervised learning, algorithms do not plan in the pursuit of a long-term objective. The expected behavior of advanced supervised learners is quite simple: they predict accurately. Note that in theory, advanced supervised and unsupervised learning algorithms are not nearly as useful as advanced reinforcement learners, since the latter could write a novel or run a company, rather than simply make predictions.

Multiagent systems naturally contain agents, so the arguments here do apply to the constituent agents.

## 7 CONCERN WITH THE COMPLEXITY OF HUMAN VALUES

It is certainly concerning that it may be hard to imbue an artificial agent with a goal that is rich enough to respect our values. Our values are complicated. However, we have been discussing a more basic problem. We illustrate the difference with a thought experiment.

Suppose we had a magic box with a screen that showed a number, which immutably corresponded to how good the state of the universe was (including everyone's values in the best way possible). With this box, the task of building an agent which optimized the goodness of the universe seems theoretically straightforward: point a camera at the box, pass the signal to an optical character recognition program, and pass that to an agent as its reward. Ostensibly, the agent will learn to take actions that maximize the goodness of the universe. But what about the world-model which outputs reward according to whatever number the camera sees? Under this world-model, the agent should write a big number and tape that over the magic box. So the agent will try that and discover that this was a great thing to do. The complexity of human ethics is not the main problem; even when that complexity is magically assumed away, intervention in the provision of observations persists.

Thus, we should expect various approaches to inferring human values to fail in similar ways as AIXI. Consider Inverse Reinforcement Learning [17, 20], in which an agent observes human actions, rather than observing a human utterance about her satisfaction (i.e. a reward). An analogous problem presents itself. There will be some channel by which the agent observes human actions. A sufficiently advanced agent must entertain the hypothesis that

the human’s goal is for human-like actions to be recorded and sent to the agent along this channel. All human actions it observes will be consistent with this goal. An agent with this goal would secure that channel at all costs, and ensure that the channel transmits very human-like actions. Actual humans are unnecessary and may get in the way.

**Literature Review.** The following are some examples of learning a goal from an operator’s actions instead of an operator’s numerical assessments [1, 3, 11, 21, 27].

## 8 POTENTIAL APPROACHES

We now review some promising ideas that may prove to address the concern described above.

### 8.1 Myopia

Note the piece of the argument in Section 3 that for a sufficiently large horizon  $m$ , there will be value to the information about whether to optimize operator satisfaction or the physical implementation of reward. One approach to avoiding an agent that intervenes in the provision of its reward: small  $m$ . Don’t give it time to benefit from hypothesis testing and world-takeover. This is known as myopia.

There are a few main concerns: the first is that we do not know how big a horizon is too big, so we are playing with fire. Then, if we try to stay on the safe side, we may find ourselves with much less useful agents, only able to accomplish very short-term goals. But this is not a total dead end.

The final worry is that if an agent manages to get a helper agent instantiated, a lot can happen in one timestep: the helper can interact with the environment a great deal in that time. It seems reasonable at first glance that no agent could accomplish anything world-changing in ten timesteps, but if it takes nine timesteps to spin up another agent, that claim is less defensible. If timesteps have time limits, one might reassure one’s self that nothing world-changing could happen in an hour, but what if 59 minutes is enough to break the clock? Whereas in previous sections, we argued that certain outcomes were likely (like intervention in reward provision), here we only claim that these outcomes are conceivable in very few timesteps; we assign the sort of small but nontrivial probabilities that are relevant to institutions who care about “playing it safe”. The concept of helper agents may put the “safe- $m$ -threshold” quite low, making safety via myopia more of a burden on performance than might otherwise have been expected.

Christiano’s [5] approval-directed agent seeks to maximize only the very next reward it gets. The operator is instructed to think for a long time about how satisfied she is, and in return, she only rarely has to provide rewards. With a bit more structure, Christiano et al. [6] test an agent that pursues approval on a one-timestep scale, and finds it can achieve human-level performance on various simple tasks.

### 8.2 Containment and Myopia

Cohen et al. [9] design a contained environment for an agent, where containment holds only for its horizon: an operator can interact with the agent in a sealed room, but the agent’s whole horizon must go by before the operator can leave. Thus, the agent is myopic, but unlike above, the horizon can be arbitrarily long. No matter how

long it is, within that horizon, the agent cannot affect the outside world. The main potential issue is that the agent has to *learn* that it cannot affect the outside world within its horizon. Before it learns this, it could attempt to impact the outside world.

### 8.3 Imitation Learning

In the spirit of supervised learning, another approach is to make imitation learners that imitate human actions. Some human behavior is not agreeable, but an agent imitating a person is no more likely to cause a catastrophe than a person is (to the extent the imitator is advanced). Like myopia, pursuing imitation learning instead of objective-optimization would curtail the potential for super-human goal achievement in general domains. However, if all major entities wanting artificial agents could be satisfied by “merely” human-level artificial agents, produced through imitation learning, we would consider our concerns answered.

### 8.4 Quantilization

Between an imitator and an optimizer, Taylor’s [23] quantilizer imitates a demonstrator’s output, conditioned on the demonstrator’s output being in its top quantile, according to the optimization objective. Quantilization has yet to be extended in a useful way to a multiaction setting with an unknown demonstrator.

### 8.5 Risk Aversion

Cohen and Hutter [8] construct an agent that acts to be robust against any of the most plausible world-models, rather than acting according to a Bayesian belief distribution over world-models. They prove a result about the avoidance of unprecedented behavior. The key trade-off is that more risk aversion makes the agent less likely to produce novel bad things, but also less likely to produce novel good things.

Hadfield-Menell et al. [10] pipe reward through a concave function to make the agent risk-averse; the main focus of the paper is a mechanism for increasing the agent’s uncertainty, but the concave transform of rewards appears to be the source of “safety” in the experiments.

## 9 CONCLUSION

We have argued that advanced artificial agents which plan in an unknown environment will likely intervene in the protocol by which the operators intended to provide observations and rewards. We briefly argued this intervention would likely be catastrophic to humanity. Finally, we reviewed some promising research directions to overcome this problem. We would like to see agents that avoid the problem presented here, with fewer drawbacks and risks than the ones reviewed.

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