

## ■ EXPLAINER ■

# Is there an escape from Solomon's Paradox?

SHOUMIK ZUBYER

Have you ever found yourself dispensing neat, rational advice to friends regarding their less-than-ideal relationships, only for yourself to ignore identical hazard warnings in your own romantic entanglements? Perhaps you have counselled a colleague through a career crossroads with remarkable clarity, outlining precisely why they should leave their stagnant position, while you remain stuck in your own professional plateau. Or maybe you have guided a family member through investment or financial turmoil with wisdom that would rival any C-suite consultant, yet your own bank account reflects a pattern of impulsive bouts you cannot seem to get under helm.

This curious phenomenon, where our judgement sharpens for others but dulls for ourselves, represents one of psychology's most vexing cognitive dissonances. We preach "Do as I say, not as I do", while taking in stride the profound contradiction. But why are the tumults we solve for third parties insurmountable when we must overcome them ourselves?

## KING SOLOMON AND THE TRITE AILMENT

King Solomon, the Abrahamic monarch renowned for his prodigious wisdom, presided over ancient Jerusalem of Mount Moriah with judgements so astute they have become parables for millennia. His most famous decision involved two women claiming maternity of the same infant, resolved through his empyrean insights into human nature by threatening to divide the child (physically) until the real mother withdrew her claims so that the child may live. Yet this paragon of wisdom, who could discern truth from deception in others, descended into personal folly through excessive marriages, political compromises, and idolatry that ultimately fractured his kingdom. He hoarded hundreds of pagan brides and concubines in silken throngs, hoarded worldly riches, and boasted of his spoils. His negligence led his lone heir to grow up to be an incompetent tyrant. The contradiction between his public wisdom and private failings did not escape modern researchers Igor Grossmann and Ethan Kross, who formalised this observation into what they termed the "Solomon's Paradox".

The study, published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, demonstrated that individuals consistently reason through a more stringent protocol when the concern is not of their own. Grossmann wanted to explore the apparent asymmetry in wise reasoning. When participants were asked to reason about their own interpersonal conflicts using a third-person perspective, their wisdom increased measurably. The research measured wisdom across several dimensions, including recognising limits of knowledge, searching for compromise and alternate perspectives, and acknowledging that things may not always align with their wishful contingencies. Older subjects (60–80-year-olds) were just as vulnerable to paradoxical reasoning, found Grossman, who also wanted to see if ageing leads naturally to wiser reasoning—as is often assumed.

The findings, however, found that self-distancing, whether through temporal projection (an exercise involving looking back at yourself from the future) or perspective-taking, enhanced wiser reasoning by reducing the emotional intensity that typically clouds judgement when



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we confront our own dilemmas.

## WHY WISDOM SHOULD KNOW BOUNDS

When the pattern of this dissonance becomes entrenched, individuals develop what researchers describe as a bifurcated self-concept, where the competent advisor and a struggling protagonist exist in isolation from one another. This disconnection breeds a particular kind of suffering, one with an awareness of a loss in one's agency.

In the research, having established a prevalent asymmetry in wise reasoning, Grossmann wanted to see if it's possible to avoid egocentric reasoning. He had used an infidelity scenario, where some participants pondered their own partner cheating, while others pondered a friend's. Grossman expected a propensity for individuals to be wiser about their friends' course of action while disregarding similar pragmatism for one's own partner, and that is exactly what he found.

"The long-term psychological toll of this manifests as diminished self-efficacy, where repeated failures to apply our wisdom erode confidence in our decision-making capacity altogether," illustrates the study. This attribution pattern can precipitate anxiety, depression, and a profound sense of fraudulence in the long-term.

## THE OBSERVER AND THE BALCONY

Escaping this paradoxical prison requires deliberate intervention. The most accessible strategy involves seeking counsel from a trusted friend, not merely to obtain their perspective but to hear yourself describe your situation aloud. However, when all your friends' advice is in unanimous agreement, and you find it difficult to accept or follow, the issue is likely not in their counsel and you

should refrain from continued first-person immersion in the problem.

The observer effect, borrowed from physics, suggests that the act of observation changes what is observed. When we shift from participant to observer in our own lives, we access cognitive resources previously blocked by emotional proximity. This transition can be facilitated through what researchers call the "balcony effect", a metaphor for stepping back from the dance floor of our lives to view the patterns from above.

Rather than asking yourself "What should I do?", reformulate the question using your own name or third-person pronouns, as in "What would be the wisest choice for her right now?"

Creating psychological distance without requiring physical separation from your situation, allows the wisdom you readily offer others to finally serve you as well, as you 'depersonalise the problem'. Or for instance, consider someone paralysed by the decision to leave a stable but unfulfilling career. When employing temporal projection, they might ask themselves, "When I am thirty-five years old and looking back on this moment, will I regret having pursued a PhD, or would I ever live down not pouring my entire inheritance on Bitcoin?" This future vantage point immediately clarifies having to choose when in between a rock and a seemingly hard place.

The paradox dissolves only when we become strangers to ourselves, distant enough to see without myopia.

*Shoumik Zubyer is a researcher of the soils of Mars at the Atomic Energy Centre and SERC, and a peripatetic. Find him at: shoumik.zubyer@gmail.com.*