The AORTA Reasoning Framework - Adding Organizational Reasoning to Agents

Intelligent agents are entities defined by, among other things, autonomy. In systems of many agents, the agents' individual autonomy can lead to uncertainty since their behavior cannot always be predicted. Usually, this kind of uncertainty is accommodated by imposing an organization upon the system; an organization that defines expected behavior of the agents and attempts to restrict the agents’ behavior to let it match the expectations. Restrictions can lead to a decrease in autonomy, contradicting one of the pillars of intelligent agents.

This thesis presents the AORTA reasoning framework, which is a practical component (founded in logic) that enriches intelligent agents with organizational reasoning capabilities. We take the agent's perspective by devising a component that integrates with the agent's usual reasoning capabilities in a non-intrusive way. This results in agents that are both organization-aware and autonomous. The reasoning component makes them organization-aware, and their autonomy is intact because the component does not change the existing reasoning mechanisms. As such, it allows the agents to decide whether to adhere to the system’s expectations.

The ability to reason about organizations has previously been successfully integrated into agent programming languages. However, the operationalization of an organization is usually tailored to a specific language. This makes it hard to apply the same approach to other languages and platforms. The AORTA reasoning framework distinguishes itself by being a generic framework that allows different kinds of agents to reason about different kinds of organizations.

We present our results in three main parts. In the first part, we present the theoretical foundations for the AORTA framework, which consists of semantics of norms, an organizational metamodel, and the AORTA reasoning component. The reasoning component is characterized by being completely decoupled from the cognitive agent, by its automated reasoning about norms and organizational options, and by the reasoning rules specified by the designer to act upon norms and options. We specify the reasoning component using structural operational semantics providing us with a formal, rigid description of the behavior of the component during execution. This enables us to precisely specify each reasoning phases (using transition rules), and it makes the implementation of the system quite straightforward.

The second part moves from theory to practice: we present an implementation of the framework and integrate it into various agent platforms. We show that the same configuration of the component can be used for different agent platforms, providing evidence for its use a general tool for organization-awareness. Furthermore, we use practical verification to show various properties of an implementation of agents and of the system in general.

In the last part, we discuss a potential issue with our framework. The possibility to commit to organizational objectives can affect the agent’s autonomy, which contradicts our main goal. We propose a model that solves this problem by adding a filter to the agent’s decision procedure that takes consequences of fulfilling a goal into account before deciding to commit to it. By considering both the agent’s preferences and the expected outcome of fulfilling the goal, we show that it was possible for the agents to make qualified context-dependent decisions.

We claim that by using the AORTA reasoning framework, agents become organization-aware. The reasoning component provides capabilities to reason about organizations and our decision procedure ensures that the autonomy of the agents is still intact.

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