

# The Spendthrift and the Swallow

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Apropos

The deception of indicators and/ or the severity of decision

## 1 The fable

ORIGINAL TEXT (JONES, 1912)

A Spendthrift, who had wasted his fortune, and had nothing left but the clothes in which he stood, saw a Swallow one fine day in early spring. Thinking that summer had come, and that he could now do without his coat, he went and sold it for what it would fetch. A change, however, took place in the weather, and there came a sharp frost which killed the unfortunate Swallow. When the Spendthrift saw its dead body he cried, 'Miserable bird! Thanks to you I am perishing of cold myself.'

## 2 Systems view

The presence of Swallows may *indicate* the advent of summer, but is not an un mistakeable indicator. In addition, the summer may occasionally bring extremely low temperatures — even in the Mediterranean region, where the fable originated. Hence, both propositions are subject to flaws (Figure 1).

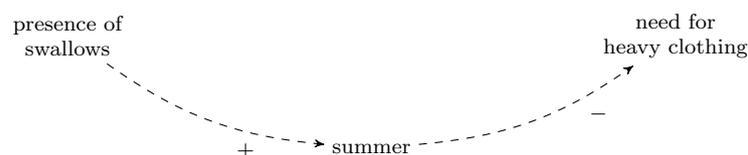


FIGURE 1 The links are possible but tentative pathways; the relationship on the left is non-causal

### 3 Process view

The fable invokes two tasks: *interpretation* of the Swallow sighting, and *preparation* for the summer. Even for such simple tasks, the associated decision-making requires a fair amount of experience and wisdom (Figure 2).

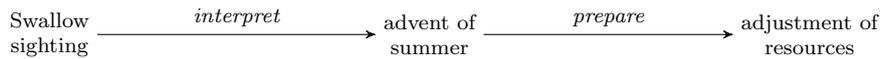


FIGURE 2 Each task (in italics) needs to be executed properly

### 4 Plan view

The reaction of the Spendthrift to the (alleged) advent of summer befits his characterisation: he *sold* the coat instead of saving it for the following winter (Figure 3).

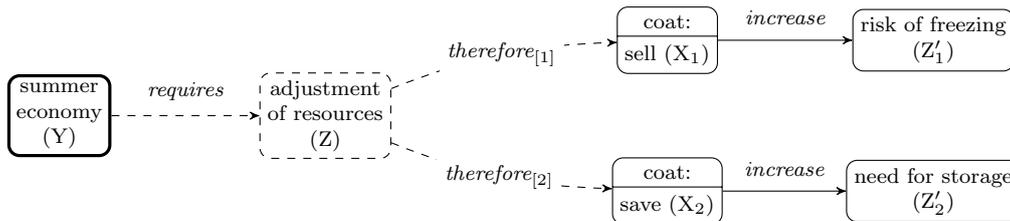


FIGURE 3 For various reasons, the Spendthrift may have not considered an alternative solution (X<sub>2</sub>)

### 5 Commentary

Of the numerous lessons to be learned in this fable, the highlights appear to be (a) how to *interpret* facts and reach a conclusion safely, and (b) how to *identify and decide* on the appropriate action (Figure 2). Either task is difficult and involves some risks of being mistaken, but the conjoined tasks (Figure 1) amplify both the difficulty and the risk. Interpretation often requires expert judgement and sometimes additional information, while seeking the appropriate human action can be assisted by an analysis of concerns and intents to discover and juxtapose potential options (Figure 3).

### References

Jones, V.S.V. (1912) *Æsop's Fables — A New Translation*. London: Macmillan & Co.

