D’you ever notice how people think they top you in an argument just by saying, “You’re being irrational”? It never works. The other person just gets mad, which kind of proves you right before the fact. But you still don’t win the argument.

No one wants to be called irrational. Deep down, even those who espouse misology (hatred of reason, not to be confused with misogyny) flinch at the very threat of it, from the Gen-X flake to the New-Age sponge. Reason is one of the things we pride ourselves on as a species, but that pride is often inflated, a fact exploited to great effect by Seinfeld. In the character of George especially, we see writ large the symptoms and causes of an impoverished reason. Being rational is an important part of being human—our lives depend on it—yet it can be funny to see just how far short of the ideal we can fall. Since Basil Fawlty, perhaps no character has better illustrated this than George Costanza.

Of all the Seinfeld episodes, one of the most memorable pits George against the forces constantly at work to defeat him—his own impulses. One day, in conversation with Jerry, he reports a revelation:
GEORGE: It all became very clear to me . . . that every decision I’ve ever made, in my entire life, has been wrong. My life is the complete opposite of everything I want it to be. Every instinct I have, in every aspect of life, be it something to wear, something to eat . . . it’s all been wrong.¹

As George sees it, whether he acts on decision or impulse, his behavior is always “wrong.” His actions fail to bring about and, more than this, often preclude the desired results. As anyone familiar with Seinfeld knows, George is not just ineffectual in achieving his ends, he is self-defeating. Whatever causes him to act as he does, his attempts at victory seal his defeat, and bring about the very opposite of what he wants. In a rare moment of clarity, George discovers something we have laughed at all along—that he is his own worst enemy.

Most of us, when struck by an epiphany, act accordingly. Perhaps we put the insight to good use, improving our lot, our ways of thinking, even our character. At least we let it sink in. We mull it over, and appreciate its significance. What does George do? He has lunch. Lucky for him, though, a residuum of his insight remains:

WAITRESS: Tuna on toast, coleslaw, cup of coffee.

GEORGE: Yeah. No, no, no, wait a minute. I always have tuna on toast. Nothing’s ever worked out for me with tuna on toast. I want the complete opposite of tuna on toast. Chicken salad, on rye, untoasted, with a side of potato salad—and a cup of tea.

Much as changing his order to the “opposite” is an act of hopeless futility, or hapless irony, it gets the ball rolling toward what will become, at least in this episode, George’s guiding principle. Here is how it happens. Elaine notices an attractive woman looking at George. She reports this, and tells him to approach the woman. He is loath to do so, but where Elaine plants the seed, Jerry adds fertilizer:

¹ All Seinfeld quotations in this essay are from the episode “The Opposite.”
JERRY: Well, here’s your chance to try the opposite. Instead of tuna salad and being intimidated by women, chicken salad and going right up to them.

GEORGE: Yeah, I should do the opposite, I should.

JERRY: If every instinct you have is wrong, then the opposite would have to be right.

GEORGE: Yes, I will do the opposite. I used to sit here and do nothing, and regret it for the rest of the day. So now I will do the opposite, and I will do something.

Of course Jerry’s motivation here is to amuse himself, as always. George knows this, but makes his approach nonetheless.

It is not altogether clear why George approaches the woman. Perhaps he does so for the sake of self-mockery, or out of a tragic sense of life—he might as well contribute to the joke at his expense (Absurdist George). Perhaps too it is out of a genuine desire to test Jerry’s hypothesis, made in jest but potentially useful (Curious George). Being George however, it is likely more the former that moves him to action:

GEORGE: My name is ‘George’. I’m unemployed and I live with my parents.

VICTORIA: I’m Victoria. Hi.

Doing the opposite wins Victoria’s interest. Repeated efforts sustain it. Later, in an interview with the New York Yankees, George meets team-owner Steinbrenner (another George), and the strategy really pays off:

GEORGE S: Nice to meet you.

GEORGE C: Well, I wish I could say the same. But I must say, with all due respect, I find it very hard to see the logic behind some of the moves you’ve made with this fine organization. In the past twenty years, you have caused myself, and the city of New York, a good deal of distress, as we’ve watched you take our beloved Yankees and reduce them to a laughing-stock, all for the glorification of your massive ego!

GEORGE S: Hire this man!
After his success with (the aptly named) Victoria, and before his success with the Yankees, George adopts the strategy of doing the opposite—what I'll call the Costanza Maneuver—as a principle of action. Witness how George's tentative approach to Victoria blossoms to full-blown confidence in the job-interview.

Leaving the episode aside for the moment, we can ask whether it is rational for George to do the opposite, a question of some philosophical interest, and which naturally comes to mind when the laughter dies down. Answering this question is my chief concern in this essay, and will require touching on a variety of topics apropos of Seinfeld and philosophy, including not only reason and rationality, but morality and virtue ethics, decision-theory, human nature, and—as a special case-study for psychology—George's mind.

**Reason and Right**

The first thing to be clear on is what exactly the Costanza Maneuver is. What does it mean to "do the opposite"? For George, doing the opposite means doing the opposite of what he would normally do. Whatever inclinations he has, be they the product of impulse or deliberation, the Costanza Maneuver inverts them, and bids him do the opposite. What this amounts to in many cases is far from obvious, a significant problem to be discussed in due course.

One thing to notice about the Costanza Maneuver is that by its own lights it has to admit of exceptions. Were George to apply it consistently, he would never be able to act at all, much less in accordance with the principle, except to keep applying the principle *ad infinitum*. If the Costanza Maneuver is taken to oppose all inclinations, then it rules out not only those that George wants opposed, but also those the principle recommends—inclinations to do the opposite. Opposing these inclinations would bring George back to square one, since an opposite's opposite is simply what you started with. Worse yet, George would have to apply the principle over and over again, without end, in a pointless regression barely more absurd than his own life. Like something out of Beckett, no?

Happily this is not much of a problem, for the Costanza Maneuver is intended to apply only to George's natural, basic inclinations, and not to those the principle recommends. So long
as we limit the scope of application in this way, there does not appear to be any logical difficulty in applying the principle. So conceived, the principle is at least coherent, and thus a candidate for being rational. When I speak of George’s inclinations, then, I mean those that are basic and natural to him, opposable by the Costanza Maneuver.

Earlier I said that the Costanza Maneuver is an action-guiding principle. Now most people, when they think of guiding principles, have moral principles in mind—words to live by, secular or sacred in origin. It is important to realize that the Costanza Maneuver is not a moral principle. All moral principles may be action-guiding, but not all action-guiding principles are moral. This does not mean the Costanza Maneuver is immoral, but rather that it is amoral, lying outside the moral sphere. Questions about whether it is good, or morally right, to pull the Costanza Maneuver are beside the point of whether it is rational to do so.

Many philosophers, some still living, some long dead, resist the distinction I am drawing between rationality and morality. For various reasons, they find appealing, and go to great lengths to justify, the notion that intellectual and moral virtues converge, that reason and right are one and the same. Without going into too much detail, arguments to this effect are notoriously hard to defend. The idea of a perfectly rational bad guy is just too plausible, as is that of the good-natured simleton. Illustrations abound. Look at the more formulaic movies coming out of Hollywood. It seems that reason and right just have to diverge somewhere. Morality tells you what to do irrespective of your desires. Reason tells you what to do to achieve your desires, whatever they may be. This leaves open the distinct possibility that, in certain cases, doing the right thing means sacrificing one’s own interests. That is why being moral seems to go hand in hand with self-sacrifice. Moral people—think of your own examples—at some point give of themselves. It may be rational to give of oneself for some further desired end, or in the name of some cause, but although it can be rational to be moral, it need not be. One can be rational without giving a second thought to moral concerns, much less making a first effort at being moral. This can happen when the desired ends are either evil, incompatible with the good, or simply in areas where morality does not apply.
My discussion of morality is by way of showing what the Costanza Maneuver is not. It purports to be not a moral principle but a rational one. None of the Seinfeld characters is particularly moral, perhaps Kramer, but certainly not George. Yet the latter's namesake strategy may indeed be rational. Now that we know what the strategy is not, we can move on to what it is, and discuss in more detail what it means to be rational.

Three Kinds of Rationality

What does it mean to be rational? The answer is somewhat subtle and complex, in part because there are various senses of 'reason' and 'rational', different ways these words are used. When we call someone irrational we may mean a number of things. We may mean they hold unjustified opinions, that they miss the point, or have turned a blind eye to certain things, denied the obvious, and so on. We may mean that they act crazy, or contrary to their better judgment—that they should have known better. Or we may mean that what they are after is silly, not worthwhile, too far removed from what they really want, or what they should want to achieve further ends. One can be rational or irrational in what one thinks, in what one does, and arguably in what one wants.

Consider some examples. It is rational to think that one should carry an umbrella in the rain to avoid getting wet, but irrational to think that leaving the oven on at home will achieve the same end. Likewise it is rational to go to the corner store if one is out of milk, irrational to pray that a fresh carton will materialize in the fridge on its own. It is rational to want to be happy, irrational to want the Washington Senators to win the next World Series—as a matter of common knowledge, the Senators no longer exist. There simply is no such team, and so it makes no sense to root for them.

Talking about rational and irrational desires is somewhat problematic because many wants are not subject to evaluation or informed change. Occasionally I like social-tea biscuits with

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2 For a different position on this see Aeon J. Skoble, "Virtue Ethics in TV's Seinfeld," in this volume.
3 For a different position on this see Robert Epperson, "Seinfeld and the Moral Life," in this volume.
my coffee, but is this the sort of thing I could ever justify? The desire to have the occasional social-tea seems purely a matter of taste, non-negotiable in a rational forum. Still, some desires do seem patently silly, like the desire to have everyone wear paper hats on the stroke of midnight next January 23rd. That's just bonkos. So while some desires are not terribly rational or irrational, some seem irrational, while still others seem rational. Consider the desire to protect one's family from harm.

Questions about the rational status of desire are not really important here, since we can assume that there is nothing wrong with what George wants. The course of 

Seinfeld supports this assumption; what is so amusing about George is less what he wants and more the way he goes about trying to get it. What does he want? Success, as do we all. He wants to win the game of life, to be liked, to impress potential sex-partners, to succeed in business without really trying. If desires are valuable in this way at all, what George wants is not irrational. So in examining whether it is rational for George to do the opposite, we have to look not at his desires, but at his behavior, and the thought-processes (or lack thereof) behind it. To help get clear on what exactly we mean when we ask whether it is rational for George to do the opposite, it would be helpful to distinguish three different kinds of rationality. Within philosophy itself there are various such concepts, and it is all too easy to confuse one for the other.

First, notice that actions can often be rationalized by beliefs and desires, even if the beliefs are patently irrational. Normally we say that someone is rationalizing when they make excuses for their behavior, coming up with them on the spot, in an attempt to avoid responsibility, an attempt that is usually obvious and therefore unsuccessful. In a philosophical sense, however, beliefs and desires rationalize behavior when they make sense of it, regardless of whether the beliefs themselves are justified. We can make sense of a man's juggling at a party if we know he wants to impress women and believes that by his juggling he will impress them. Why is he juggling? Because he wants to impress women.

Practically all behavior is rational in this way. Citing the right belief/desire pair makes sense of people's behavior. But this is a very weak sense in which an action may be rational—what we might call minimal rationality, a reflection of the fact that we
have to presuppose a minimal sort of reason to even understand what someone says or does. Both in general and in pulling the Costanza Maneuver, George is rational in that we can easily understand his behavior. Why does he do the opposite? Because he believes it will get him what he wants. Notice that George's behavior here would be minimally rational whether or not he got what he wanted. Were the Costanza Maneuver to fail, we would still know what George was trying to accomplish by pulling it.

At the other extreme we have a different, and much stronger, sense of being rational—what we might call maximal rationality. This is the region inhabited by the few, the supremely talented: Mr. Spock, Sherlock Holmes, Socrates. These are the icons of intellect, beings with ideal faculties of reason. They are not just reasonable, but rational as can be. They are expert problem-solvers, performing feats of computation and inference well beyond the normal thinker's ken. They act efficiently, without hesitation, cutting to the heart of the matter, maximizing the achievement of maximal ends. Under the best conditions, almost no one can even approximate the achievements of such well-oiled thinking-machines.

Clearly, what we are after is a notion of rationality somewhere in between the minimal and the maximal—what we might call medial rationality, reason with a human face, intelligent, but human. Let us zero in on the target by considering more explicitly the relationship between means (actions) and ends (desired results). Most actions presuppose a goal; one does things to bring about certain results. We already concede that what George desires is okay, even though there may be more worthwhile things for him to strive for. What we want to know is whether the Costanza Maneuver, and specifically George's adoption of it as an action-guiding principle, is appropriately related to his desired ends.

You do not have to be a genius to be medially rational, you do not have to be a great problem-solver, and you do not have to perform extraordinary feats of computation or inference. Nor do you have to act most efficiently, without question or pause, or maximize the achievement of maximal ends. You can be emotional, even impulsive. But you have to be pretty good at discovering and doing what to do to get what you want—you
have to have passable instrumental reason. An action-guiding principle like the Costanza Maneuver does not have to be the best of all possible strategies, it just has to be a good one. And for it to be a good one, you have to know two things: first, that it has a good chance of getting you what you want; and second, that you can implement it in a quorum of applicable cases.

Now we have a litmus test for finding out whether it is rational for George to do the opposite. The Costanza Maneuver is (medially) rational for George to adopt if (and only if) George has good reason to think it both reliable and feasible. If both conditions hold, then it is rational for George to do the opposite. But if either fails, it is not rational. I will argue that neither condition holds, and that therefore it is irrational for George to do the opposite. Not only is the Costanza Maneuver neither reliable nor feasible as a matter of fact, George lacks sufficient reason to suppose otherwise.

**Getting What You Want**

I want to argue that the Costanza Maneuver is an unreliable means of getting George what he wants, and that he has no good reason to think otherwise. But am I not missing the point? The Costanza Maneuver works for George, and surely that is what counts. Perhaps I ask too much. Granted, in his efforts to do the opposite, George gets what he wants. He wins and sustains Victoria's interest. He secures a job with the Yankees, along with several more minor victories, all in the space of a single episode. Besides which, since George does the opposite of what he would normally do, and since what he would normally do is irrational, it seems he must be rational to do the opposite.

But the opposite of something irrational is not necessarily rational. An example: It is unwise to sink your life-savings into a high-risk investment, because the odds are just too good you will lose your shirt. The opposite would seem to be sticking with low-yield but secure ventures, or not investing at all. But if you need investment income, the rational move may not be to avoid risky ventures altogether, but to invest part of your savings in them. That is, it may be irrational to do either one thing or the opposite, the rational course being somewhere in the middle. Another example: If you are cold and in the vicinity of
a fire, it is rational neither to stay away nor throw yourself on
the flames. These would seem to be opposites, yet both are irra-
tional. Acting in opposition to irrational impulses does not by
itself guarantee rationality.

Merely getting what you want is no benchmark of reason.
Likewise, being rational is no benchmark of getting what you
want, because even if one is maximally rational, there are
always other elements in the picture, circumstances beyond
one’s knowledge or control. Although following the course of
reason is no guarantee of success, rational decisions certainly
facilitate the achievement of desired ends. I bring this up to sug-
gest not that successful means can be irrational, but that being
successful and being rational are two different things.

Why? The answer is that success can be and often is a mat-
ter of luck, *dumb* luck. Imagine you are playing draw poker,
and the hand you are dealt yields two salient options. You can
discard one and go for the outside straight, or you can discard
two and go for the flush. Although a flush beats a straight, the
odds are such that—as a general rule—it is irrational to go for
the flush. If you go for the flush, you may get it. And if you get
it, the chances are good you will win. But the chances of draw-
ing a straight and winning are much better than the chances of
drawing a flush and winning. If you go for the low-percentage
move, and it pays off, that does not mean you were rational to
do so.

Take lotteries for example, which yield about $1 for every $5
spent. If you win the lottery, that does not mean that buying the
ticket was rational. It was irrational if you were in it solely for
the money, although many people get a harmless thrill in the
bargain. The minimal expense is often more than outweighed
by anticipatory pleasure, in which case there is nothing irra-
tional about it. Notice that George’s pleasure derives not from
any such anticipation, but rather and solely from his astounding
success. Thus George’s doing the opposite cannot be rational in
the same way buying lottery tickets can.

By now it should be clear that mere success is no measure
of reason. The (achievement of) ends do(es) not (rationally) jus-
tify the means. Despite George’s success, then, we must ask
whether the Costanza Maneuver is reliable and, more impor-
tantly, whether George is right to bet on its being so.
What are the Odds?

Is the Costanza Maneuver a reliable strategy? Will it *tend* to get George what he wants, or does he just happen to luck out? On the surface it certainly seems reliable. From ordering chicken salad near the beginning, to telling his parents he loves them near the end, George does the opposite no less than ten times. In a few cases it is not clear whether the strategy is of any value. But in most cases the attempt is a very palpable success. As I score it, George’s batting average is around .800, which certainly seems reliable enough.

Consider, however, that although a strategy may work 80 percent of the time in a certain range of cases, this may amount to nothing more than what gamblers call a lucky streak. Note the trivial fact that the Costanza Maneuver works in the episode because the writers wrote it that way. And they wrote it that way because it is funny, realistic or not. Admittedly, part of the strength of *Seinfeld* lies in a ruthless sense of realism, even in finding absurdity in the mundane, and vice versa. But we should be wary of drawing any real conclusions from the plot of a sit-com, even a top-shelf sit-com like *Seinfeld*. One gets the sense that the Costanza Maneuver works for George not because it is a good strategy, but because it would be absurd, the dumbest possible luck, for it ever to work.

If we look at George’s individual at-bats, rather than his batting average, it becomes clear just how unlikely his successes are. When Elaine first pressures him to approach Victoria, he is right to retort:

GEORGE: Elaine, bald men, with no jobs, and no money, who live with their parents, don’t approach strange women.

Why not? Because they know that by and large they will incur from beautiful women not interest but wrath. Later, George goes ballistic at some annoying, vaguely thuggish movie-goers:

GEORGE: Shut your traps and stop kicking the seats! We’re trying to watch the movie! And if I have to tell you again, we’re gonna take it outside, and I’m gonna show you what it’s like. You understand me? Now shut your mouths,
or I’ll shut them for you. And if you think I’m kidding, just try me. Try me. Because I would love it!

How likely is it that such a rant would quiet thuggish moviegoers? Not bloody likely. What are the odds of getting a job by being rude to the boss? Slim indeed.

Now does George have any reason to think otherwise? His initial efforts at the opposite do bear a superficial resemblance to hypothesis-testing. Further efforts are spurred on by initial successes, which appear to confirm the hypothesis. Seems rational enough. But come on. George’s success is not just a matter of luck, it is obviously so. The hypothesis is only spuriously confirmed, and we know this. George, too, should know better, and on some level I think he does:

**George:** This has been the dream of my life ever since I was a child. And it’s all happening because I’m completely ignoring every urge toward common sense and good judgment I’ve ever had.

George’s primary pleasure comes from success, but there is also—look for it—the more ironic pleasure of knowing he does not, in any sense, deserve it. That is part of the reason his success is so funny, precisely because it is based on a strategy that we all know is unreliable—George included. It shouldn’t work, but does. There’s the rub.

**Long-Term Feasibility**

Doing the opposite is not a reliable strategy, nor does George have reason to believe otherwise. But this is not the only problem with the Costanza Maneuver. In addition to being unreliable, it is not a particularly feasible strategy. It is tough if not impossible to approximate what the principle requires, much less follow it to the letter. To show this, I want to start by exploring the prospects for the Costanza Maneuver as a viable long-term strategy.

In subsequent episodes, the Costanza Maneuver is all but forgotten. George wins initially, and although he keeps his job with the Yankees awhile, he stops doing the opposite. The nature of habit makes it clear why. Habits are patterns of learned
response to certain kinds of stimuli, patterns which become engraigned over time. These patterns, like George’s basic inclinations, can be hard to change. Long-standing habits especially can be reverted to far too easily, before and even after new habits are formed. Notice what happens later in the episode, when Elaine gets evicted:

GEORGE: Well, you could move in with my parents.

ELAINE: Was that the opposite of what you were going to say, or was that just instinct?

GEORGE: Instinct.

ELAINE: Stick with the opposite.

Still, habits can be changed, though when they are they tend to change other habits as well. The more one does the opposite, the more one becomes habituated to it, and the more one becomes habituated to it, the more “natural” the behavior becomes. But the more natural the behavior becomes, the more one is so inclined, and being inclined that way means not being inclined the way the Costanza Maneuver requires.

So either George lacks the right stuff to do the opposite over the long haul, or he has it, and the nature of habit would defeat him anyway. Over the long haul, the Costanza Maneuver would either upset the upset mind it relies on, or leave it altogether untouched. Either way, it fails to be a viable long-term strategy. But maybe doing the opposite would eventually lead to recognizably prudent impulses. Maybe George’s commitment to the principle would gradually die out as the learning curve increased. Maybe the Costanza Maneuver would set aright inveterately wrong impulses. Maybe, but highly unlikely given how unreliable the strategy is in the first place.

Two things bear mention. One, even if the Costanza Maneuver is not a feasible strategy in the long run, that does not mean it is not feasible in the short run. Two, a rational strategy need not be long-term feasible. Take kamikaze pilots. It might be rational to fly one’s plane into an enemy ship, especially if that is the best available means of attack. Suicide is hardly a viable long-term strategy, but it may still count as rational. Unfortunately for George, the rationality of the Costanza Maneuver is even less plausible than that of the kamikaze pilot.
Impulse Problems

One of the reasons the Costanza Maneuver is not a feasible strategy, even in the short-term, is that George has impulse problems. His behavior is often erratic, impulsive, random, ill-considered, if considered at all. True, in this episode he seems to have the wherewithal to oppose such impulses. Witness his unusual restraint as, in the following scene, he is driving Victoria to the movies:

**Victoria:** Hey watch it! He just cut you off! Did you see that?

**George:** Take it easy. Take it easy. It's not the end of the world.

Typically such restraint is impossible for George. It's just not in his character, and the Costanza Maneuver doesn't change that one bit. That he would be capable of such restraint, even in the short-term, is not something we have—or that he has—reason to expect.

Another problem is that George is prone to akrasia, or weakness of will. Not only does he often act on impulse before giving thought to the matter at hand, impulse often overpowers his better judgment. An amusing sort of fear and trembling is George's trademark, and it breeds weakness in the face of choices he knows to be prudent but never makes. This should be familiar enough to fans of the show, but look to the complement of *Seinfeld* episodes for all the evidence you need.

Not only does George know he has these problems, he should know that they would surely, if not for a great stroke of luck, confound his efforts to do the opposite. One problem I have not mentioned is that George is often paralyzed when confronted by the call to action, a problem of absent impulse. So really he has three confounding impulse problems. These are psychological, but deep as they are, they pale in comparison to what really makes the Costanza Maneuver unfeasible.

Indeterminacy of the Opposite

What really makes the Costanza Maneuver unfeasible is the indeterminacy of the opposite. To say something is indeterminate means that you cannot tell what it is. Many philosophers
think the truth-value of the statement ‘God exists’ is indeterminate, because there seems no way we could determine whether the statement is true or false. Whether, as a matter of fact, it is true or false is (apparently) independent of whether we can discover this fact. When I say the opposite is indeterminate, I do not necessarily mean that actions lack opposites. Many do, but the point is: whether or not an action has an opposite, George cannot often, if ever, discover what it is.

An example will illustrate what I mean. Imagine George finds himself wanting to say something. What should he do? Should he say nothing? That would seem to be the opposite of saying something. Should he negate what he wants to say?—"These pretzels are not making me thirsty!" Should he say what he wants, but change the tone from sincere to sarcastic?—"That's a great parking-space, baby!" Should he, where possible, invert what he wants to say?—"I love the Drake." All of these are plausible candidates for the opposite. But which is the right one? If you think about it, for all, or at least most actions, there are many plausible candidates for what would constitute the opposite. None stands out as best, and this means trouble if you are after the opposite.

It is not just that the opposite is often if not always indeterminate. George knows this, as do Jerry and Elaine. If George had reason to think otherwise, he might be right to think the Costanza Maneuver feasible. For contrast, see how George recounts, with great excitement, his success with Victoria:

George: I tell you this, something is happening in my life. I did this opposite thing last night. Up was down. Black was white. Good was—

Jerry: —bad.

George: Day was—

Elaine: —night.

George: Yes!

But actions seldom fit into neat, determinate oppositions like up/down, black/white, good/bad, and night/day. (Historical note: ancient philosophers loved opposites. Hot/cold and wet/dry fascinated them no end.) What is the opposite of order-
ing tuna on toast, with coleslaw and coffee? Certainly not chicken on rye, with potato salad and tea. Notice what goes on in the following exchange:

**Jerry:** You know, chicken salad is not the opposite of tuna. Salmon is the opposite of tuna, 'cause salmon swim against the current, and the tuna swim with it.

**George:** Good for the tuna.

George quite obviously knows that his order is not a plausible candidate for the opposite. What’s more, he doesn’t care. Jerry ribs him, and he replies with sarcasm, well aware his order was a mere alternative. But would anything else be a better candidate?

Another problem is that for George to pull the maneuver at all he must know, before acting, what his inclinations are. If he does not, he cannot very well do the opposite. And George is often unaware of his inclinations until after he acts. Most of us have much milder forms of this tendency. Sometimes we want to do something, we know not what, and so we try out various possibilities. If the desire remains unsatisfied, we know we have guessed wrong. But if it becomes satisfied, we know we have guessed right. George has this in spades. In fact, it is often because he has no inclinations, or has them unawares, that George makes a neurotic mess of straightforward alternatives.

So the opposite is indeterminate not only because actions usually don’t fit into nice, clean oppositions, but also because there is—frequently enough—the further indeterminacy of George not knowing what he wants to do. Aware of this, George is in no position to bet on the Costanza Maneuver being feasible, just as he is in no position to bet on its being reliable. It cannot be rational, then, for him to do the opposite, not only because the Costanza Maneuver is both unreliable and unfeasible, but because George knows this to be true.

**[Cue Bass]**

Looking at his success with Victoria, and in the job-interview, it might seem that the Costanza Maneuver at least counteracts
George's impulse to lie, making him a sort of virtue-mimic, which could after all be rational. But George does not tell Victoria the truth, he discloses it, and his confessional pride in the interview is pretty clearly hollow. Both involve truth-telling, fair enough, but the involvement is accidental. Notice how the tirade at Steinbrenner is patently a put-on, a lie, as are most of George's efforts. The Costanza Maneuver is not a reliable enough way to mimic virtue. The writers are rightly cynical in making it hard to pin George's success on any virtue, moral or rational, mimicked or real.

It still might seem pragmatically justified for George to try the opposite, for this may be less unreliable than his usual tactics. If you are going to bet, bet craps, because craps gives you the best odds. But the point is, you need not bet at all. Limited as he is, George can avail himself of countless strategies, many of them surely better than both the usual and the opposite. Besides which, is it at all plausible that being rude to Steinbrenner is a better job-getting tactic than obsequious politeness? Hardly. How about moderate deference, then? The opposite simply is not as good as George's usual, and both are significantly worse than other available strategies. That is where the humor lies—not as good, works better.

What would it take for the Costanza Maneuver to be a good strategy? Well, George would need something like a woe-tracking mechanism, something that always inclined him to what he should not do, where what he should not do has an obvious opposite. Setting aside the indeterminacy of opposites, there are two reasons why such a scenario could not work, even in the twilight zone of Seinfeld. First, much as we want to believe him, George's self-analysis is false. Many of his inclinations are fine: he eats (inclusively) when hungry, pays his diner bills, manages to keep friends in spite of himself, and so forth. Second, such a mechanism would have to come from neuroses so extreme that, if George tried to oppose them, they would doubtless outwit him, and feed him not the wrong inclinations to oppose, but the right ones.

George is a loser, and the Costanza Maneuver is merely a ploy to get away with avoiding significant questions about his own character—the shortcutter's shortcut, and we love him for it. He is lucky to gain some insight into his nature, however
superficial, along with the means to counteract it, however spurious. More than that, he is lucky to be so pathetic that the Costanza Maneuver would occur to him at all, much less work. But the strategy is fraught with many difficulties, as we have seen, too many to make it viable. Is it rational to do the opposite? No, but even a blind squirrel can find a nut.⁴

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