

Morality Games

Stephen J Brewer, July 2016*

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Nietzsche argued with the 'Death of God' morality has no foundation but Orin and Max's dialogue reveals how these commandments allow the players of Tit-for-Tat to produce a win-win result.

Scene: It's the 4th of July and Max has invited Orin to a barbeque. Max, holding a Bud in one hand and a burger in the other moves in on Orin through swirls of choking smoke. Orin is looking rather glum and Max knows it is not just the tasteless veggie burger he insisted on having in order to 'save the planet'.



Max: Congratulations, glad to see you Brits have regained your own Independence. About time you freed yourself from your European masters just as we did from you guys a few centuries ago.

Orin: Well, I am rather disappointed since I liked the idea of European unity and the ability to move freely about. But given European history and the cumbersome mechanism needed to form even a semblance of government, I guess it may well be for the best. The fact is though I still feel it

was our duty to stick it out for the common good.

Max: "Common good"; what a load of Socialist nonsense. There is only one good, and that's the good of the individual.

Orin: It is that sort of thinking that destroys society. Your world of selfishness is one of chaos.

Max: Well that's just where you're wrong. You just have to understand basic game theory and all will be clear. The game is 'tit for tat', where the players choose whether to collaborate or compete depending on what is in their best interest. If I think the rewards of working with others are better than those obtained when working by myself I will choose to cooperate. If it works, the result is a win-win situation for all. The classic case is where two hunters working together can kill a deer, but alone they can only catch a rabbit.

Orin: So what happens if the hunters do not evenly share the rewards of their collaboration? This is the fatal flaw because you have no moral principle stopping them from cheating on their contract.

Max: Quite simple, the partnership ends. They might both be losers, but the players are free and can go it alone or search for a better partnership. One where they are more successful and divide the rewards fairly, and by fair I mean when it's proportional to each person's contribution. No contribution means no share, none of this social welfare nonsense.

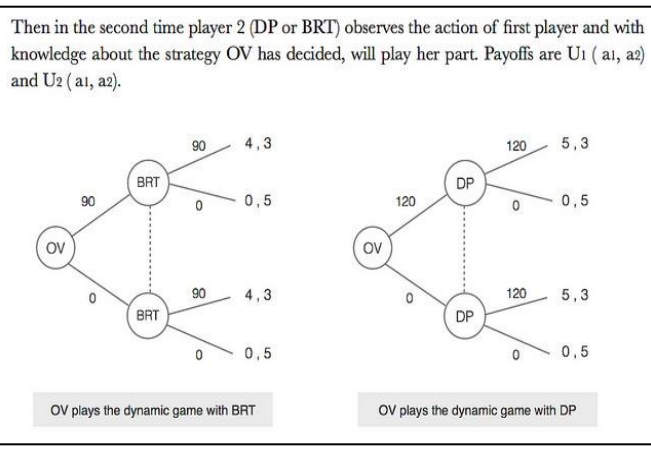
Orin: I've heard about this by the name of 'reciprocal altruism'. It is interesting because it does show how selfishness can actually result in social collaboration.

Max: I'm not sure where the 'altruism' comes from since it's all about being selfish, but the right to decide whether it's in my best interest to cooperate or compete is what it means to be free.

Orin: The point you are missing is that this trust between group members is build up over a number of games. It is trust in their skills, contribution and fairness. It is about keeping true to their social contact.

Max: The rules of the game applies to entire nations, including your European Union. You were brainwashed into thinking that by collaborating you were all doing better. But in fact it never delivered. Obviously lots of other free minded Brits couldn't see any gains either, just losses. This

lumbering EU bureaucracy just isn't relevant to today's international environment and the forces of capitalism and globalization. You're just supporting yet another layer of bureaucracy and government that adds no value.



Orin: That is a maybe and we could argue the case for ever, but it is interesting how game theory might provide a real basis of our moral codes. The decision to collaborate and share is a freely made social contract. The moral codes and laws are made to punish those who break this contact by not fairly sharing the gains or by only pretending to collaborate.

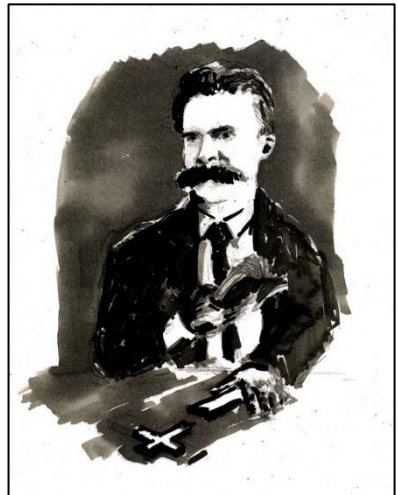
Max: But the freedom to choose to compete is an essential part of the game, and that's what your moral codes try to repress!

Orin: The rules for playing the tit-for-tat game seem to be a mixture of the Golden Rule and Law of Retaliation, that is keep your side of the bargain and I'll keep mine but I will take my revenge if you cheat on me. Although this game has simple rules, the plays are very complex. At any one time, we are playing many parallel games in an ever-changing social and physical environment.

Max: And there's no guarantee the team will deliver better results than going it alone.

Orin: That is why to retain long term cohesion in the face of short term setbacks, societies evolve complex taboos and rituals they believe will ensure success. And often with severe punishments for those who do not follow them. These social duties become part of the moral code that when they become God's commandment, dare not even be questioned. So all our morality was seen as based on divine commandments. As Nietzsche pointed out, with the "Death of God" our morality has lost this divine basis and becomes a human social invention with each society making up its own rules

Max: If the rewards of collaboration are not obvious, then I will go it alone and live with the consequences. This freedom to choose is a basic human right.



Orin: You are fortunate to live in a country that guarantees these rights but many others are not so fortunate. But even in a democracy, maintaining a balance between social duties and individual freedom is still a problem. This is why we need a moral code instructing us about the duties needed to fulfil our social contract. These codes recognise my dependence on others, the State and its institutions.

Max: Well I've just solved the God problem because his moral commands have been replaced by the natural laws of Game Theory. What's more, unlike the self sacrifice demanded by God, this morality game *requires* individuals to make free choices in their own best interest. My only moral duty is to question any authority that demands my unquestioning loyalty.

So get a cool beer, a *real* burger and celebrate our freedom!

*See also "[Is morality Objective?](#)" published in Philosophy Now