

Tales of the Woods

Ordered Anarchy in One-Shot Encounters between Strangers

Frank van Dun

The time: a bleak autumn day in the early seventeenth century. The place: the middle of a vast forest somewhere in England. The protagonists: two solitary travellers, each one a complete stranger to the other, carrying their weapons (say, a sword, a dagger and a pistol) and a few valuables (some food, some coins of silver or gold). They are making their way through the forest in opposite directions along a single desolate winding path. The action begins when these two men are about to meet. What will they do when suddenly they come into full view of one another?

There is no evident answer to that question. Feed it to a dozen writers or storytellers and you are likely to get at least twelve different scenarios, all of them of comparable plausibility. The early seventeenth century was not a particularly peaceful time, even in England. In places such as the middle of a vast forest, one probably could get away with almost anything without having to fear any even remotely efficacious police investigation, let alone an arrest and a conviction. A continuation of the scene that has the men engage in violent combat to the death would not strain our imagination. Nevertheless, it appears safe to say that, as a matter of fact, most encounters of the kind depicted in the scene, even at that time, would be non-events. The travellers would pursue their journey, having exchanged perhaps a few words of greeting, maybe having questioned each other about the conditions further down the road.

However, when we put our question to a twentieth century social scientist, he is likely—especially if he is an American—to insist that the scene be interpreted as an illustration of the Hobbesian version of the famous Prisoner's Dilemma. That is to say, given that there is no effective police power to safeguard each traveller from an attack by the other, the men have no rational option but to attack one another. The reasoning is that each of them has only two significant alternatives: either to render oneself defenceless, say by throwing one's weapons down, or to attack before one is attacked. If both of them disarm, their encounter will be peaceful and both can continue their journey without loss of their valuables (and presumably with the other man's weapons, which each one undoubtedly will pick up when he passes the spot where they were dropped). If only one of them disarms, he is at the mercy of the other and is likely to lose everything he has, including perhaps his freedom or even his life.

If both of them decide to attack, they will have to engage in combat, which may land at least one of them in the same situation that he would be in if he had disarmed unilaterally. However, an attack at least gives them some hope of emerging without loss and possibly with considerable gain from the engagement. Each one will readily understand—so the reasoning goes—that it is rational for him to attack the other, no matter what the other may do. If the other disarms, the attacker is sure to get away with his and the other’s valuables and his weapons, which clearly is better than he can expect from also disarming. If the other attacks, then it is foolish to disarm and thereby to give up the chance of avoiding serious losses or making significant gains. For both travellers, then, the attack-option dominates the alternative ‘strategy’ of disarming oneself. Consequently, there is only one ‘rational’ outcome for the encounter: it will take the form of a battle. Unfortunately, that outcome¹ is inferior to what they would have got if both of them had opted to disarm. Travelling through the woods, where there is no adequate police protection provided by a strong state, makes life ‘solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short’.

According to this Hobbesian interpretation, then, our little scene in the woods can be modelled as a Prisoner’s Dilemma. A conventional representation of the scene as such a dilemma is given in figure 1.

		B	
		Disarm	Attack
A	Disarm	Peaceful passage	Victory Defeat
	Attack	Defeat Victory	Battle

Fig. 1

¹ Of course, ‘Battle’ is not a final outcome of the encounter. That can be determined only when the battle is over and one or both of the parties are dead, wounded, or exhausted; or one of them is taken prisoner or flees from the scene.

That we are dealing with a dilemma becomes clear once we note the assumed preference orderings of the travellers:

$$\text{Victory} > \text{Peace} > \text{Battle} > \text{Defeat}$$

This ordering seems reasonable enough. However, it ensures that ‘Attack’ is the individually rational and therefore dominant strategy for each traveller and that ‘Battle’ is the only so-called equilibrium-outcome of the encounter. That is to say, no traveller can do better for himself by trying to avoid that outcome unilaterally—i.e. by disarming unilaterally rather than attacking. However, the preference-ranking also shows that both individuals only get their third best outcome (‘Battle’) whereas they both could have got their second best outcome (‘Peaceful passage’) if both had opted to disarm. Both would gain by a peaceful passage, but none of them can afford to do his part to ensure that result for fear of ending up with what is for him the least liked outcome: victory for the other and defeat for himself. Thus, the equilibrium-outcome is said to be Pareto-inferior. The will of each traveller to move up as high on his own scale of preferences as is possible (given the choices of the other) and the fact that ‘Battle’ is the equilibrium-outcome can be depicted as in figure 2.

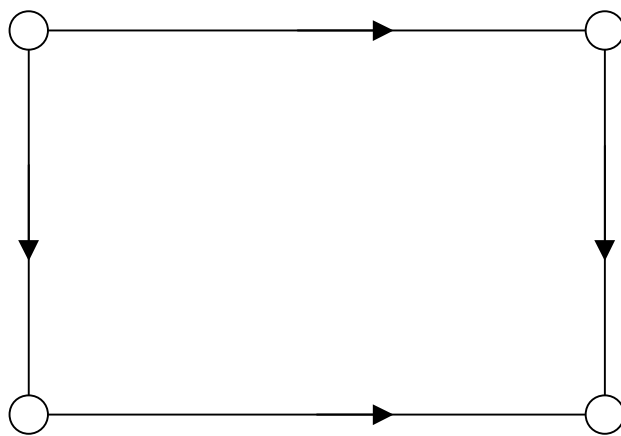


Fig. 2

Lest we think that this story has an unavoidably bloody outcome, we should note that Hobbes himself pointed the way out of the dilemma. Indeed, a ‘nice’ bloodless solution to it is likely when one of the essential conditions of the dilemma fails to be satisfied, as well it may given the uncertain nature of chance encounters in the woods. That condition is the approximate equality of strength of the two parties. As a rule, any traveller is a match for any other, but that does not mean that it is a rule without exceptions. Suppose that one of the travellers realises in time that he is no match for

the other, throws his weapons down and offers to become the other's faithful servant and subject. He thereby puts himself at the mercy of the stronger one, but then he has at least a chance that the other will accept his offer and, being able to enforce his will, agrees to let him live. In that case, the weak party realises that he has nothing to lose and everything to gain from his submission. The strong party gains a servant as well as an additional supply of weapons and food. The scene ends with both of them walking away as a small company, their combined strength making them feel relatively safe for the next encounter with a stranger. If the latter is again a man travelling alone, he will see that he is no match for the two of them and join their little band. Before long, not only no solitary traveller but also no small company of travellers will dare to resist the group. All will make haste to join it or to accept whatever terms its leader imposes, flattering him with the solemn declaration that they have no trust in those that do not entrust their lives to him. The virgin forest gives birth to a sovereign and his state. The rest is politics and, as Hobbes would have it, comfort, convenience, and commodious living for all.

The same outcome could be assured by another route, even when the parties are approximately equal in strength prior to the battle. Indeed, it is in the nature of combat that a single blow can upset that balance and lead one party to victory and the other to defeat and unconditional surrender and submission.

Let us return to our original question. 'What will the travellers do?' This time we do not put it to a social scientist. We put it, say, to a seasoned trapper who has had many encounters with strangers in the woods. There is a good chance that he will object to the social scientist's notion that a traveller has but two strategies, either to disarm or to attack. 'What normally happens when I run into a stranger in the woods,' he answers, 'is that we approach one another, watching the other's every move, holding one hand close to our weapon but taking good care not to make a threatening move or do anything provocative. In short, we are on our guard. We do not disarm and we do not attack. That's how we survive. If you need to write this down as a game-theoretical model, I suggest you use figure 3.'

Let us take that advice. Each traveller now has three 'strategies': 'Disarm', 'Be on your guard' (or 'Be vigilant'), and 'Attack'. We must consider, therefore, nine possible combinations of strategies, i.e. nine different outcomes. In addition to the four outcomes that we know already from the first Hobbesian interpretation, there are five new ones of three different types. 1) One traveller is vigilant while the other

disarms—the result being that one is strong and the other weak. 2) One traveller attacks while the other remains vigilant—the encounter turns into a confrontation between an aggressor and a defender. 3) Both remain vigilant, making as it were an armed peace as they walk by each other.

		B		
		Disarm	Be vigilant	Attack
A	Disarm	Peace	Strong Weak	Victory Defeat
	Be vigilant	Weak Strong	Armed Peace	Aggression Defence
	Attack	Defeat Victory	Defence Aggression	Battle

Fig. 3.

This already is a far more complicated scheme than the social scientist put before us. It is not obvious to determine a reasonable order of preference among the various possible outcomes, even if we leave the preference ranking of the outcomes of the first Hobbesian representation as they were. However, it is clear that there are preference rankings that do not affect the Hobbesian outcome of inevitable battle. For example, any ranking that satisfies the following conditions leads us to the conclusion that ‘Battle’ is the equilibrium outcome:

Victory > Strong > Peaceful passage

Aggression > Armed peace > Weak

Battle > Defence > Defeat

Moreover, assuming, reasonably, that ‘Peaceful passage’ or even ‘Armed peace’ is preferred to ‘Battle’, the equilibrium-outcome is still Pareto-inferior. Indeed, if ‘Peaceful passage’ is preferred to ‘Battle’, then

Victory > Strong > Peaceful passage > Battle > Defence > Defeat

Aggression > Armed peace > Weak.

If 'Armed peace' is preferred to 'Battle', then

Aggression > Armed peace > Battle > Defence > Defeat

Victory > Strong > Peaceful passage²

If such rankings of preferences obtain, we have no escape from the Hobbesian dilemma, as we see in figure 4.

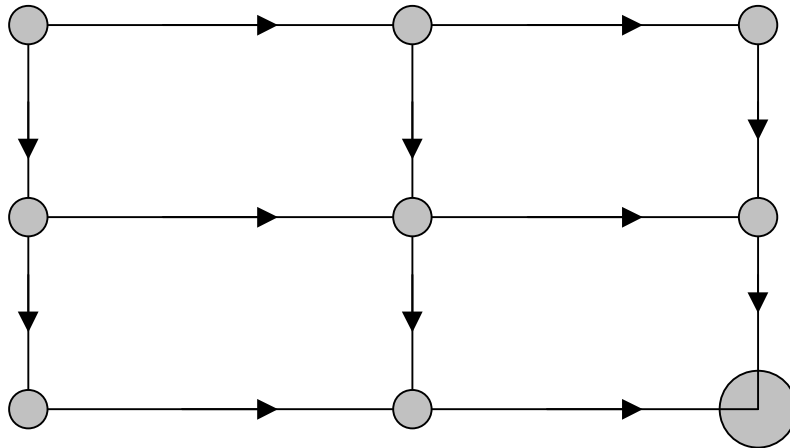


Fig.4.

Note, however, that it is not evidently reasonable to prefer being an aggressor to enjoying an armed peace. Nor is it evidently reasonable to prefer to rush into an open battle rather than to take a defensive position and try to hold it. It might be rational to act as an aggressor, if there were some assurance that aggression pays, but that it does is no law of nature.³

Suppose that the preference rankings satisfy the following conditions

Victory > Strong > Peace

Armed peace > Aggression > Weak

Defence > Battle > Defeat.

Then the equilibrium-outcome is 'Armed peace' (exactly as our trapper told us to expect and as we can see in figure 5).

² It cannot be determined where 'Weak' fits into this ranking, except that it comes in somewhere below 'Armed peace'.

³ Anthony de Jasay, *Against Politics*, Routledge, Lodon & New York, 1997, p.199.

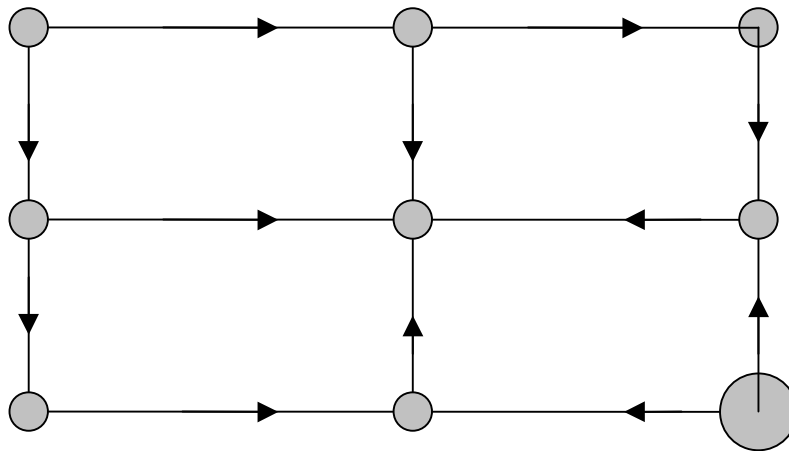


Fig. 5

It still might be that we have a dilemma here—‘Peaceful passage’ might be preferred to ‘Armed peace’—but that would be a dilemma of an entirely different nature than the Hobbesian one. Indeed, in the setting of our story, there is no obvious reason to prefer ‘Peaceful passage’ to ‘Armed peace’ since the former involves giving up one’s weapons. To be sure, there is a chance of picking up the other man’s sword, dagger and pistol where he left them, but one has no way of knowing whether they are any good. One who knows that his own weapons are substandard might prefer the temporary mutual disarmament of ‘Peaceful passage’ in the hope of getting better weapons, but he still runs the risk of ending up with useless *papier maché*.

Thus, while we cannot exclude a priori that there is a dilemma, in most circumstances ‘Armed peace’ is likely to be an equilibrium-outcome that is not Pareto-inferior.

Of course, Hobbes, who was not one to let facts get in the way of theory, circumvented this rather commonsensical result by defining ‘Armed peace’ to be a manifestation of war. ‘[T]he nature of War, consisteth not in actuall fighting; but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary. All other time is Peace.’⁴ As long as there is no assurance that no one is disposed to start a fight, there is war, a condition to which ‘this also is consequent; that nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place’. With no more to go on than one of his own innovative terminological

⁴ Leviathan, chapter XIII.

definitions, the daddy of modern political thought made it appear as if life under an armed peace is just as solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short as it is in an actual war-zone. Where peace is not *assured*, he wrote, ‘there is no place for Industry... and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation... no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death.’ Any other writer would have earned the epithet ‘utopian’ for a sentence like that—for when is peace truly assured? However, at least in the past century, Hobbes got a reputation for being a down-to-earth realist, ‘who tells it as it is’.

Leibniz, for one, was not as easily taken in by ‘the sharp-witted Englishman’⁵ as were later commentators. ‘[N]o people in civilised Europe’ he wrote⁶ ‘is ruled by the laws that he proposed; wherefore, if we listen to Hobbes, there will be nothing in our land but out-and-out anarchy... Hobbes’ fallacy lies in this, that he thinks things that can entail inconvenience should not be borne at all—which is foreign to the nature of human affairs... [E]xperience has shown that men usually hold to some middle road, so as not to commit everything to hazard by their obstinacy.’

Locke also was not impressed. *His* state of nature was not a ‘state of war’. It was, arguably, something very close to the middle road of ‘Armed peace’, that outcome of vigilance of which the trapper spoke in answering our question about the travellers meeting in the woods. Moreover, Locke noted a glaring contradiction in Hobbes’s theory. Indeed, Hobbes had maintained that only a fully assured peace is not a state of war. However, he also had maintained that the *pax victoris* that results from the complete victory of some and the unconditional surrender and submission of others is really the only way to achieve a *victoria pacis*. However, as Locke noted, the *pax victoris* only means the end of ‘actuell fighting’; in other respects, it is no more than war by another name.⁷

Locke, of course, belongs to the long line of wise and judicious men that are the true founts of civilisation. Hobbes, on the other hand, is one of the more outstanding

⁵ Leibniz, ‘Casarinus Fürstenerius’, in Patrick Riley (ed.) Leibniz, Political Writings. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p.118.

⁶ Leibniz, op.cit., p.119.

⁷ Locke, Second Treatise of Government,

members of that much longer line of ‘wits’—intellectuals—for whom truth is no more than an adept manipulation of suggestive words (and ‘models’).

It would be unwise to draw any general conclusion from these tales of the woods. Much of the socio-political literature today in one way or another rests on the assumption that Prisoner’s dilemmas are everywhere. However, even some situations that at first sight would appear to be obvious candidates for being interpreted in that way in fact may turn out to be quite innocuous. Hobbes’ advice, that one should act like a psychopath because there is always a chance of running into a real one, is rarely taken seriously, even by people who regularly deal with strangers that they will meet never again. One reason is, of course, that most people are not particularly interested in taking extraordinary risks merely to profit from an unexpected opportunity. Our travellers presumably entered the woods to go from one place to another, not to make a killing. To quote Leibniz again, why should they ‘commit everything to hazard by their obstinacy’?

To be sure, occasionally things get out of hand. Even then, however, in a world in which people are cautious and vigilant, they are likely to do so in a small way. The Hobbesian spectre of ‘Universal Warre’ is not a likely outcome except in the case of the collapse of a system of institutionalised violence and exploitation. Such a system typically forces large numbers of people to live in close proximity with their enemies and relies heavily on the presence of a disciplined police force to keep order. Its collapse will probably set off a Hobbesian scramble to fill the power vacuum in one way or another, because most of the old alliances, networks and interests still hold sufficient attractions to serve as principles of mobilisation of men and means. However, while that may lead to a war in which nearly everybody is actively involved, it is not ‘a war of all against all’. It is a war in which only a handful of large parties are involved and in which most individuals have no better option than to take sides (or to take advantage of the general confusion to exploit their individual opportunities for mischief to the fullest extent). In short, it is a continuation of politics without its usual conventions of civility, but it is not ‘the Naturall Condition of Mankind’.

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