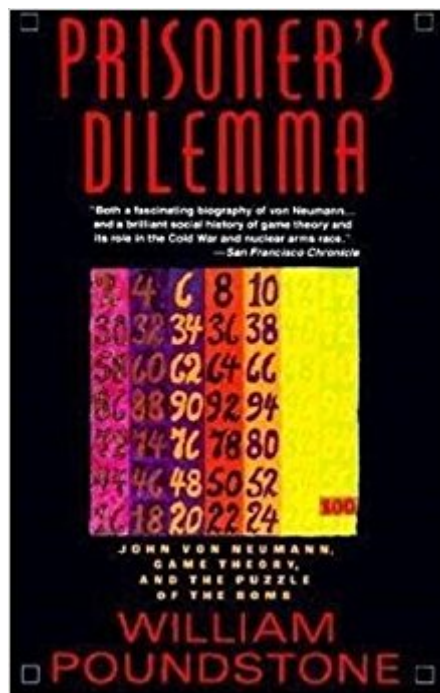




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Prisoner's Dilemma: John Von Neumann, Game Theory, And The Puzzle Of The Bomb



Synopsis

Should you watch public television without pledging?...Exceed the posted speed limit?...Hop a subway turnstile without paying? These questions illustrate the so-called "prisoner's dilemma", a social puzzle that we all face every day. Though the answers may seem simple, their profound implications make the prisoner's dilemma one of the great unifying concepts of science. Watching players bluff in a poker game inspired John von Neumann – father of the modern computer and one of the sharpest minds of the century – to construct game theory, a mathematical study of conflict and deception. Game theory was readily embraced at the RAND Corporation, the archetypical think tank charged with formulating military strategy for the atomic age, and in 1950 two RAND scientists made a momentous discovery. Called the "prisoner's dilemma," it is a disturbing and mind-bending game where two or more people may betray the common good for individual gain. Introduced shortly after the Soviet Union acquired the atomic bomb, the prisoner's dilemma quickly became a popular allegory of the nuclear arms race. Intellectuals such as von Neumann and Bertrand Russell joined military and political leaders in rallying to the "preventive war" movement, which advocated a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union. Though the Truman administration rejected preventive war the United States entered into an arms race with the Soviets and game theory developed into a controversial tool of public policy – alternately accused of justifying arms races and touted as the only hope of preventing them. A masterful work of science writing, Prisoner's Dilemma weaves together a biography of the brilliant and tragic von Neumann, a history of pivotal phases of the cold war, and an investigation of game theory's far-reaching influence on public policy today. Most important, Prisoner's Dilemma is the incisive story of a revolutionary idea that has been hailed as a landmark of twentieth-century thought.

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Customer Reviews

Poundstone's three-dimensional outline of game theory mathematics sketches the life of its inventor, John von Neumann, and his role in Cold War policy-making. Photos. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This very readable book is partly a biography of John von Neumann, partly a nontechnical history of the branch of mathematics known as game theory, and partly a description of some of the paradoxical findings that arise from that theory. Von Neumann was a brilliant mathematician who was the major figure in the Manhattan Project and later an active public figure. Thus, those portions of the book that deal with his life are interesting and informative. Those sections that deal with game theory use no mathematics beyond simple arithmetic and are thus fascinating, thought provoking, and easily accessible to the layperson. For all biography and science collections.- Harold D. Shane, Baruch Coll., CUNY Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The book intertwines three totally different subjects and to a degree that works well. The book's take on historic cold war events is superficial. However, the discussion is more than simply the backdrop discussion. One gets some strange insights into the thinking of many who shaped the world. However, as with the other subjects, one is left wanting more. The focus on Van Neumann often appears needless. One is never clear, despite heavy assertions, why he should be considered a cut above the rest of the great innovators in the game theory field the way Einstein is in the field of relativity. This is not to doubt Van Neumann's leading role or superiority but the book somehow never substantiates enough despite amusing anecdotes and many tales involving him. On the key game theories, the book excels. For those more interested, the treatment would appear superficial. But few who are not experts won't walk away with some amazing insights. The real life connections are good. And the treatment is neither too simplistic nor excessively technical. For anyone uninitiated on the subject, the book is a great start despite all the imperfections.

I have had the original book on game theory by John Von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern which is 600 + pages of dense math for many years. This book is more about the people involved with

enough math to make the theories understandable. If you are into dense math you can start here and go on. If not you will probably start and stop here which is quite ok.

I think it is a very good book as it well ties in game theory with some of the first historical applications (such as nuclear war strategy) and describes quite well some of the historic characters that were behind the initial development of the game theory.

The essay is very rich of information about the prisoner's dilemma. This game is similar to other typical evens of the Greek logics. But this reconstruction is very large, in fact the first applications are by von Neumann in relation to the militar context. The resolution of this game found easy applications in the II world war. Next, we observe particularly the Axerold contribute, who tried an algorithm for the solution, without particular subcess. The game model is standard, but we can apply a recursive action for having several steps.

I do not have enough words of praise for this book. It so masterfully weaves together numerous areas of human interest. Who knew that game theory could be applied so broadly? The book is centered largely around the use of game theory during the cold war, and the life of John Von Neuman, but makes numerous other connections. For example, the parallel to the economic dilemma of "the Free Rider Problem" is discussed. Cooperation, as an evolutionary necessity, is talked about. The psychology of decision making is a focus. Most interesting was the connection that different styles of playing has to ones political views. I found myself pausing every few pages to absorb and integrate what was written into my world view. This is not a book that merely entertains -- it is a book that influences.

Wide ranging and at times a bit meandering, but nevertheless an excellent introduction to Game Theory and its significance in the recent past and present. (Hint: It was yuuuge).

Dear fellow readers. I love this book it adds to my library on Johnny Von Neuman and those parts of the book covering The Prisoner' s Dilemma add to the rudimentary and introductory material I had in that area of my ethics materials. John Barnes, Bangkok, Thailand

If you use a computer - you owe so much to Jon Van Neumann. I confess we called number theory mystery math in university. No longer - I understand it now. This little book does a great job on the

subject. The story of van Neumann is fascinating, then you have the explanation of many games like the prisoner's dilemma and how they apply to nuclear proliferation. Many world leaders should read this book, but of course politics and ego overshadow logic and rationality. Well worth the read, but this is not a trivial book, but it will help anyone in negotiations.

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