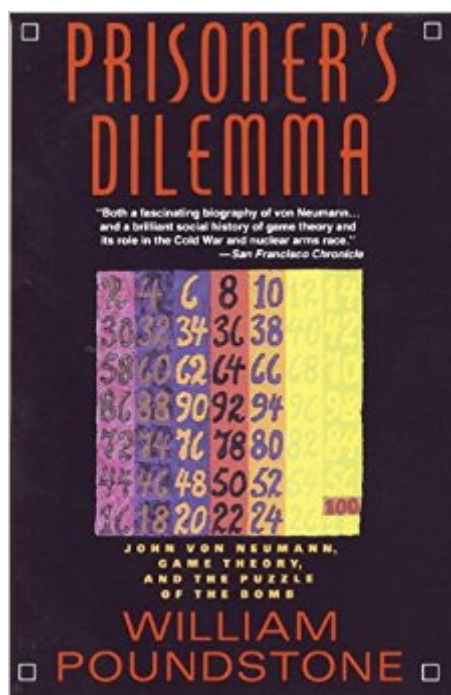


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Prisoner's Dilemma: John Von Neumann, Game Theory, And The Puzzle Of The Bomb



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, an idea that has influenced leaders across the political spectrum and informed our views of conflicts ranging from the Cuban missile crisis to the Persian Gulf War. 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.

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Customer Reviews

The enjoyment, or perhaps the utility you'll find with this book, will be directly related to how much you know about Game Theory prior to this read. This book spends, as much time on history and biography as it does on what Game Theory is about, so this work would seem to be most appropriate to those who are new to the material. I had only basic understanding of Game Theory from other books I had read, within which this field of study was mentioned, so for me the book was very worthwhile. The historical and biographic aspects of the book were not new, so there were of less interest to me. Math need not be a passion for this book to be understood and enjoyed. The various games that are explained and, "played", for the reader actually utilize little in the way of math. Game Theory in practice is about the number of participants, the choices they have, how the games should rationally be played, and how they are played when people replace theory. The results of these games are applicable to daily life, whether it explains how a network will decide the placement of their commercials, why a person will stand in a line of unknown length, or pay more than the true value of an item (like a dollar bill). Peoples behavior often crosses from the irrational to the absurd, and many of these games will point out courses of action almost all readers will have taken at one time or another, when the rational decision was the opposite of what they chose to do. The book is also a good primer for further reading on Bertrand Russell, John Nash the subject of the movie, "A Beautiful Mind", and John von Neumann, who many considered the most brilliant man alive during his career, and many other great scientists of the 20th Century.

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