

Thinking about Social Phenomena

Constructing Puzzles



Lecture dt. Feb 10, 2020

Why do norms exist?

To accomplish a social function; hold one another accountable to adhere to its principles: **functionalism**

Is this convincing?

- Do norms of revenge exist as an alternative to weak law and order?
No, they “light as many fires as they put out” (Montaigne)
- Do norms of etiquette exist to keep lower classes away?
No, it is nearly impossible to imitate the elite if you were born in the working class (and vice versa)

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- Then why do pointless, harmful, and inefficient norms continue to exist?

E.g.,

Eating with the right hand: pointless

Discrimination and honour: harmful

Corruption: both harmful and inefficient

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One explanation: we intensely care about what others think. Why? In some cases, reputation.

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In other cases, to avoid incurring formal penalty (going to prison), e.g. traffic norms; spitting or urinating in public

Crucially, it's all about cooperation

Social norms: a glue that binds people together, to ensure smooth functioning of the group

But why is it so difficult for people to cooperate for what they believe is good for all?

e.g. if everyone desires clean air, why do some of us use bad fuel, faulty vehicles, or burst crackers?

Collective vs. individual action: The Prisoner's Dilemma

Two prisoners; accomplices in a robbery; kept in different prison cells

I am a police officer. Offer each of you the option to either **Confess** to the crime or **Remain Silent**:

- If you both confess: 2 years (appeal for early parole).
- If you both remain silent: 1 year (minor charges).
- If you confess, and other remains silent: you go free (0), the other gets 5 years.

What will you choose?

Collective vs. individual action: The Prisoner's Dilemma

	A [Confess]	A [Silent]
B [Confess]	2,2 (early parole)	0,5
B [Silent]	5,0	1,1 (minor charge)

Best individual strategy:
Confess (Either 0 or 2)

Best collective strategy:
Both remain silent (1)

Dilemma: Each is better off confessing, whatever the other decides. But the outcome for each is worse if both confess than if both remain silent. 'Confess' is to not cooperate; 'Keep silent' is to cooperate.

Puzzle for Thursday

I am willing to contribute money for the upkeep of the garden in my residential complex, but not willing to contribute money towards the upkeep of gardens in my city, although I use them. Why?

Readings

Olson, Mancur. 1971. *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Ostrom, Elinor. 1990. *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ostrom, Elinor and Björn Vollan. 2010. 'Cooperation and the Commons.' *Science* 330: 923.