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Section 2

Problem Solving

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Part I: A Cat, a Parrot, and a Bag of Seed

A man finds himself on a riverbank with a cat, a parrot and a bag of seed. He needs to transport all three to the other side of the river in his boat. However, the boat has room for only the man himself and one other item (either the cat, parrot or seed). In his absence, the cat could eat the goat, and the goat would eat the cabbage. Show how he can get all the passengers to the other side, without leaving the wrong ones alone.

1. Defining the problem:

Obviously the main problem here is that the man has more items than he can fit in his boat. Beyond this, the riddle seems to be mixed up. It talks about a goat and cabbage. I assume this is a typo.

The goal obviously is to get the seed and animals across the river in one piece without them eating each other or the parrot eating the seed.

2. Breaking the problem apart:

The constraints in this problem are quite simple; each item can only be left with a specific item. If it is left with the wrong one, it will eat that item. The other constraint is the size of the boat, as it only fits one item or animal at a time.

The main sub-goal is to get the animals across the river without having them eating one another.

3. Identifying possible solutions:

For the constraints listed above, I think the obvious solution is proper ordering of moving the items. Also, the riddle doesn’t state anything about moving things back to the starting point being against the rules. That being said I think the proper solution is to carefully plan which items go back and forth to avoid any of them being eaten.

4. Choosing a solution:

As I stated, the only solution I can see is to move the animals and seed in a specific order. The riddle states (when corrected) that the cat will eat the parrot, the parrot will eat the seed, and the seed will do nothing.

First, we move the parrot across the water and drop him off at the other side of the river. As he’s alone without seed, he has nothing to eat and will remain there, while on the other side, the cat will not eat the seed. Then, the man sails back to the other side, takes the seed, and sails back to the opposite side. He proceeds drop the seed off and then take the parrot back with him. He sails back to the opposite, drops the parrot off, and takes the cat to the other end. Again, as the parrot is alone, he cannot eat the seed, and the cat has no interest in the seed. The man then sails back, grabs the parrot and then sails back to the other end, drops the parrot off and disembarks from his boat, along with his seed and animals in tact.