

A war of all against all? The close up problem

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Abstract. This paper presents a problem for a prisoner's dilemma model according to which the state of nature would be a war of all against all, which I call "the close up problem."

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What would life be like in the state of nature? In other words, what would life be like without a government and legal system to enforce rights and resolve disputes? Hobbes famously said that it would be a war of all against all, and there is a prisoner's dilemma model which supports this contention, though it is a mystery who devised it (Gauthier 1967: 468? Not quite). Person A and person B are approaching each other in the state of nature. There are two options: approach peacefully or attack. Both could approach peacefully. However, if one person aims to attack while the other approaches peacefully, then the other will suffer injury and lose their property. So the rational thing for each party to do, given the risk that the other will attack, is to attack. The loss of property is less, but the result is a war of all against all, in the sense of each individual being involved in conflicts and potentially with any other individual. (This is not exactly the sense Hobbes has in mind, by the way, defining it rather in terms of a known disposition to fight. See 1651: chapter 13.)

A lovely model, or outline of one, but who devised it? And does it not suffer from a "close up problem"? You and I are approaching each other. The technology is not advanced. As we get closer, is it not going to be evident whose approach is peaceful and who is planning to attack? Approaching each other face to face, I think such plans will often be evident before the

fighting or the fighting proper. “This person looks as if they want a fight!” or “This person just threw a stone in my direction. What an unpleasant character!” etc. And since we are both rational, we are both planning to attack. But given the costs of conflict, is it not rational, once these plans are evident, to avoid each other? If one does not have any recollections of fights, beyond surprise attacks, and perhaps whoever devised this model does not, just imagine a game, a computer game. You and some other individuals are, to begin with, distributed evenly in a territory. But of course you must search for food and so must they and occasionally your paths cross, or risk crossing. When the other is close enough and prepared to attack, it is evident by the colour of that character – they flash red upon the screen. After enough injuries you are dead. The aim is to survive. There is probably a lot of avoidance in this boring game. When pursuing the aim, there is a lot less conflict than anticipated by the model.

References

Gauthier, D.P. 1967. Morality and Advantage. *The Philosophical Review* LXXVI: 460-475.

Hobbes, T. 1651. *Leviathan*. London: Andrew Crooke.