

May 15th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Viminitz

Narveson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Narveson, "Commentary on Viminitz" (1999). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 117.
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA3/papersandcommentaries/117>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

Author: [Jan Narveson](#)

In Response To: Paul Viminiz's [The Deer Hunter paradox](#)

(c)2000 Jan Narveson

Viminiz concludes his not-easy-reading paper as follows: "So, what follows from all or any of this? Well, among other things, that there are some situations - more instructively, situations involving this recursivity feature - in which the rationality (or irrationality) of an action seems to be, in a highly instructive sense, independent of that action's expected utility. Provided only that the action at the head of the recursion would be countenanced because of its expected utility, an action down the recursion line can inherit that sanctionability even if its own expected utility would counsel against it. And that, I submit, might have very important consequences indeed." In particular, it leads him to go into Chicken theory pretty quickly; re which, he says,

And so why - in the absence of a pre-commitment strategy in the meta-game - are we destined to crash? Because this reversible penetration is recursive. In other words, rational choice theory is stymied in Chicken because it is stymied in Deer Hunter. And it is stymied in Deer Hunter because it has yet to develop an account of maximizing under conditions of recursive reversivity.

Paul's reasoning is strong here, and if, as he implies at the end, he doesn't have this all sorted out, I certainly don't. Still, for situations like his widget-producers, most of us humans spot an easy solution: split the difference (yielding 3 for me, 4 for you, dividing the cooperative surplus equally a la Gauthier's MRC.) This solution can be modified by all sorts of things. In fact, it is solved differently with a private-property regime, as Gauthier in effect also showed with his example of hired lab assistants versus Yukon gold-strike claimants. If I own the factory, you take the best offer you can get from me, which is made with an eye on the labor pool; if it's tiny, you get more; if large, less. But if we are joint owners with equal capital investments, we split fifty-fifty. And so on.

These time-proven human solutions work because we all know (intuitively, anyway) the sort of problem he's pointing to here, and because our budgets of time and trouble are comparable. If they are not, of course, we'll again get different results: the tourist in the Arab souks, due to board the plane in three hours, will pay more than the seasoned tourist in no hurry, and even he will pay more than the very seasoned fellow Arab who can wait forever and knows exactly what the score is.

Reality makes a lot of difference in these matters, though it tends to be ignored in game-theoretic analysis. We may surmise that some such factor accounts for the whole of the deer hunter situation: enemy boredom, lack of scruple or fellow-feeling, curiosity, and so on all enter in to induce the VC leader to allow, in the moments he has available for decision, the 3-bullet load for Mike and Nick. Paul is surely right that "if the Round 3 player should rebel rather than

comply, the VC should never have let him have the gun after Round 2!", with its further implication at another recursion.

Here's another weakish thought. As a former colleague of mine once pointed out, the odd thing about games as they occur in game theory is that nobody actually plays them. The theory of game analyzes a given game, shows which moves are the logically best ones at each move, and who wins (if it's the sort of game you win or lose), and then if real people propose to play that game, and have done the mathematics (or read the article), there'd be no point in playing it - indeed, there would be no possibility of literally playing it at all. Why bother to kick off at the start if both sides knew exactly how it was all going to go and who would win? If they did "play", it wouldn't be playing - it would be a rather hard-knocks sort of ballet.

In real games, game theory would seem to be a very limited resource. Indeed, a good deal of the thinking that goes on in games addresses the sort of issues for which Clausewitz is famed for pointing to: After you've made all your plans in the light of all the known facts, expect everything to go totally awry in about the first ten minutes. Nothing will go as planned. In real-life games, I suppose, it is more or less that way too.

That provides only a weak answer to the paradox Viminiz has presented, and in a sense it's not a real answer at that. But it's probably relevant at some level anyway. In particular, I think it's pretty relevant to moral philosophy. People have talked about "rule utilitarianism" in hopes of heading off some problems apparently generated by utilitarianism. But the best theory we have shows that utilitarianism is wrong from the start, so there's no real point in rule utilitarianism. On the other hand, the general sort of view that David Gauthier and Hobbes have developed, and to which I broadly subscribe, is the right sort of theory. That plus the points about how the real world is, and is known to be, suggest the correctness of the sort of moral principles advocated by Hobbes. Rational maximizers looking at the real world and asking what protections would come in handy will see that general principles, especially Hobbes' first principle of Seeking Peace and confining war to defense, are an extremely good general bet for this purpose. Yes, there'll be all sorts of variations in specific power-relations among people from time to time, and especially, enough to make it not plausibly predictable that any given person will enjoy advantages of that kind for long; and if we're going to try to resort to the strategy of trotting out principles for adjudicating disputes, we can't do better than principles that are thoroughly general and impartial.

So we do (or try to).

Of course, in a world in which people lived up to those rules, problems like Deer Hunter will crop up mainly in movies and in the ruminations of game theorists. Which doesn't mean they aren't worth thinking about, but may mean that solutions, whether or not forthcoming, aren't likely to be much real use.

