What the language game of game theory cannot express

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Abstract

Wittgenstein famously claimed that *to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life*. The *language game* or *world picture* of that form of life consists of the nest of mutually supporting suppositions that are beyond any doubt for us, the bedrock of our understanding the world.

The language game of our understanding the world via game theory is straightforward to describe. The profile of everybody's actions define outcomes, and the individual is characterized by her preferences over outcomes. A more preferred outcome means improved well-being. Others' actions may change and are beyond the individual's control, but the individual's preferences over outcomes remain stable.

Since actions and outcomes can take a huge variety of shapes and forms, this language game seems so general that we have become accustomed to thinking that we can express and analyze within it all relevant social interactions; hence the vast array of applications of game theory in economics and political science . The world picture by which individuals are thus conceptualized has, nevertheless, two huge blind spots.

First, the link between action profiles and outcomes is unstable. Whereas an action profile may be a physical description of deeds, an outcome is always a narrative, and human beings are storytellers: eating bread can soothe one's hunger, bring joy within a communal meal, or be part of a religious ceremony. More importantly, the outcomes we read change abruptly and instantaneously:

> If at night, on a deserted road, instead of a tree I think I see a man lying in wait, a threatening human presence forces itself on me, and (...) makes me tremble even before I know what it's all about; I draw near, and suddenly everything is different, I no longer tremble, I read a tree and not a man. (Simone Weil, *An essay on the notion of reading*)

In this example, perception has stabilized, and the reading of the dead tree trunk will not switch back into a reading of a lurking person to be avoided. This is the exception rather than the rule, though: we are continuously overwhelmed by sudden, haphazard happenings that terrify us and disrupt our reading of the world:

> (...) if in times of war or civil unrest unarmed men are sometimes killed, it is because the sight of what is vile in these people and begs to be destroyed penetrates the souls of the armed men at the same time as the sight of their clothes, their hair, their faces (...) If few crimes are committed during the ordinary course of life, it is because when a human being stands in front of us we read in the colours which enter through our eyes something which must to some degree be respected. There is the same difference between these two states as between those of the man walking on the deserted road when he reads in an appearance first a man lying in wait, then a tree. (...) The change takes place like a flash; each of the two readings appears, when it is there, to be the only one real or possible (...) (Weil, *reading*)

A stable perception of outcomes is therefore an achievement, not a starting point, an achievement that is never attained once and for all. But if outcomes are narratives and narratives get repeatedly disrupted, the idea of stable preferences over outcomes has, in fact, a rather narrow scope of applicability.

Weil proposes an alternative language game, where the stable (or slowly evolving) characteristic of an individual is not her preferences over outcomes but rather her character:

> Character is an invariant that appears throughout the reactions of a human being (acts, gestures, attitudes, words), and, if it were itself defined, would define the possible reactions. (...) The reaction of a human being with respect to determinate circumstances, that force him to get involved in some manner or other, depends upon the circumstances and upon his character; the possibility of a choice is illusory. When we have to choose, the choice is in fact already made. (...)

> Thus our problem with respect to our character is double. First of all, how can we modify it ourselves, (...) and go beyond it in the direction of the highest value? Then how can we keep the empire of circumstances in certain cases from breaking it, and transforming it in such a way that we are exiled from ourselves? (Simone Weil, *Notes on the Concept of Character*)

The second blind spot of the language game of game theory is that it is consequential: an outcome brings about one's well-being. It is a far-reaching generalization of the idea of food consumption that brings satiety. However, an important aspect of human flourishing is precisely the lack of satiety, the ever-remaining sense of wonder and yearning that accompanies deeds aimed at satiation and gratification. "Outcome" and "yearning" are antonyms - the one finalized, achieved, the other never finalized and never achieved. The contrast between these two complementary aspects of well-being is a thread proceeding from classical Greek philosophy to contemporary psychology.

In [Heifetz and Minelli (2019), *Flourishing as productive tension*](), we devised a model aimed at capturing these two incommensurable aspects of well-being. The individual's vitality is tunneled to different goals/practices; gratification is represented by discharge of flow, flourishing corresponds to generated power, and the two are not necessarily co-monotonic.