

Complicity

See how they cling to the very chains which bind them!

-----Rhett Butler

There appear to be at least two important disanalogies between the situation of women and that of racial and ethnic minorities whose members are generally regarded as paradigmatic victims of oppression. First, in the case of oppressed racial and ethnic minorities it is relatively easy to identify the oppressors and the policies which serve to keep the oppressed in their place; it is not so easy to determine who the oppressors of women are--surely men are not universally blameworthy--nor even to ascertain which policies are oppressive. Secondly, unlike most members of disadvantaged racial and ethnic minorities, many women seem actively to support the very policies and institutions which contribute to their oppression.

I suggest that the difficulty in identifying the oppressors of women arises because the whole picture of women as members of a slave class, who regularly act against their own interests because they are either coerced or brainwashed by their oppressors, is seriously misleading. Rather in supporting traditional sex roles women, as well as men, are act as rational, self-interested choosers whose choices, though intended to optimize their chances of a good outcome, bring about a state of affairs which is less than optimific for all concerned. Women, in short, are caught in a game of Prisoner's Dilemma, a game in which, paradoxically, the result of everyone's free and rational choice is a state of affairs which no player would freely or rationally choose.

1. The Prisoner's Dilemma

The Prisoner's Dilemma was discovered by Melvin Dresher and Merrill Flood of the RAND Corporation in 1950 and given its now- famous name by Albert W. Tucker who wrote the first of many articles discussing the puzzle. The following formulation of the problem is Hofstadter's ("The Prisoner's Dilemma, Computer Tournaments and the Evolution of Cooperation" in *Metamagical Themas*):

Imagine that you and an accomplice (someone you have no feelings about one way or the other) committed a crime, and now you've both been apprehended and thrown in

jail, and are fearfully awaiting trials. You are being held in separate cells with no way to communicate. The prosecutor offers each of you the following deal (and informs you both that the identical deal is being offered to each of you--and that you both know that as well!): "We have a lot of circumstantial evidence on you both. So if you both claim innocence, we will convict you anyway and you'll both get two years in jail. But if you will help us out by admitting your guilt and making it easier for us to convict your accomplice...we'll let you out free. And don't worry about revenge--your accomplice will be in for five years! How about it? Warily you ask, "But what if we both say we're guilty?" "Ah, well, my friend--I'm afraid you'll both get four-years sentences, then.

There's a certain poignancy about this case: if you and your accomplice, assuming each other to be rational egoist, behave in what would seem to be a strictly rational and self-interested fashion and rat on one another, you end up worse off than if you both behave "illogically" and maintain your innocence. To make this out, consider the payoff matrix for this version of the Prisoner's Dilemma:

		your accomplice	
		stays mum	sings
you	stays mum	(-2, -2)	(-5,0)
	sings	(0,-5)	(-4,-4)

In this case, -2, which you get if both you and your accomplice stay mum is called the reward for mutual cooperation; -4 is the punishment for mutual non-cooperation since this is what you get if each of you rats on the other; for equally obvious reasons 0, getting

off scot free at the cost of implicating your accomplice is called the temptation and -5, is the sucker's payoff. Such are the four possible payoffs in any version of the Prisoner's Dilemma. We could easily have set up a prisoner's dilemma where the numbers were different, but in any case of prisoner's dilemma the following conditions must be met:

(1) temptation > reward > sucker's payoff

(2) (temptation + sucker's payoff)/2 < reward

Note, the first condition insures that being honorable is both more dangerous and less potentially beneficial for you than being a jerk. The second condition figures importantly in the iterated Prisoner's dilemma to be discussed presently. It guarantees that where the ultimate payoff depends upon a series of decisions, each with its own payoff, the reward for consistent cooperation will be greater than the payoff for alternately suckering and being suckered by your opponent.

Now from the moral point of view, or at least from the utilitarian point of view, given the assumption that the numbers in the matrix cash out as negative hedons, the situation in which both of you stay mum and thus reap the rewards of mutual cooperation is the most desirable state of affairs. As a rational egoist however your aim is not to maximize overall utility but to maximize *your own* utility and, since you assume your accomplice is similarly motivated, you have no compelling reason to think he will stay mum. If however he sings and you stay mum then you get 5 years, the maximum penalty, together with the frustration of seeing him get off scot free. Prudence therefore requires you to sing and, since your accomplice is in the very same position, this is true of him also. But irony of ironies: in this situation being honorable would have been more prudent than being prudent! The best laid plans fail: each of you gets 4 years.

Isn't life that? Indeed, says Hofstadter: the Prisoner's Dilemma is a "very lifelike paradox"--particularly if we consider it in it's most virulent iterated form in which a player engages in repeated trails, either with the same opponent or with a number of opponents. Even if being honorable and trusting is the best policy to adopt in a single trail, it is not so clear that such a policy would be to your advantage in repeated trails,

particularly in repeated trials with the same adversary. Wouldn't opponent discover that you were a patsy and exploit your niceness in order to get the biggest payoff for himself? Shouldn't make some attempt to keep your opponent guessing? And shouldn't you try to take advantage of him if he proves to be reasonably nice?

According to Hofstadter you should not. The peculiar feature of Prisoner's Dilemma, especially salient when we consider its iterated version, is that even if isolated nastiness or "defection" is better for you than isolated niceness or "cooperation," widespread cooperation turns out to be better for everyone, including you, than widespread defection. Given the assumption that all players are likely to make the same decision (since by hypothesis they are all equally rational, equally informed and equally egoistic) cooperation turns out to be the best strategy in one-shot cases and in iterated cases strategies which are highly (though not maximally) cooperative, or "nice" turn out to be the overall winners.

Interestingly, this result was proven (as least to Hofstadter's satisfaction) by a computer tournament conducted by Robert Axelrod, a political scientist investigating the evolution of cooperation in a world of rational egoists. Pitting computer programs which embodied strategies for coping with Prisoner's Dilemma against one another in a number of trials--including an "ecological tournament" in which "fit" programs were multiplied while the "unfit" were removed from the "environment"--the overall winner turned out to be a relatively "nice" program named TIT FOR TAT. TIT FOR TAT's strategy was exceedingly simple: cooperate on move 1; thereafter do whatever the other player did on the previous move. Speaking anthropomorphically, TIT FOR TAT (and most other programs which did well in Axelrod's tournaments) had the properties of being nice, provokable, forgiving and clear: that is to say it started by cooperating and did not defect unless provoked, if provoked however it responded immediately by retaliating in proportion and its policy, being simple, could easily be discerned by its opponents.

The implications of these results for evolutionary theory are striking and, indeed, Hofstadter notes that they been worked out and published by a leading evolutionary biologist. We have only to imagine a number of primitive organisms swimming in a primordial soup, occasionally interacting according to the strategies modeled by Axelrod's

programs in the "ecological" tournament to see the explanatory power of this thesis. Furthermore, as should be apparent, the results show that we needn't invoke divine guidance, moral sense or even anything remotely resembling intelligence to explain the evolution of cooperation. The programs that played in Axelrod's tournaments were all pretty dumb: none even approached the sophistication of AI programs. The tournaments were therefore excellent models for the "rational" behavior of primitive organisms.

In fact, it turns out that faced with Prisoner's Dilemma situations, more complex organisms behave less "rationally" than bacteria or 4-line programs in BASIC. Hofstadter, for example, set up a (one-shot) prisoner's dilemma situation for 20 of his most rational friends and the defectors outnumbered the cooperators 14 to 6. (Of special interest to philosophers, Dennett was included in the sample and he cooperated!) Worse, results like this seem to hold not only in artificial situations, such as this and other mind-games contrived by Hofstadter and others, but in real life. What would happen if there was a war-- or a traffic jam, or a run on a bank--and no one came? What would happen if concentration camp inmates who greatly outnumbered their captors had stampeded guards who led them to the ovens? And what would happen if women, who constitute the majority the population and, at least in America, control most of the wealth, were to go on strike?

2. Women's Dilemma

To make a plausible case for my contention that the oppressive situation in which women currently find themselves is a Prisoner's Dilemma I need to show two things: first, that our situation is indeed a Prisoner's Dilemma situation and secondly, that the choices most women make are best understood as defections and are motivated by the same sorts of considerations as those of other apparently rational but cynical egoists who, in the expectation that others will defect, have themselves adopted a strategy of defection in order to avoid the sucker's payoff.

In real life, the satisfactions for which we play and the evils we hope to avoid, are many and varied. It is not the case that all, of the decisions which confront women are Prisoner's Dilemmas nor that women's support of oppressive policies and institutions is invariably motivated by a jaundiced view of other women and a desire to avoid being suckered. Sometimes women are forced to comply with sexist demands and sometimes

women comply because they have "internalized" popular wisdom about which attitudes and actions are appropriate and to women, in particular because compliance in and of itself is regarded as appropriate and asserting one's rights inappropriate. Most of the time however women comply because we are every bit as aggressive, cynical and competitive as men, because we are tempted to get the big payoff and, perhaps even more so, because we are afraid of being suckered.

Consider, for example, the following game of Prisoner's Dilemma which women frequently play: Snagging A Man. Most women have an interest in attracting men. First, most women are heterosexual and therefore need to acquire men to use for sexual purposes. Secondly, and more importantly, given massive discrimination in hiring and promotion, most women need men for economic reasons.

A woman's ability to snag a man however is directly proportional her attractiveness. The slimmer and prettier a woman is, the easier it is for her to trap a high-quality man; plain women must make do with the rejects and may, if they are too picky, end up out in the cold completely.

Now within limits a woman can improve her appearance and thus her chances of snagging the man of her choice: she can diet, do aerobics, beach her hair, have plastic surgery if necessary, pass her leisure time under a sunlamp, curl her eyelashes, invest in acrylic fingernails and spend the bulk of her income on clothes and cosmetics. Still, in the words of our mothers, "beauty hurts." A woman who wants to improve her appearance appreciably must exercise an enormous amount of effort and spend the better part of her days in profound and distracting discomfort, wearing constricting clothing, itchy pantyhose and painful shoes.

Most women, in fact, do take pains to be attractive and well-dressed because they know full well that if their appearance is well below average they will lose out in the meat market. In the past, married women could "let themselves go" but now, as the divorce rate tops 50 percent, married women know that they can easily be dumped. There is no safety net, no end to the competition and no end to the pain. Furthermore, women know that if they are prettier than the average they are in a very strong position indeed: men compete for the most attractive women so an exceptionally pretty woman has a large selection of suitors from which to choose and, even better, is in the position to strike a

hard bargain with the man she finally accepts.

Now if all, or most, women decided to "let themselves go" life would be much better for all women. If we all went off our perpetual diets, burnt our pantyhose and spent the remainder of our lives in jeans and sweatshirts we would be more comfortable *and we would still get the sexual and economic goods* since men would be forced to put up with our slovenliness. If Hofstadter's analysis is correct the solution is obvious: we should form a compact in order to reap the rewards of universal sloppiness.

This situation is a Prisoner's Dilemma. If we "cooperate" (with our sisters) in order to bring down the dress code we reap the reward for mutual cooperation; if most of us defect--as we in fact have--we get the punishment for mutual defection (pantyhose forever). If however some of us cooperate and others defect then the defectors, having succumbed to the temptation to get one up on their sisters, get their pick of men and do very well indeed while those who cooperate get the sucker's payoff and end up as old maids.

This case is illustrative of a more global phenomena: women's business is the business of pleasing people. Hard work, intelligence and technical competence are not nearly so likely to pay off for women as are good grooming, social skills and niceness. A woman achieves success by exhibiting to a high degree qualities that oil the social machinery and make other people feel good, thus a woman gets a much bigger payoff from being compliant, compassionate, cheerful, and generally pleasant than a man does. It is not that women have a greater psychological need for "connectedness" or get more intrinsic satisfaction from being liked (and more dissatisfaction from being disliked) than men; rather for women more *extrinsic* satisfactions hang on being likable. For a man, a winning smile and pleasant manner may be a plus; for a woman such qualities are a necessity since most women *literally* earn their living by pleasing people, particularly men.

Ironically, women compete with one another, and compete quite fiercely, to be the most compliant, the most apparently cooperative (with those whose approval they seek to win), the nicest and least aggressive. Indeed, this sort of competitiveness is rarely recognized for what it is, thus contemporary writers tout men's alleged "aggression advantage" or, in a feminist vein, women's greater capacity for "connectedness" and for

finding "inclusive" solutions to problems. I suggest that such conclusions result from a failure to be clear about what should count as aggression, as competitiveness or as cooperation. We should recognize that, ironically, the efforts of traditionally "feminine" women to outdo one another in "niceness" are competitive, aggressive and non-nice in the highest degree. We should take seriously old-fashioned metaphors about women donning their "war paint" and going out "dressed to kill."

The pressure on women to take extreme care with dress and appearance is not the only sexist pressure on women or the most important. Consider the situation of women who work outside the home. The overwhelming majority of women in the labor force are still employed in traditionally female occupations which are boring and underpaid. In addition, as most women know, such positions offer little chance for advancement. Women still make less than two thirds of what their male counterparts earn--a figure which has not changed appreciably in the past twenty years. Discrimination against women in hiring and promotion is the norm and sex segregation the labor force is the rule rather than the exception. In such circumstances, it does not pay women to invest too heavily in their careers. Men's earning potential and prospects are more promising than women's hence, where resources are limited, a rational woman will invest in marriage and in her husband's career in preference to her own because this strategy is likely to have the better payoff *for her* as well as for him.

This too is a Prisoner's Dilemma. One important reason that employers, who are, by and large rational, self-interested choosers, are reluctant to invest in women is that women on the average invest less in work than men. This is known as the Feedback Effect for obvious reasons: women don't invest in work because they know that their employers aren't likely to invest in them; employers don't invest in women because women don't invest in work. Probability is the guide to life and, as rational choosers, both women and their employers are just rational choosers playing the odds.

Women's rational, self-interested choices to invest less in work help perpetuate discrimination, which is detrimental to the interests of all women. Yet because minority cooperation results in cooperators being suckered it is exceedingly difficult to break the feedback loop. If a few isolated women, in the interests of solidarity with their sisters--cooperators in the game--invest more in work they are suckers: they will miss out on the

benefits they could otherwise have gotten and, since they are in the minority, they will be written off as exceptions or cranks. Discrimination will continue unabated. On the other hand defectors, women who without any thought for sisterly solidarity, invest less in their careers, gain.

In short, I suggest that women--like politicians who promote the arms race, motorists who drive offensively, and other victims of their own cynicism and competitiveness--have become locked into something close to an "All-D" (all defection) strategy in the game of iterated Prisoner's Dilemma.

3. Why?

The question which will no doubt immediately occur to anyone who stands on the brink of being convinced of the plausibility of my hypothesis is *why*? Why have women, as a class, locked themselves into a fundamentally self-defeating strategy? More generally, given strong evolutionary pressures toward cooperation, why do rational, highly-evolved beings pursue uncooperative strategies which are ultimately self-defeating?

Hofstadter's suggestion is, I think, illuminating. To understand the Prisoner's Dilemma puzzle we have to take seriously stipulation that all players are equally rational, equally well-informed, and similarly motivated, in other words we must assume that we are typical players so that our own actions are indicative of what others will do. In Prisoner's Dilemma it is what Hofstadter calls the "hope for asymmetry"--the hope that players will not behave uniformly--that induces players to defect. If we recognized that we are more or less like other people and gave others credit for being as rational as we were we would recognize that this hope is in vain and the temptation to get one up on our fellows by defecting would disappear. Alas, we are all sturdy individualists and cherish the secret hope that others are not so clever, or so nice, as we are: this what leads to our downfall.

This diagnosis, so far as it goes, seems correct and is clearly applicable to our case. Women may play dumb but few women, however unliberated or unsympathetic to the aims of the women's movement, really believe that they are dumb. Many women however believe that other women are dumb and that they themselves, some inexplicable reason, are uniquely rational.

In addition, most women do not know that they are playing prisoner's dilemma.

Their ignorance is advantageous: in the people-pleasing game, self-deception facilitates one's performance. A cynical woman who recognizes her situation as a Prisoner's Dilemma and consciously sets out to snag a high-yielding man in order to optimize her chances of a favorable economic outcome is less likely to snag a financially promising man than one who believes that her only consideration is True Love.

There is however a more pessimistic conjecture that might explain the persistence of self-defeating strategies of defection. By hypothesis players of Prisoner's Dilemma attempt to maximize their own gain in an absolute sense: they are not motivated by an interest in winning, that is, in getting one up on other players, except insofar as this may be conducive to increasing their gain in an absolute sense.

In real life however people are not like this. They regularly exult in Pyrrhic victories and strive to gain prestige for its own sake, even where the cost of being one up is great in absolute terms. The big fish eat the little fish, and the little fish eat even littler fish: even fish who know that this brutally competitive system makes it likely that they will get eaten support it because the satisfaction they get from eating littler fish is so great that it outweighs their fear of being eaten themselves. Even if women could be convinced that we would all be better off if we called a halt to the competition to be nicer, more pleasant, better groomed and more attractive than most of our peers we might still continue with the game just in order to get one up.

In any case, whatever the explanation for women's having adopted a non-cooperative strategy, my suggestion is that our motives for having adopted this strategy are the same as the motives of overwhelmingly male political leaders who play the game of nuclear brinkmanship and motorists of both sexes who indulge in rude and childish behavior on the road. Only the circumstances and the payoffs are different. On my account, women are neither forced to comply with sexist demands nor are they "brainwashed" into supporting sexist policies and institutions. Women as a class are neither cowardly nor stupid. We are moved by the same competitive, individualistic and cynical assumptions that motivate men and we reap similar questionable rewards.