



Teaching Philosophy

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Articles

CHRISTINA M. BELLON: At Play in the State of Nature: Assessing Social Contract Theory Through Characters

Characters

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I have a special fondness for the characters in this game.

CHARACTERS	
<i>Person 1:</i> Controls the local well (only source of water) and the apple orchard. Growing wealthy from trade.	<i>Person 7:</i> Loves fresh baked breads and delicacies, but sad and reclusive since Person 3 killed the baker. Stash of gold from undisclosed sources.
<i>Person 2:</i> Captive of Person 3 (you consented at knife point upon threat of death). Formerly the apprentice baker.	<i>Person 8:</i> Shepherd with only 3 sheep left (someone keeps stealing them). Trades wool for apple-berry pies or cider with Person 4.
<i>Person 3:</i> Powerful, feared because of weaponry and skill in battle. Not many of the others like you, though.	<i>Person 9:</i> Hopeful entrepreneur who sees the market profit potential in the skills and needs of others. No capital. Needs investors (maybe Person 7?).
<i>Person 4:</i> Religiously inclined pacifist vegetarian apple and berry gatherer, weaver of fine cloth, maker of cider and pies.	<i>10: The Voice of Desire:</i> You remind the others of what they most desire for themselves.
<i>Person 5:</i> Former captive of Person 3, now escaped and occasionally allied with Person 4 because s/he gave you shelter, cider, and pies.	<i>11. The Voice of Fear:</i> You remind the others of what they most fear and dread.
<i>Person 6:</i> Wandered into this place and can't get out. Surviving by thievery, cunning, and forming false alliances. A taste for mutton.	<i>12. The Voice of Reason:</i> You remind the others of what they should do to get what they want at the least risk.

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This list of characters developed gradually through several less successful earlier versions of the exercise. This set seems to strike the necessary balance between sophistication and barbarism without presupposing too much advanced social organization, and seems, in my opinion and in the opinion of student players, to underscore the potential for forming alliances with others and for fearing false alliances—exactly what Hobbes assumes about individuals in their pre-civil existence. This was, for me, the most difficult aspect of formulating this exercise—trying to create characters who would have good reason for wanting to form civil society but also good reason for not wanting to do so. It strikes me that this is the sort of tension Hobbes envisioned in his thought experiment—that rational individuals, motivated by self-interest, would be willing but also reluctant to trust other like-minded and similarly motivated individuals.

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The three additional characters—the voices of Reason, Fear, and Desire—serve as motivators to the others when it seems, in the estimation of Reason, Fear, or Desire, that the person is “forgetting herself.” Reason, Fear, and Desire should take, as the better part of their task, to cajole or persuade each member to do what Reason, Fear, or Desire think is best. It is important to note

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that these three characters might act together, cooperating so as to bring about the ends they find best, they might work independently of one another to achieve the same ends, or against one another, if they find their preferred ends conflicting. I added these three characters only recently, finding that some students might enjoy this sort of activity; and somewhat selfishly, because it freed me to observe the groups without getting directly involved in the dynamic of the play. I found