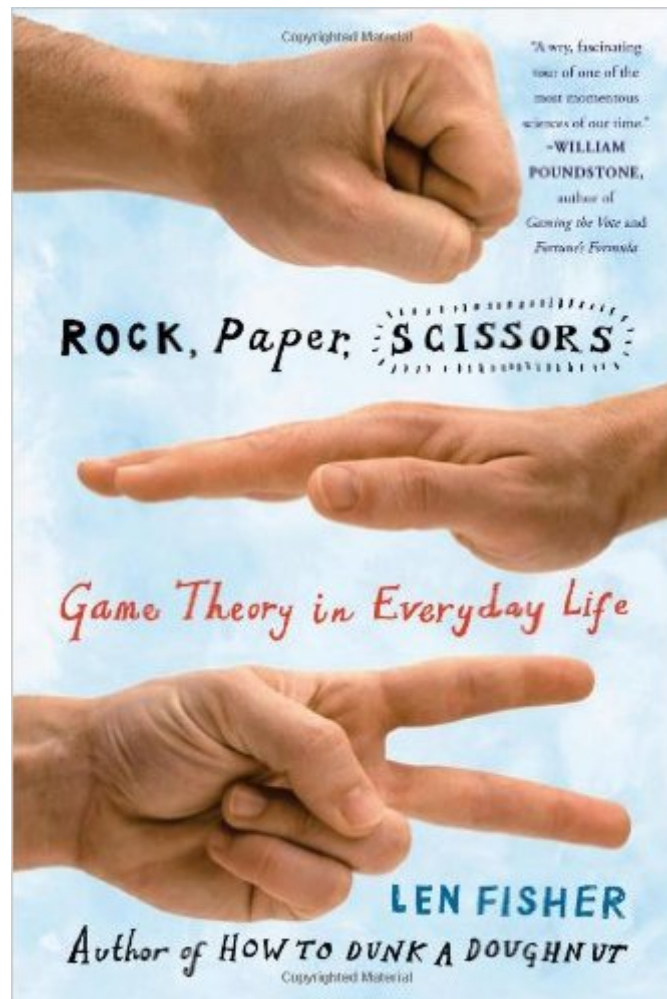


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Rock, Paper, Scissors: Game Theory In Everyday Life



Synopsis

Praised by Entertainment Weekly as "the man who put the fizz into physics," Dr. Len Fisher turns his attention to the science of cooperation in his lively and thought-provoking book. Fisher shows how the modern science of game theory has helped biologists to understand the evolution of cooperation in nature, and investigates how we might apply those lessons to our own society. In a series of experiments that take him from the polite confines of an English dinner party to crowded supermarkets, congested Indian roads, and the wilds of outback Australia, not to mention baseball strategies and the intricacies of quantum mechanics, Fisher sheds light on the problem of global cooperation. The outcomes are sometimes hilarious, sometimes alarming, but always revealing. A witty romp through a serious science, *Rock, Paper, Scissors* will both teach and delight anyone interested in what it takes to get people to work together.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A good example of how to write at the "popular" end of the popular science spectrum. Game theory in general deals with settings in which each player has to choose one of several strategies without knowing other players' choices, and gets a payoff depending on everyone's choices (note this is rather different from what we call games in everyday language). Such games typically have a Nash equilibrium, which (roughly speaking) is the result when players behave selfishly; but there may be some different "cooperative" choices of strategies that would make everyone better off (a "social optimum"). This paradox or "logical trap" is usually illustrated by the Prisoner's Dilemma story. Observing where this situation occurs and contemplating ways of getting around them by

"self-enforcing strategies" -- how cooperation might be achieved in the face of temptations to cheat -- are the main themes of the book, which is well paced and engagingly easy to read. Some highlights are (1) Discussion of "7 deadly dilemmas" given cute names by theorists (Prisoner's Dilemma; Tragedy of the Commons; Free Rider; Chicken; Volunteer's Dilemma; Battle of the Sexes; Stag Hunt) -- models in which there is math theory. (2) A lengthy verbal discussion of strategies to promote trust and cooperation (e.g. making it costly to change your mind later; deliberately cutting off your escape routes). (3) Martin Nowak's 5 rules for the social evolution of cooperation. While the in-text accounts of scientific studies in the human social world or in biology are conversationally casual, the end-notes (comprising 1/5 of the book) provide citations to the scientific literature -- a definite improvement on most books at this level.

This book provides a few laughs and a regrettably tenuous understanding of game theory. This is not an introduction to game theory, nor a practical supplement for applying game theory in everyday life. It is a collection of stories, often from the author's childhood, and several informal definitions scattered throughout. These elements are tied together loosely under the heading "game theory", but not only collectively fail to provide a solid introduction to game theory but lack adequate explanation. I suspect that many of those introduced to game theory by this book will have a false sense of knowledge about game theory and its application in everyday life. Like Fisher, these individuals will speciously argue for solutions to everyday problems (social dilemmas Fisher prefers to call them). Part of the problem is that he is, initially, quite convincing in his simple presentation of game theory. Only after the reader comes in contact with those with even a rudimentary understanding of game theory does the reader realize that he has been fooled by the simple and seemingly intuitive presentation. Fisher has other books out in multiple disciplines (he has a Ph.D. in chemistry I think). I cannot comment on these, but I suspect that he is a sort of jack of all trades, master of none (except perhaps informal, inaccurate, ultimately entertaining representations of scientific disciplines). For this book, he frequently injects his own categorization, terminology, and opinions into the text in place of thought out explanations for game theoretic concepts. For example: He refers to Nash's equilibrium as Nash's trap. "Professional game theorists may not much like my describing the Nash equilibrium in this way, because it implies that the equilibrium always leads to a bad outcome.

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