

## *The Canterbury Tales* as a Practical Demonstration of the Prisoner's Dilemma

Matthew Alain

---

*This essay is dedicated to the memory of Neil Patrick Kennedy*

The philosophy that emerges from Chaucer's Miller, Reeve, Pardoner, and Franklin is that everyone is either selfishly manipulative or naively vulnerable, and it is through this context that each tale can be thought of as a possible outcome of the prisoner's dilemma. The prisoner's dilemma is a game theory thought experiment in which two subjects choose to either trust or betray the other, resulting in one of three possible outcomes depending on the combination of their choices, whether they both trust, they both betray, or one trusts and the other betrays. Through the tales of the Miller and Reeve, Chaucer demonstrates that people are either foolishly trusting victims or selfish manipulators, establishing that in any circumstance in which these two types of people interact with one another, the manipulators acquire personal benefit at the expense of the victims, which is a possible consequence of the prisoner's dilemma. The Pardoner's tale exemplifies a case where manipulators interact with one another, demonstrating how they all receive a far worse punishment when they do not have anyone to take advantage of and are too selfish to change their ways, representing the net worst outcome of the dilemma. Finally, when trusting characters are able to interact with one another without being taken advantage of by manipulators, as is the case in the Franklin's tale, it showcases the best possible outcome in which those who trust may do so without the risk of being betrayed, and all involved members are mutually rewarded. Thus, the philosophy

that Chaucer presents through his tales is not one with a static solution, but a complex set of scenarios that rely on the interpersonal cooperation to achieve the best results, an opportunity that is not always possible given the different ideals and actions of a character's given company.

Firstly, the Miller and Reeve showcase that of each tales' characters, the ones who are most often punished are those who place the most blind trust in those around them, and the ones who come out on top are those who do so at the expense of others. John is the most obviously naive of the victims in the Miller's tale for his blind trusting of Nicholas' claims of receiving divine revelations; he is too concerned with his immediate worries of "[his] little Alison" and whether "she [is] to drown" (Chaucer 128) to adequately consider the possibility of deception or falsehood. Thus, John not only becomes a cuckold for lacking the required skepticism to consider that Nicholas' claims might not be true, but he is also physically wounded and mocked by those he trusted, much like Absalon is when he trusts Alison to give him a kiss and is instead made into a joke for the entertainment of those who deceived him. Similarly, John and Alan from the Reeve's tale may know of Simpkin's reputation, but still naively allow their horse to be vulnerable enough to be set free so Simpkin can steal their corn, and thus they are punished for trusting their own capabilities when they know they are interacting with a manipulator who intends to deceive them. Meanwhile, characters such as Alison and Simpkin actively benefit from the suffering of those who trust them, with Alison being the only character in the Miller's tale who does not receive some form of physical or social punishment despite her manipulative behaviour, and Simpkin being allowed to continue his

“outrageous” and “forthright” thievery of the bedridden manacle by “[Blustering] it out and [swearing] it wasn’t so” (Chaucer 143) when accused by the warden. In both cases, the manipulative characters are implicitly trusted by those they manipulate, and thus maximize their value in the prisoner’s dilemma by continuing to act selfishly for as long as they receive no consequences for doing so. Thus, Chaucer’s tales demonstrate that in a setting where manipulators and victims are allowed to engage with one another, the selfish group will always benefit at the expense of the group that are too trusting of those around them.

Both the Miller’s and Reeve’s tales demonstrate that when characters are made victims at the hands of a manipulator, they see the benefits that can be reaped from acting more selfishly and will become manipulators themselves. When Absalon is mocked by Alison and Nicholas, he immediately becomes willing to “take [his] soul and sell it to the Devil / To be revenged upon [Nicholas]” (Chaucer 135), twisting his wounded pride into a motivation for vengeance in the form of physical violence against his transgressors. Once he is made aware that he is being taken advantage of, he knows that for as long as his manipulators refuse to cooperate he will continue to suffer for their benefit; thus, his only available option is to become similarly cynical and self-serving in how he interacts with them. In a similar way, Alan cites the law “If in one point a person be aggrieved, / Then in another he shall be relieved” (Chaucer 149) as justification for their seeking of vengeance on Simpkin when the pair assaults his wife and daughter to get even for the comparatively minor loss they faced when the manipulator took advantage of them. In both cases, the characters recognize that their trust was misplaced, and as per Chaucer’s version of the

prisoner's dilemma, realize that if they cannot benefit from the role they are currently in, their only option is to magnify the punishment and inflict more suffering upon those they believe deserve it. This demonstrates the violently cyclical nature of this Chaucerian version of the prisoner's dilemma, where if one cannot find success in trust and understanding, their only available options are to allow themselves to be punished for the benefit of others or become equally selfish and seek vengeance on those who take advantage of their trust.

While this philosophy may provide some perversely violent satisfaction in the short term, the Pardoner's tale provides a grim example of how the acceptance of this thought process can cause one to spiral downward into continually worsening behaviour, until characters become willing to do anything for personal gain. The three rioters of the Pardoner's tale are entirely self-centered characters who only act with their own benefit in mind, initially sparked by the motivation to take revenge on "this traitor Death" (Chaucer 301), who they believe to have wronged them for killing their friends. As established, the conclusion derived from the presented philosophy is to seek vengeance on those who are viewed as having acted against the character, or in the words of the old man, to "Do no more harm to an old man than you, / Being now young, would have another do / When you are old" (Chaucer 302). Thus, the rioters selfishly wish to pay back Death for the injustice they perceive to have been enacted against them, and they act as a single member of the dilemma with the intention to act in a similarly violent manner by finding and killing Death to pursue their selfish benefits. This motivation, however, rapidly changes when they discover another way to acquire personal gain through

the acquisition of the discovered wealth, changing the circumstances of the dilemma by no longer having them play against a perceived victim to take advantage of, but against one another. Immediately upon realizing they have the opportunity, each of the rioters becomes “utterly content / To kill [the others] and never to repent” (Chaucer 305), fully accepting that they are self-centered enough to take advantage of the others for their own benefit, even to the extent of murder. However, as demonstrated by the prisoner’s dilemma, mutually self-centered betrayers both receive a greater punishment for their actions, and with each of the rioters being so focused on their potential for personal gain, they all either fail to realize the consequences that await them or refuse to allow others to benefit at their expense. Thus, the stubbornness of self-centered characters results in them killing each other for their ideals and provides a grim warning for what the prisoner’s dilemma could lead to if everyone stuck within it only make selfish choices.

Finally, the presented philosophy could alternatively be used as motivation for characters to be entirely trusting of one another to achieve the greatest net positive outcome through mutual faith, as is demonstrated in the Franklin’s tale. Inversely to how the Pardoner tells of mutual manipulators who fail the prisoner’s dilemma and suffer the greatest penalties, the Franklin tells of mutually trusting individuals who, without any manipulators to take advantage of them, have the healthiest marriage presented within any of the tales, achieving the best success possible within the scope of Chaucer’s presented philosophy. The Franklin identifies that “Lovers must each be ready to obey / The other, if they would long keep company” (Chaucer 484), and that “One should not seek revenge for every slip”

(Chaucer 485), emphasizing that the love that Arveragus and Dorigen share is not only mutual in how they treat one another, but also does not fall victim to the same failures that the relationships of the other tales do, where one victim seeks to get even with those who wrong them. Thus, the Franklin's tale demonstrates the best circumstances for the presented philosophy where, if characters are both trusting enough to treat one another well and willing to accept transgressions without seeking escalated vengeance, they can achieve the best circumstances as presented in the prisoner's dilemma.

The philosophy that Chaucer demonstrates through these tales is neither inherently positive nor negative, but educative about how a subject's willingness to trust others is directly related to the benefits they will get out of most relationships. In cases where there is an imbalance in the characters' willingness to trust and understand one another, such as with Alison in the Miller's tale, one character will always be able to exert control over another, and if they are willing to act on that opportunity Chaucer's philosophy will be beneficial to them for as long as their victim allows such actions to take place unpunished. The philosophy will instead become mutually disadvantageous when that victim finally refuses to allow themselves to be taken advantage of and becomes so displeased with the perpetrator that they become selfish themselves and willing to inflict suffering on those who have wronged them, even if doing so will be partially at their own expense, as is the case with John and Alan's revenge on Simpkin in the Reeve's tale. What the philosophy primarily presents, however, is the lesson that mutual trust leads to the best outcome, as seen in the Franklin's tale, and mutual manipulation

leads to the worst outcome, as seen in the Pardoner's tale. Thus, the philosophy that Chaucer presents is reliant on one's ability to understand the actions and intentions of others to ensure that they trust adequately without being manipulated.

Works Cited

Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Franklin's Tale." *The Canterbury Tales*. Translated by Nevill

Coghill, Penguin Classics, 1977, pp. 483-510.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Miller's Tale." *The Canterbury Tales*. Translated by Nevill

Coghill, Penguin Classics, 1977, pp. 119-138.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Pardoner's Tale." *The Canterbury Tales*. Translated by Nevill

Coghill, Penguin Classics, 1977, pp. 293-309.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Reeve's Tale." *The Canterbury Tales*. Translated by Nevill

Coghill, Penguin Classics, 1977, pp. 141-153.