

Harsanyi's Sweater¹

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Over many years of professional and personal contact, my family and I got to know the Harsanyi family—John, Anne, and Tom—quite well. We met frequently at workshops and conferences—notably the Jerusalem Game Theory workshop in 1965, where we first started to hear about games of incomplete information; the Berkeley conference in 1970, organized by John; the Bad Salzufflen conference in the early seventies, organized by Reinhard Selten; and many others. We also interacted intensively in the framework of the extraordinarily fruitful *Mathematica* project for the USACDA (United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency), which, in the late sixties, sought to identify areas of application of game theory to arms control and disarmament. The participants in this project—which included Gerard Debreu, John, Harold Kuhn, Mike Maschler, Jim Mayberry, Herb Scarf, Reinhard Selten, Martin Shubik, Dick Stearns, and me—met two or three times a year at some secluded place for a few days of intensive brainstorming; in the intervening periods we would work out the details of the ideas produced at these meetings. In the spring of 1971, during a sabbatical at Berkeley, we would come often to the Harsanyi home in the hills and be served fresh strawberries, fresh whipped cream, and fresh coffee from the Harsanyis' one-cup espresso machine—a good deal less common then than now. One day both families went to an island in the San Francisco bay; John had brought along a water-powered rocket toy, which rose to extraordinary heights.

Intellectually, John was unusual not only in the breadth and originality of his ideas, but also in an uncommon, almost unique intellectual openness. Unlike most scientists, he was able to look at his own ideas—his intellectual babies—dispassionately. When approached with some objection, he would as often as not agree, sometimes even totally abandoning a long-held position. A case in point is the matter of risk dominance versus Pareto dominance in equilibrium selection; when shown the arguments for

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risk dominance in the game known as the Stag Hunt, he willingly abandoned his long-held preference for Pareto dominance. He told me at the time that he would gladly have rewritten the whole Harsanyi–Selten book on selection, had it not been for Selten’s unequivocal veto.

In a way, this openness is reflected in a poignant personal story that John told me many years ago. It is 1944 in Budapest, and John is in his early twenties. He has been taken for deportation, with all that that implies. Arriving at the railroad station, he puts his knapsack down and wanders off a few yards, under the watchful eye of a guard. Then the guard is distracted for a moment, and John sees his chance to escape. But in the knapsack there is a beautiful, warm sweater, lovingly hand-knitted for John by his mother. John hesitates; should he—can he—abandon the sweater? After a moment, the urge to live takes over, and he slips away, taking refuge in a convent by previous arrangement. He survives the Holocaust to become the great thinker that he becomes. Hesitant, careful, open-minded, undogmatic—and in spite of that, or perhaps because of that—great.