

OEDIPUS DECISION-MAKER: THEORY OF DRAMA AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

by
Nigel Howard

Chapter 1

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS DRAMA THEORY?	2
1.1 The case of Oedipus—and the rest of us	2
1.1.1 Does drama apply to life?	2
1.2 Drama theory, game theory and choice within a fixed frame ('instrumental rationality')	3
1.2.1 Rational choice theory as the starting point for drama theory.	4
1.3 Drama theory and ethics	7
1.3.1 Differing moralities	8
1.3.2 Humour and irony	8
1.3.3 What kind of ethics?	9
1.4 Other uses of the drama metaphor; free will and consciousness	10
1.4.1 The author and the audience	12
1.5 Drama theory in relation to other subjects	13
1.5.1 Rationalism v. irrationalism	15

CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS DRAMA THEORY?

1.1 The case of Oedipus—and the rest of us

Oedipus has learnt that the queen his wife, with whom he had four children, is his mother. He married her after he had unknowingly killed his father. He goes to the royal bedroom. He finds her hanging from a noose; she has killed herself. He cuts her down, takes two brooches from her dress and stabs his eyes, making himself blind. This is Sophocles' drama *Oedipus Rex*, written 2.4 millenia ago.

How can we explain Oedipus' choices? I mean to explain them using drama theory – a set of ideas that applies to psychology, personal relations, politics, business and war, as well as literature. It explains unreason and emotion as well as rational behaviour, and unconscious as well as conscious urges. It's both descriptive – explaining how we choose – and prescriptive, showing how we should choose, both for our own ends and others'. It is a fairly new theory -- two books have appeared on it so far, plus a number of papers.¹ In this book I will discuss and use methods that make drama-theoretic analysis stronger and simpler².

1.1.1 Does drama apply to life?

This question arises at once. *Oedipus Rex* is a story. Why look at it instead of real life?

Drama theorists are interested in stories and in real life. We see both as drama. We use terms like 'character', 'author', 'audience', 'scene-setting', 'climax', etc, about both.

We aim to give the same kind of insight into real life as you get from a good play: insights into how we solve, or fail to solve, conflicts.

A play gives you these insights intuitively. You see and feel something that you can't say clearly, even if you may be able to act on it. Drama theory gives conscious insight as well. You can say what you see. It offers words—theoretical terms—to say it with. This makes the insights more useful, or at least useful in new ways. Being able to say what the insights are, you can teach them and build systems on them.

For example, conscious insight into how conflicts are solved lets us build command and control systems that make war-fighters 'do peace' better—ie, help them stabilise

¹ Drama theory, as we use the term, refers to a discipline with a mathematical base—an extension of game theory. It was founded at the end of 1991 in a meeting in Sheffield Hallam University between Jim Bryant, Peter Bennett, Morris Bradley and myself. An immediate product was 'Manifesto for a theory of drama and irrational choice' (Howard, N., P. Bennett, J. Bryant and M. Bradley, *Jour. of the Operational Res. Soc.* 44(1); 1992). My 'Confrontation Analysis: How to Win Operations Other than War' was published by the CCRP Press in 1999 (order from www.dodccrp.org). Bryant's 'Six Dilemmas of Collaboration' was published by Wiley in 2003.

² Many of these methods have been discussed on a drama theory web site – Dilemmas Galore (www.dilemmasgalore.com) – where they are applied using a software package called Confrontation ManagerTM (order from www.ideasciences.com).

post-conflict theatres. Conscious insight into how it works lets us apply the same system to business or government.

Our aim: a scientific—ie, formal, transferable and testable—view of how emotion, rationality, irrationality, deceit, morality, conflict, self-realisation and self-development help people solve problems and cooperate. Also, how they go wrong and cause fights.

We use the metaphor of drama in the same way as game theory uses the ‘game’ metaphor. Neither games nor drama are ‘real’. They’re role-playing tasks done for fun. Game theory works, in cases where it’s applicable, because the structures found in competitive games occur in real life too. When this is the case, it helps to see life as a game and use game theory to analyse it. In the same way, but differently (because drama is richer than a game), drama theory finds things going on in real life—emotion, reason, unreason, debate, conflict and development leading to change in people’s values and beliefs—that occur in drama. It looks at those things as if they were in a play, and analyses them accordingly.

So we draw examples from real life and fiction. Fiction has advantages. You can know all that’s known about the case: it’s in the text. Thus, you can judge a drama-theoretic analysis better than when discussing real-life politics or business, which different people tell differently. Also, you may see things more clearly when less concerned to see the analysis come out in a way that seems to favour ‘your’ side.

Conflict, actual or potential, underlies all human relations – from love through business to war. It frames the way we think, even when talking to ourselves – which we always do by taking sides in an imaginary conflict. Even when facing death, we see death as a decision-maker we are up against; we can’t help it, any more than we can help seeing a face in an object like a car. Whenever we’re in a serious spot, we think of ourselves, consciously or unconsciously, as facing one or more other decision-makers. We think and feel in terms of drama.

1.2 Drama theory, game theory and choice within a fixed frame (‘instrumental rationality’)

Drama theory models life in the same way as game theory because it came from game theory. It takes game theory and adds something. It adds a deep analysis of the pre-play communication that precedes playing a game – without which the game, as a mutually understood interaction played out under mutually accepted assumptions (ie, an object of which there is ‘common knowledge’), could not exist.

In analyzing pre-play communication, drama theory jettisons the assumption that players know what they want, what others want, and what they and others can do about it, and that all these things are fixed. This is the assumption of ‘instrumental rationality’.

In sticking to this assumption, game theory is part of a wider trend in the human sciences that is called ‘rational choice theory’. This trend embraces economics and large areas of political science and business decision-making. It tries as far as it can to understand conscious choice by assuming that decision-makers’ ends (what they want) and possible choices (what they can do) are fixed, given and known to the decision-makers – ie, by assuming that choice is instrumentally rational. Now, to look at dealings between people as a game is, indeed, to focus on this—on how they pursue

given ends within given means. That's what a game does: it sets up that focus. It gives each player a fixed set of possible choices (sequential or simultaneous, continuous or discrete), says what outcomes (stochastic or deterministic) are expected from each mix of choices and fixes for each player and each pair of possible outcomes which of the pair that player should want (prefer). It's against the rules to change any of this. To change what you want—for example, to decide you want another player to win—is as much not playing the game as to change what you can do—for example, by deciding to move another player's pieces.

Within such a fixed setup, there's nothing to do but try to guess what choices others will make and, given those choices, to 'optimise'—ie, try to get the outcome you most want. This is 'rational choice'. Rational choice theorists try to assume that people do this not only in games, but in life.

Drama theory does not. It allows players to have pre-play contacts that are 'rational' in a wider sense—the sense in which we talk about 'rational debate' and 'rationalisation'. Pre-play communications are emotional as well as rational. They change what players want and think. In other words, they change the game that will, in the end, be played—as seen by the players.

These changes lead, if all goes as it 'should', to an ending that satisfies emotion as well as instrumental rationality. Not only are people 'optimising', given their ends and means. They have also accepted that they can't now change their own and others' ends and means: the time when they could change them is past.

Such an ending is rational in the rational-choice-theory sense. But the changes by which it's reached can't be. They can't, because they are changes in choice-makers' fixed ideas about their means and ends—objects that rational choice theory takes as unchangeable.

Such non-instrumentally rational changes are dramatic. They touch players' emotional definition and re-definition of themselves and their plight. Drama theory looks at how such dramatic change takes place on-stage and off. It seeks to model it with as much rigour and generality as rational-choice theorists use to analyse instrumental rationality.

1.2.1 Rational choice theory as the starting point for drama theory.

Though we drama theorists focus on non-instrumentally rational changes such as self-realization and self-development, we don't throw out rational choice theory. We take rational choice seriously and draw consequences from it.

Here is a 'thumbnail sketch' of our method.

- Suppose we're given a set of characters (parties) that have come, through pre-play contact, to see the 'frame' of what they want and can do as fixed: to see it as a game. Exactly how and why they come to that view is something we still have to discuss. Let's just say they've looked at the best evidence they can find and are using the values they see as most fitting.
- Suppose our characters think how to be rational in the instrumental sense – how to optimise within the givens of what they want and can do. This brings them up against certain 'paradoxes of rationality'. These generally face rational choosers that depend on each other to reach their ends. For example,

in order to get others to do what it wants a character may need to make threats or promises it would rather not carry out – thereby facing the paradox that to get what it wants, it must go against what it wants.

- These paradoxes cause characters to feel and express emotions, some positive, some negative—eg, ‘love’, ‘anger’, ‘despair’, ‘joy’, etc. The emotions felt depend on the paradoxes faced and the way they try to deal with them.
- Emotion makes our characters irrational. They start to redefine what they want and can do. They seek to and start to believe in new characters or options or in new effects that change what they want and affect their decisions. Why is this irrational? Because, by assumption, it means they are going against the best evidence they can find and the values they see as most fitting. And they’re going against reason in this way because influenced by emotion. For example, a player whose promises or threats are disbelieved may be carried away by determination to carry them out, whether doing so is in its interests or not.
- Emotional irrationality, made known between the parties, may be all that’s needed. It may resolve the paradoxes that caused it and so solve the conflict. But this can only be so if the conflict is solvable in the short term. If it drags on, emotion fades, along with others’ belief that it will affect decisions, and parties go back to previous, justified, paradox-generating beliefs and values.
- To solve conflicts that last longer than emotion can be maintained, paradox-resolving change must last. This is done by ‘rationalisation’ – ie, by looking for *reasons* and *evidence*, hitherto overlooked, to justify the required changes in preferences or beliefs. Rationalisation, though triggered by emotion, must justify change in a way that stands up when emotion fades. Otherwise it fails.
- These are means by which emotion-generating paradoxes may be resolved, in the short or long term. They are ways of resolving a paradox by fighting and overcoming it. But there is an alternative. A character may give in to a paradox; for example, it may give up making a threat or promise that is not believed. This generally means – since the threat or promise was needed to induce acceptance of the character’s position – that the character gives up its position and adopts one that makes fewer demands.
- In general, each emotion-generating paradox presents a dilemma of this kind – whether to fight the paradox or give in to it. As a matter of terminology, therefore, drama theorists attach to each ‘paradox’ that a character must resolve a matching ‘dilemma’ that it must eliminate. Emotion-caused irrationality and rationalization of changes in preferences or options are ways of eliminating a dilemma by fighting it. ‘Giving in’ is the alternative way of eliminating it.
- There is a third way to eliminate a dilemma: *deceit*. It is not the fact that you prefer not to keep your promise or threat that creates the dilemma. It is other’s perception of this fact. Instead, therefore, of irrationally changing what I want or think, I may eliminate my dilemma by pretending to do so.

- Now deceit is of two kinds. I may pretend that I always preferred to keep my promise or threat, or that my preferences have changed so that I now prefer to. The latter kind of deceit involves displays of emotion and is, obviously, quite common – proving that change of preferences is indeed possible, and that the frame of preferences and beliefs is not fixed. The mere fact that characters do deceive each other into believing that it has changed, proves that it can change.
- But whatever may lead one party to deceive another may lead the other to disbelieve the first. Thus characters face the possibility of *disbelief*, justified or not, concerning any preferences or beliefs that favour their position.
- But whatever is done to overcome disbelief will, if it can be faked, itself evoke disbelief. This is the ‘Mandy Rice-Davies proposition’ – named after the prostitute who, informed that a client denied knowing her, replied, ‘Well, he would say that, wouldn’t he?’
- How, then, are we ever believed about things that matter to us? (If someone ‘would say that’, then their saying it conveys no information.) We need arguments—‘rationalisations’—that are seen to be unfakeable. Logical deduction and empirical evidence are the only kinds of arguments that are unfakeable in principle (drama theorists would argue that this is the evolutionary reason why humans developed them). To be effective, therefore, rationalizations must be based on reason and evidence.
- The deeper problem of disbelief is that if I would want you to believe what I say, even if it were false, you are motivated not to believe it. Even reason and evidence will therefore be suspect—unless I can show you an interest we have in common. I must show you that if what I say were false, we would both want you not to believe it. Hence, finally vanquishing disbelief requires finding a common interest. We need ‘rational arguments in the common interest’.
- If successful, these arguments build up the wants and beliefs of a ‘supercharacter’, formed by joining the characters together. To do what the supercharacter wants is, though rational for the supercharacter, irrational in general for individual characters that have not changed what they want. However, it becomes rational for individuals as they eliminate dilemmas by changing their preferences.
- The supercharacter is, as a rule, a character in a larger drama, where it too tries to be rational and comes up against dilemmas. We therefore end up with different types or levels of rationality and irrationality, one for each level of the drama we are looking at.

Thus, starting from the assumption that characters try to be instrumentally rational within a fixed frame, drama theory shows how they’re led to behave irrationally and to change the frame, so creating the possibility of rational behaviour at a higher level.

Finally, let’s try to answer the question—how and why do characters, after pre-play communication has ended, come to see themselves finally as choosing within a fixed frame? Our ‘thumbnail sketch’ of this is as follows.

- Suppose that certain parties have come together to seek a common solution to their problems, knowing that they need each other to get what they want. As a rule, they won't yet see themselves as inhabiting a fixed frame. For one thing, each will be unsure what frame (fixed or not) the others have in mind.
- They begin by suggesting what they'd like others to do and what they're willing to do in return. As each finds its suggestion accepted or rejected, it may change it; but in the end, it must stick to a suggestion; and to back it up, must say what it will do. So in the end parties fix on 'plans' (or 'positions) and 'wills' (or 'stated intentions')—what they say they'll do if others' plans and wills don't change.
- In fixing on plans and wills, parties put together a 'common frame'—their common beliefs about the things each can do and the preferences each has over different mixtures of those things. This common frame may not at first be fixed. Characters, on hearing each other's plans, may see how they're better off changing the frame—eg, enlarging a plan that's good for themselves and seems liked by others, or if their plan is disliked, firming up a will that others don't like and may pay to avoid. But as they cease to surprise each other, they fix the frame because each needs to make credible its plan and its will.
- In this manner, following initial explorations, characters come to a frame that's fixed through each having put a plan and stated a will that it presents as 'final'. The dilemmas they then face (with effects seen in our first thumbnail sketch) depend on whether or not each character's will suits each character's plan (a blending of wills into a common position) or not (a clash of wills).

This, in brief, is the drama-theoretic model of how characters change and resolve (or fail to resolve) conflicts. In what follows I will show how to use it in business and government as well as in relations between individuals.

1.3 Drama theory and ethics

There's a link between drama theory and ethics. Drama theorists tell of an emotion-led process by which people build a common interest out of individual interests while appealing to general standards. This is morality in action.

This is how we have both a descriptive theory of how people *do* behave and an ethical theory of how, in some ways, they *should* behave. Our theory manages this double role, often thought to be philosophically difficult, by describing a 'normal' process in the medical or biological sense—ie, a process that 'should' take place but often suffers from 'pathologies' that block or distort it.

We claim that there's a normal way for humans to solve differences just as there's a normal way for an organ such as the human liver to function. We sense this normal way through a universal ethical intuition. Universal, inborn methods for solving differences give rise to a corresponding universal, inborn discrimination between 'right' and 'wrong' ways of doing so.

But if there's an inborn method for solving differences, how come actual methods differ? Obviously because the method comes out differently in different societies—

just as languages do. Just as linguists try to dig out the universal traits of human language, so drama theorists seek what's universal in methods of conflict resolution.

But why should there be universal methods? Presumably they were selected evolutionarily because pre-humans survived better if better able to plan joint action—but we don't claim to know the details. We merely point out that a 'functional' explanation of difference resolution is quite consistent with an evolutionary origin, and consistent with there being a universal, 'normal' way to do it, deviating from which represents a 'pathology'.

Thus, drama theory tries to model a universal ethical intuition, just as linguists try to model an innate, universal grammar.

1.3.1 Differing moralities

As difference-resolving methods vary between societies, a universal intuition based on drama theory doesn't determine all features of morality. Humans have different, contradictory moralities just as they have different, mutually incomprehensible tongues.

These may give rise to the worst conflict. People that find each others' mores disgusting and horrifying make entrenched enemies. And drama theory can't adjudicate between the contradictory commandments of different moralities—eg, whether to eat pork or beef. However, because it looks at basic, universal ways to solve differences, it finds methods for resolving clashes between moralities as well as other kinds of conflict—methods based on universally felt intuitions as to how differences 'should' be resolved.

The existence of such universal intuitions isn't disproved by the fact that 'shoulds' arising from them are sometimes outweighed by 'shoulds' arising from particular moralities. This only shows that simultaneously-held 'shoulds' may clash, forcing those that hold them to choose which to act by. For example, some Anglicans believe gays shouldn't be clergymen, and stick to that belief even though it makes conflict with other Anglicans worse; others believe the opposite. Neither side is, in principle, in favour of conflict or against compromise. Nor do they deny that compromise could solve this conflict. It's merely that the claims of their special morality outweigh, for them, the claims of conflict resolution.

A drama-theoretic 'meta-ethic' of how to solve differences judges process, not content, and is based on a universal intuition as to what kind of process is good.

1.3.2 Humour and irony

Drama theorists connect their model of how to solve differences with the function of 'real' drama—as practised in theatres or in fiction generally.

Our claim: the function of drama is to show how differences are solved—or not. To show both how resolution may go wrong—its pathologies—and how it may go right. People go to the theatre or read novels to see this. It's why they enjoy fiction.

We claim that when shown to an audience, the pathologies of dramatic resolution are seen as either *humorous* or *ironic*—in the sense of 'dramatic irony', not in any other sense of the word.

Dramatic irony is a rhetorical form that consists of an audience seeing something characters don't see. But the 'something' that is seen and not seen must be significant. We claim that dramatic irony is found in characters disastrously failing to see how they're mishandling the solving of a conflict. Depending on how it's shown, this can also seem funny.

Now given our claim that the normal process of dramatic development and resolution shows how we should solve differences, while pathologies show what can go wrong with this, we need to be clear in every case whether what we're describing is *normal* or *pathological*. There is interest and utility in examining pathologies; but they need to be compared with what's normal. This, therefore, must be set out first.

To distinguish normal from pathological, our claim implies that we can use a thought experiment: *would an audience find this humorous or ironic?* If so, it's a pathology. If not, not.

This test depends upon an audience having a nose for the right way to solve conflicts. And so it does: it has the universal ethical intuition discussed above. Of course, individuals differ in how ethically sensitive they are, just as they differ in sensitivity to music. But this universal intuition will exist in any audience.

Note that 'normal' in this sense doesn't mean 'average', or 'what's usually found'. Nor does 'pathological' mean 'monstrous'. 'Pathology' simply means 'imperfect or ineffective functioning'. As such, pathologies are common. They're what is usually found. It would be hard to find an organism whose functioning is quite normal.

To guard against confusing 'normal' with 'usual' and 'pathological' with 'weird', we'll often use the word 'ideal' in place of 'normal' and 'non-ideal' in place of 'pathological'.

In sum, non-ideal or pathological behaviour is behaviour that doesn't solve conflicts in an ideal way. That's why pointing it out is seen as humorous or ironic.

1.3.3 What kind of ethics?

As an ethical theory, drama theory is and is not *relativistic*.

It's relativistic in admitting that collusion between 'villains'—eg, thieves, monopolists or swindlers—can be carried out well. They can plan in a healthy, normal way, with positive feelings and cooperation. There may be a limit to how well they can do so. Limits may arise because the supercharacter they're building through their relationship is meant to behave badly—non-ideally—in the bigger drama it's meant to join; this can mar the rational arguments and appeals to standards that 'villains', like the rest of us, use.

There's no such limit for parties that honestly see their aims as good and are building a supercharacter that will, in their view, be good. We may disagree with their ethics in ways not to do with resolving differences. But nothing stops them from being ideally moral in how they interact. Take the example of Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union. His racist ethics appal us. But a different kind of wrongness appears in the fact that Ukrainians would have welcomed him, had he not immediately begun treating them even worse than the Soviets had. This is ironic. The irony shows something wrong with Hitler's methods of solving differences.

By contrast, Shakespeare's *Othello* ends—after much anguish and irony—in a harmonious resolution. The harmony could, no doubt, have been brought about in many ways, but is actually brought about by one character (Othello) committing suicide while another (Iago) goes away to be tortured to death. The ending is thus incompatible with our ethics. We are against suicide and torture. But it is in harmony with the universal ethics of conflict resolution.

This shows that though drama theory does claim to be a *universal* ethics, it doesn't try to be complete. It looks at how to solve differences. Ethics is about this, but not only about this. Ethics looks at the content of resolution, not just the process. Thus it looks at many more things than drama theory. It looks at things, like approval of torture, that vary from one culture to another.

Drama theory, even in focusing on difference-solving, is not *deterministic*. It doesn't determine uniquely how people should act to resolve conflicts. They must work this out for themselves. They—it says—are necessarily in the best position to do so. In other words, the best way to resolve a conflict is only found by looking outside the drama-theoretic model and examining its real-world context with emotional motivation that can only come from being immersed in the problem.

Again, we don't say there are no specific cultural aspects to difference-solving. Take, for example, positive emotion, which we claim has a universal function in solving differences. Positive emotion is universal. However, different cultures express it in different ways. For this reason, again, effective conflict resolution requires immersion in details of the problem that are absent from the drama-theoretic model.

It remains true that drama theory, by claiming to be universal, claims to offer difference-solving methods for use by cultures with different, irreconcilable ethics. People from different cultures may need each other's help to meet their aims; when they do need each other in this way, the theory points to universal principles that show them how to work together. It also shows how as they do so their ethical systems can and should converge.

We also show the effects of an imbalance. When A's need for B's help is greater than B's need for A's, convergence tends to be on B's terms. Drama theory doesn't hide this. It shows it.

1.4 Other uses of the drama metaphor; free will and consciousness

Drama, like game-playing, has been used as a metaphor for real life by poets, psychologists and sociologists. Our use of the metaphor differs from most of these.

The point they usually make is that real life, like drama, is made up of 'actors' playing roles; that they follow 'scripts' most of the time; even that they appear on a 'stage' with their appearances divided into 'scenes'.

Our drama theory has no place for actors, roles, scripts or performances.

'Scripts', in the metaphorical sense of speech and actions learned beforehand and followed without question, explain much behaviour. But script-following behaviour is precisely what drama theory *doesn't* try to explain. What it seeks to explain is newly-invented behaviour that breaks with previous patterns: the kind that's dramatically interesting.

Both kinds of behaviour matter. Routine behaviour is essential for many purposes. So is novel, rule-breaking behaviour. After all, routines constantly need adaptation. At times of crisis, altogether new ones are called for. Drama theory focuses on how this creativity is evoked.

The TV series 'The Office' illustrates this. Office work is largely a matter of following routines (scripts). Even social interactions between office workers are controlled in this way. Ironically, however, psychological approaches to management demand that behaviour be free, spontaneous and informal. Managers therefore demand such behaviour. The rule they prescribe is the self-contradictory one that rules should be followed by not following rules, but behaving 'freely'. The TV series uses this irony to create comedic tension between the human nature of office workers—creative, anarchic and drama-theoretic—and the script-following demands of office work. Each episode ends with the humour of an office worker faced with a dreadful example of script-following behaviour masquerading as true, drama-theoretic behaviour—and turning away, deciding not to unmask it, because it has to be accepted if you work in an office.

Just as it's uninterested in scripts, drama theory is uninterested in the fact that drama is 'performed', not 'genuine'. Instead of focusing on this, we approach drama as game theorists approach games. Like them, we abstract from—ignore—the fact that the paradigm activity (game-playing, drama) is an artificial, role-playing exercise, voluntarily undertaken and done for entertainment. We are concerned with the *characters* of a drama, taken as real; with their situations and choices, not with the fact that they are played by actors on a stage.

The difference is essential. Whereas actors follow a script, characters (as such) have free will. If interested in someone as an actor, we're interested in how they follow or interpret their script. If interested in them as a character, we want to see how they make choices in interaction with others and, in so doing, change in unforeseen ways and achieve self-realisation.

'Free will' exercised by a 'conscious', intentional being is thus an essential concept for us, just as it is for rational choice theorists. Like them, we lay down that any new piece of theory must meet the meta-theoretical requirement: *knowledge of the theory by its subject must be compatible with the theory*. Knowing the theory cannot cause it to be disobeyed. We call this the *consciousness principle*.

A theory that doesn't follow this rule isn't a theory about conscious choosers, since if being conscious of a theory made subjects disobey it, it would have to be a theory about which subjects were unconscious. It wouldn't be a theory of conscious behaviour.

Drama theory obeys this rule of theory-building. But to avoid misunderstanding, we should point out what the rule doesn't say. It doesn't say that a conscious chooser's behaviour cannot be altered by knowing the theory—merely that such alterations must also be covered by the theory. Knowing the theory can lead a character to change its behaviour—perhaps making it more appropriate or effective.

It follows that the theory must allow for more than one behaviour. It cannot be deterministic. Drama theory thus fails to give a unique answer to the question 'how will a character behave?' As a predictive theory, it's worse than 'non-deterministic' in the usual sense of the term. Theories that give a unique probability distribution of

predicted behaviour are often called ‘non-deterministic’. Drama theory gives a set of possible solutions with no attached probabilities. It’s *radically* non-deterministic.

This radical non-uniqueness has to characterise the theory because, as said, it allows for both ‘normal’ or ‘ideal’ behaviour and ‘pathological’ (‘non-ideal’) behaviour. One effect of knowing the theory and applying it to one’s behaviour can be to bring one’s behaviour closer to the ideal—as when a character realises that showing certain emotions will have a good effect, and so is liberated to express them. In other cases, the effect might be ironic. A character might decide to make its behaviour less ideal—eg, to be deceitful, realising that deceit can help it. In each case, the character itself decides what to do, having seen the range of behaviour covered by the theory.

The assumption of consciousness

In effect, the consciousness principle recognises the subject of a theory—the character—as being on the same epistemological level as the theorist—the builder of the theory.

Does that mean we assume that all real-life and fictional characters know our theory and consciously apply it? That would be absurd. We do assume, first, that had they known it and drawn all necessary conclusions, they wouldn’t have chosen to disobey it. To support this, we assume that those not conscious of it had a degree of unconscious awareness, enough to enable them to obey its logic.

Such unconscious awareness isn’t mysterious. It’s just a way of saying that behaviour follows the theory. When riding a bicycle, we’re unconscious of the compensating movements that keep it upright, even though we direct and control them. We’re unconscious of drama theory in the same way. And just as we can fall off a bicycle, even though staying on it explains the movements that we make, so we can do the wrong thing (by reacting pathologically, or just making a mistake) when solving differences.

1.4.1 The author and the audience

Because it treats dramas as if they were real, terms such as ‘actor’, ‘role’, ‘script’ and ‘performance’ don’t appear in drama theory. However, ‘author’ and ‘audience’ do.

Many real-life dramas are created by a superior authority. This we call the author. For example, a firm starting a new venture first hires people to fill posts, then sets production or profit targets. In doing so, it creates a drama between the people. Similarly, a general sets missions for subordinate commanders.

Subordinates may be inspired by paradoxes of rationality to break out of the drama they’ve been put in and appeal to the higher authority that put them there. Here the analogy with the author of a play breaks down—though Pirandello (1921) in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* allowed such goings-on. Mostly, however, characters take the decisions of their author for granted, as fixed parts of the frame they inhabit.

The ‘author’ can be the characters themselves at a prior time, when they made irrevocable decisions placing them in their present spot. Or it may include non-sentient environmental forces, like a storm that isolates a group of people. It’s whatever set up the scene the characters are in.

The 'audience' can be outside observers. It can be the characters themselves, observing themselves. The audience of a drama—characters or outside observers—learns from it, feels for its progress and gets satisfaction from its resolution.

Note that the satisfaction derived from dramatic resolution is of a peculiar kind. It isn't got from seeing characters succeed; tragic endings satisfy as well as happy ones. What matters is whether true dramatic resolution obtains. Milton, in *Samson Agonistes*, describes the effect of a profound dramatic resolution on an audience:

*His servants he, with new acquit
Of true experience from this great event,
With peace and consolation hath dismissed,
And calm of mind, all passion spent.*

When a drama is fully resolved the characters have one set of intentions for the future. There is no more information to be shared between them or with the audience. They've nothing left to hope for or to fear—all previously existing opportunities having been either destroyed (a tragic ending) or exploited (a happy one).

This describes the resolution of a drama like *Samson Agonistes* that deals with things of life-shattering importance. Many real-life dramas are, of course, less apocalyptic; what's at stake is less significant. A more precise statement, therefore, is that at a resolution, characters have one set of intentions, have shared all information and have nothing left to hope for or to fear *regarding what's at stake*.

Again, we've described an ideal resolution. Real-life endings often depart from the ideal—ie, are 'pathological'. In fiction, authors often play with pathologies to point morals or arouse perverse, 'non-normal' interest. This 'perversity', in the sense of a liking for what is non-ideal, doesn't deny, it confirms, the existence of an ideal.

And note that the ideal resolution, in which characters, starting with different plans and conflicting wants, come to one will regarding what's at stake, is practically important. It matters for business and politics as well as personal relations. A business firm wants to resolve its problems as ideally as it can in this sense.

The ideal resolution that we strive for has, however, two disconcerting characteristics. First, it can't go into much detail. As we pin down more and more details, we eventually find points on which characters disagree. Secondly, it doesn't last. Human nature demands, and the impossibility of predicting the future implies, that as we go further into implementing an agreement we will get into new conflicts and misunderstandings.

1.5 Drama theory in relation to other subjects

We've outlined a specific approach to drama and conflict resolution. It is, broadly,

- a theory of how paradoxes of rationality cause changes in parties' plans and wills and in the 'frame' they inhabit;
- a view that such 'reframings' of objectives, value systems and views of the world represent self-realisation and development.

In changing the plans they push or the wills they state, parties change both their objectives—the projects that embody their values—and their contingent objectives—what they intend to do if their objectives aren't met. Depending on how much the issues matter to them, this means changing themselves, to a greater or lesser extent. Changes in their beliefs and preferences also mean changes in themselves, since beliefs and preferences are founded on knowledge of facts and effective value systems. To change such things (when the issues matter) is to go deep into one's own self-definition. It is self-transcendence.

Such self-transcendence, brought about not by new information but by the situation's internal dynamic, is the essence of drama, which lays before us a closed system containing the factors responsible for change and shows how it happens.

The derivation of such developmental changes from paradoxes of rationality, encountered by players making conscious decisions, makes drama theory a theory of conscious choice—one that its subjects, the characters, can become conscious of without it being invalidated.

What can one do with such a theory? Drama theorists can model, analyse and explain dramas. They can, like theatre directors, show characters how to behave. The difference is that whereas a theatre director talks to actors, a drama theorist talks to characters.

Drama theory can help businessmen, politicians, military commanders or individuals to handle relationships. It can help by showing the way to self-realisation and satisfactory resolution of conflicts for individuals and organisations.

Different theoretical approaches define "success" differently, depending on the aims they set themselves. Behavioural psychologists succeed when they explain choice as caused by prior events. Rational choice theorists succeed when they explain choice as instrumentally rational. Game theorists, being mathematicians, succeed when they prove general properties of instrumentally rational solutions. And drama theorists? We succeed when we explain interactions as processes of dramatic resolution and self-realisation and show how characters find solutions that satisfy them.

Both drama theory and game theory assume conscious choice. They explain choice in terms of the futures subjects see before them, rather than past events. Thus they look to the future for 'causes', rather than the past. This is an important departure from the physical-science paradigm, which explains the future by the past.

These two theories of conscious choice—drama theory and game theory—complement each other. They are mutually dependent. Drama theory explains how and why players have the beliefs and aims that game theory takes as given: game theory explains how drama-theoretic characters foresee the consequences of adopting these or those beliefs and aims.

Drama theory has obvious links to applied subjects. Economics needs a theory that, without abandoning rationality or losing mathematical rigour and generality, covers emotion, irrationality and preference change. Psychologists should be interested in how emotion and development arise from cognitive interactions between people. Political science can use a theory of interacting characters that may be nations or organisations as well as individuals. Being ethical as well as descriptive, drama theory can help construct an effective new world order capable of adapting to climate change.

1.5.1 Rationalism v. irrationalism

Is drama theory ‘irrationalist’, or part of the rational tradition of Western thought?

Drama theorists show that instrumental rationality suffers from paradoxes. The fact is that the simple concept of rational choice—expressed as *choose A rather than B if A is both preferred and available*—cannot bear the weight put upon it in human interactions. It breaks down.

We make a point of this (following my 1971 book, *Paradoxes of Rationality*³). We don’t, however, leave it at that. We hypothesise a natural, emotion-driven process of dramatic resolution whereby rationality, having broken down, is rebuilt on a new basis, the energy for this being supplied from the same source as the breakdown—the paradoxes themselves. Paradoxes of rationality go on generating emotion and rationalisations that justify redefining the game until the drama is rationally resolved.

A drama begins with the separate, unreconciled rationalities of the individual characters. It ends with these reconstituted and reconciled.

Rational-choice theorists, by contrast, take the preferences and opportunities that define a decision-maker’s problem as given—ie, as fixed (or, if they change, as changing only parametrically, due to exogenous causes). This is instrumental rationality. It’s felt to be necessary because it enables the use of mathematical methods of optimization. Once stated, however, it seems obvious that it is too narrow. And it has unfortunate results for the concept of rationality. It defines ‘rationality’ so narrowly as to exclude two important areas where it was traditionally thought to be essential it defines ‘rationality’ so narrowly as to exclude two important areas where it was traditionally thought to be essential: *education in ethics* (more broadly, the formation of new preferences) and *scientific discovery* (more broadly, the perception of new opportunities).

To exclude these areas from rational scrutiny seems like throwing the baby out with the bath-water. Yet it’s clear from first principles that instrumental rationality can’t show how we form new preferences or perceive new opportunities because it assumes *given* preferences and opportunities. Once these are given, it performs a technical calculation to select a most-preferred opportunity. Until they’re given, it can’t start.

But the desire to use extremal mathematics (the mathematics of optimization) isn’t the sole reason for excluding both ethics and scientific discovery from rational auditing. I think there are reasons based in the nature of our society.

First, the view that reason has no role in forming preferences (and therefore no role in ethics) seems natural to us because it corresponds to a basic distinction between our economic roles as consumers and as producers. As consumers, we aren’t required to think rationally in deciding what we want, We can be as whimsical as we like.

Whatever we want, rational or irrational, producers are expected to supply. As producers, on the other hand, we’re expected to think rationally at all times, so that by maximizing our incomes we will, through the market, optimally satisfy the (arbitrary, irrational) desires of consumers.

³ N. Howard. *Paradoxes of Rationality: Theory of Metagames and Political Behavior*. MIT Press: Cambridge MA. 1971. Now in print as an MIT Classic.

This economic paradigm is assumed in all our lives. It makes us willing to see preferences as not subject to rational choice—and hence, ethics as non-rational.

Second, the idea that rationality has no role in deciding what opportunities are open to the decision-maker (and hence, in particular, no role in the creative side of scientific discovery) follows from a widespread, wrong idea about the role of observation in science and decision-making. This is that something called ‘objective, disinterested observation’ can give us an adequate, correct view of the world prior to our deciding what we want to do with it. Much criticism of the use of intelligence prior to the Iraq war made this foolish assumption. It corresponds to a naïve view of scientific discovery as a two-stage process: first, observe the facts; then, build a theory.

That such a process is impossible has been pointed out by philosophers of science from Karl Popper (*Conjectures and Refutations*) to Thomas Kuhn (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*). We must already have a ‘theory’—ie, a mechanism for filtering out irrelevant observations—in order to define and select the facts we observe. The only observations science can use are made by someone trying to prove or disprove a theory. ‘Disinterested’ observation is useless. But the deeply-engrained idea that it’s not—that somehow we can disinterestedly survey the facts prior to making a theoretical or practical decision—is the basis for the idea that a decision-maker’s beliefs about its opportunities are given to it, rather than created by it in interaction with the environment and its aims.

Of course, the fact that we must have reasons for wanting to believe something before making observations to confirm or deny it doesn’t excuse us from criticizing, by all available means, the intelligence we wish to be true. It is this very fact that makes criticism essential; and this is how intelligence on Iraq was misused—it was not viewed and demolished critically.

But if preferences and opportunities—what we want and can do—are not taken as given, they must, apparently, be selected. And how can the way we select them be rational unless it’s a matter of choosing the best from a given set—which means taking these other, more basic preferences and opportunities as given?

In other words, which comes first, the chicken of opportunity-observation and preference-formation—deciding what we want and can do—or the egg of rational choice?

Drama theory answers this by proposing that the problems (‘dilemmas’) that arise from trying to choose rationally within given ideas of what we want and can do, motivate us to look for evidence to justify changing those ideas. This motivation can’t be called ‘rational’ in the instrumental sense. For one thing, the motivation itself—as distinct from the rationalisations it motivates—is purely emotional. But it’s a necessary part of rationality because it drives us to try to change our own and others’ beliefs and preferences by producing arguments and evidence. And because such attempts to make changes are contested, we’re driven to try to make our arguments valid and our evidence sufficient. Thus it motivates two pillars of rationality: the use of reason and evidence.

By contrast, producing arguments and evidence, let alone trying to make them valid and sufficient, has no role—is totally redundant—in rational choice theory. It is central to drama theory. And we assert that it has more to do with rationality proper than the idea of optimization within a fixed framework of preferences and beliefs.

Unfortunately for its acceptability, the drama-theoretic approach challenges many systems of ideas. The false view that perception of opportunities is outside the scope of rational choice has influenced both philosophical theories about scientific discovery and economic theories about technological advance—two important activities through which, as societies, we try to enlarge our set of opportunities. In the philosophy of science and in economics, advances have been seen as ‘sent from above’—ie, as inherently incapable of rational explanation. Comparing a proposed advance with its competitors and deciding which should be preferred can, it has been said, be represented as rational activities. Finding the advance in the first place cannot. This view, though criticized in ‘endogenous growth theory’ and in some philosophies of scientific method, nevertheless persists.

Drama theory contends that the instrumental, rational-choice view of rationality is too narrow. It should be expanded by incorporating a theory of emotion as the factor that impels and liberates decision-makers to reconsider their ‘fixed’ values and beliefs in order to eliminate the paradoxes that confront them. The ‘rational arguments in the common interest’ that they use to build and defend new values and beliefs show rationality operating on a higher level, and at the same time show how individuals can and should reconcile their individual rationalities with the rationality of the group. Adam Smith, the founder of economics, showed this, in one way, on the macro scale. Drama theory shows it, in a more advanced way, on the micro scale.

To return to the question—is drama theory rationalist or irrationalist?—the answer is that drama theory is rationalist, provided we use a wider definition of rationality than the rational-choice paradigm.