

The Prisoner's Dilemma

Written by

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INT. POLICE STATION INTERROGATION ROOM - DAY

A 20-something CRIMINAL sits handcuffed to a metal table with two chairs in an otherwise empty, windowless, pale blue room.

One wall has a two-way mirror.

A closed-circuit camera is mounted at the corner of the ceiling.

He jabs a middle finger at the camera and mirror. Then he checks his reflection and attempts to pass a hand through his hair, but is thwarted by the cuffs.

CRIMINAL

Hey, I think I'm supposed to get a phone call! I know my rights!

Silence.

The door swings open and a DETECTIVE enters. Wearing a button shirt, tie, and brown slacks, with a gold shield clipped to his belt. In his late 40s, heavy around the middle, his hair is thin and beginning to go gray.

DETECTIVE

Good afternoon, mister ... Threshner?
Or would you prefer "Sharky?" I was told that's what your friends call you.

As the detective grabs the back of the other chair:

Sharky stands up behind the desk and slams his hands down on its surface.

CRIMINAL

You can call me that monkey that
Speaks No Evil because I ain't sayin'
shit. I want my phone call.

The detective ignores Sharky and sits, spreading out a stack of paperwork.

He leans back and stares blankly at Sharky. He crosses his arms.

Sharky stands defiant, then realizes he isn't getting the rise he had hoped for.

The detective squints and tilts his head.

Sharky sits and pulls the chair under him to sit close to the table.

DETECTIVE

Are you calm? Can we behave like adults?

CRIMINAL

Man, fuck you! What is all this shit?

He references the paperwork.

CRIMINAL (cont'd)

Is this supposed to scare me?

The detective raises his hands.

DETECTIVE

Nope. I'm not here to scare you. I'm here to do you a *favor*.

CRIMINAL

HAH! Fuck you. You think I'm retarded?

DETECTIVE

Not at all. I'm hoping you're smart. At least, I'm hoping you're smarter than your buddy down the hall. When I go in there and present him with what I'm about to share with you, if he's smart, he'll tell me everything I need to know to put you away for a long time.

CRIMINAL

Fuck this shit. I want my lawyer.

DETECTIVE

Oh, you can call anyone you want. I can leave this room right now if that's what you want ...

CRIMINAL

That's what the fuck I want!

DETECTIVE

... but if I leave, you are going to jail. Maybe for three years. Probably five.

CRIMINAL

Bullshit. Once I get my lawyer, I ain't doing a day.

DETECTIVE

No, now you see, that's where you're wrong.

Sharky studies his adversary.

CRIMINAL

How the fuck so?

DETECTIVE

Do you like games?

CRIMINAL

You mean like--?

The detective raises a hand.

DETECTIVE

Not ... video games.

Sharky looks puzzled.

DETECTIVE (cont'd)

There is a whole branch of mathematics that deals with game theory. Are you aware of this?

Sharky sneers.

CRIMINAL

What are you? Some kind of school teacher?

DETECTIVE

Just something I've been reading up on.

Sharky digs in.

CRIMINAL

Man, when I want to read, I read the tattoo on your wife's ass.

He grips the edge of the table and pumps his hips.

CRIMINAL (cont'd)

It says, "Sharky was here."

DETECTIVE

(sarcastic)

Brilliant.

Sharky is pleased with himself.

DETECTIVE (cont'd)

Anyway, back in the fifties, these mathematicians proposed what's called the Prisoner's Dilemma. As it happens, this problem plays out daily in rooms just like this one every day. With people just like you. I should say with *smart people* just like you. Because if you're smart, this will all make perfect sense.

CRIMINAL

Well you already think I'm a retard, so what's the difference?

DETECTIVE

No no. Let's be fair. I didn't say that, you did. I think you're probably a smart guy. I hope so anyway.

Sharky seems to like this label and leans back.

CRIMINAL

So what's this prisoner's enema?

DETECTIVE

Dilemma. It states that two otherwise rational people will not cooperate, even if it's in their favor to do so. In your case, you have two choices and four outcomes.

Sharky seems unimpressed.

DETECTIVE (cont'd)

Your choices are ...

He holds up a thumb.

DETECTIVE (cont'd)

... get comfortable and tell me what happened ...

And a forefinger.

DETECTIVE (cont'd)

... or wait for your attorney and not say a word.

CRIMINAL

And the outcomes?

DETECTIVE

Let's start with waiting for your lawyer. When he gets here, he's going to tell you to not say another word and we're done.

CRIMINAL

Sounds good to me.

DETECTIVE

You think? Because after I leave here, I'm going to talk to your buddy and present him with the same options. His alternate choice is act as a witness for the prosecution and not spend a day in jail. In which case, you will go to jail for five years.

Sharky thinks for a minute.

CRIMINAL

What if we both stay quiet?

The detective slaps the tabletop.

DETECTIVE

See? I knew you were smart!

Sharky smiles.

DETECTIVE (cont'd)

Okay, so if both of you clam up, we don't have a confession of guilt and that makes our job much harder. And it makes your lawyer's job easier.

Sharky leans forward just enough so his fingers can make a buttoning motion on his lips.

DETECTIVE (cont'd)

Now we're getting somewhere! Now all you need to do is ask yourself how confident you are in your buddy's loyalty.

Sharky's face turns dour.

DETECTIVE (cont'd)

What I mean is, when I tell him that he can walk out of here if he rats you out, do you think he'll keep his mouth shut?

Sharky grows nervous.

DETECTIVE (cont'd)
Or do you think he's gonna wonder
what you've already agreed to and try
to limit his own damages?

The detective starts to slide the paperwork back into the folder.

DETECTIVE (cont'd)
In the dilemma, and in actual
practice, almost no one opts to
remain silent because they can never
be assured that their actions will
result in them going free. Are you
absolutely certain that your friend
down the hall will stay silent when I
present him with the same choices
I've given you? Is he as smart as
you?

He stands and pushes the chair under the table.

As the detective reaches for the doorknob, Sharky stands.

CRIMINAL
Wait!

The detective smirks, then turns back to the table.

They both sit again and the detective retrieves a writing
pad and pencil, placing them in front of Sharky.

DETECTIVE
Write it down.

END