The Political Economy of Buchanan's Samaritan's dilemma

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Abstract

Written by James Buchanan in the early 1970s, "The Samaritan's Dilemma" is a pessimistic essay, marked by his author's negative views about the situation in Western societies at that time. Yet, the situation described in this essay also fits into Buchanan's approach of cooperation and free-riding. Put differently, it is perfectly with Buchanan's views in public economics. This is what we aim at showing in this short article. Our demonstration develops in two parts. First, we show that Buchanan's main argument about cooperation in the provision of public goods or removal of externalities necessarily leads to situations such as the one described in the Samaritan's dilemma. Second, we show that Buchanan did not take the situation seriously until the end of the 1960s, a few years before he wrote his essay on the dilemma.

Keywords

Buchanan, samaritan's dilemma, cooperation, exploitation, numbers, public goods, externalities

Introduction

The samaritan's dilemma is a situation that has largely been studied in economics and social sciences. It has been shown that it occurs a large number of situations (Boettke and Martin, 2010; Boone, 1996; Bovard, 1983; Burnside and Dollar, 2000; Coyne, 2008, 2013; Futagami, Kamada and Sato, 2004; Rajan and Subramanian, 2005; Skarbek, 2016; Stone, 2008; Wilson, Andersson, Ostrom and Shivakumar, 2005; Wagner, 2005; Williamson, 2010). It is therefore an important phenomenon. However, the reference to the first economist who—as it seems—used the term for the first time, James Buchanan, is frequently lost. This paper focuses on the role the Samaritan's dilemma played in Buchanan's work.

It was in an essay published in 1975 in a collective volume edited by Edmund Phelps, entitled *Altruism, Morality, and Economic Theory* (1975) that Buchanan put forward and analyzed the problem Samaritans could face when they help people in need, for instance, by transferring them money. The dilemma is a trap in which Samaritans are caught when and because the persons in need they help do not react to the help received, make no effort to reciprocate the help from the Samaritan. Now, Buchanan believed or started from the assumption that a Samaritan expects that her help, gift or transfer will lead the recipient to change his behavior, make some additional efforts and, in particular, "work".[3] Therefore, the Samaritan cannot but be dissatisfied by the lack of effect the transfer has on the recipients' behavior. To avoid this asymmetrical, unequal—and unpleasant—situation in which she helps and the recipient does not make any effort in return, the Samaritan could decide to stop behaving charitably, stop helping the potential recipient. Choosing this course of action would suppress the Samaritan's dissatisfaction with seeing her charity not reciprocated and also, in Buchanan's mind, would incite the recipient to change his behavior and work. Symmetry and equality would thus be restored. But, according to Buchanan, not helping people in need is costly. The Samaritan would suffer from seeing the recipient starve and from the loss of utility that stems from the impossibility of behaving benevolently. An unpleasant situation replaces another one. Hence, the dilemma the Samaritan faces: either she helps someone who does not return her help or she does not help but suffers from the cost of not helping.

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3 In his description of the interaction between the Samaritan and the recipient, Buchanan wrote that the recipient had two strategies: "the potential parasite... may work ... Or... refuse work" (1975, 76). Then, the many examples he gave of Samaritan dilemmas evidence that it was not only a matter of "work". For instance, he used the case of a mother who hesitates to "spank a misbehaving child". Indeed, it hurts her to have to punish her child but "spanking may be necessary to instill in the child the fear of punishment that will inhibit future misbehavior." (76) Here, it is no longer a matter of "work" strictly speaking. it seems to be more of a matter of changing the behavior of the child.

To Buchanan, Samaritans could prevent being caught in the dilemma if and only if they were able to follow an ethic of individual responsibility, exhibit what he called "strategic courage"—that is the courage *not* to help others even despite the costs it implies for the Samaritan. That was the responsibility Samaritans had and should face. But Buchanan doubted they would. The "cliche that modern man has 'gone soft'" (Buchanan 1975, 75) was only too true. Samaritans could not resist to their own benevolence and to the demands of recipients Buchanan "labelled... the parasite" (1975, 75, e.g.). They were "incapable of making the choices that are required to prevent [their] exploitation by predators of [their] own species." (74) Buchanan insisted: "What we may call 'strategic courage' may be a markedly inferior economic good, and what we may call 'pragmatic compassion' may be markedly superior." (1975, 75) To Buchanan, individuals were afraid to behave as responsible Samaritans, to assume their responsibilities.

These particularly negative statements can be explained by what was happening in the U.S.A. in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Buchanan started to draft his essay. He was extremely pessimistic about the situation in his country and in Western countries in general. It was this pessimism that had lead him to write "The Samaritan's dilemma" (see Fleury and Marciano, 2018). Yet, a product of its times, "The Samaritan's dilemma" also perfectly fits Buchanan's view in public economics and in public choice or, put differently, his views on political economy. This is what we argue in this essay. More precisely, our goal is to show why situations like the ones described in the 1975 essay are perfectly consistent, and even the consequence of Buchanan's analysis on cooperation in the provision of public goods, and the removal of externalities. In other words, Samaritan's dilemmas are inherent to how Buchanan envisaged cooperation and defection around public goods and externalities. More globally, the Samaritan's dilemma is part of Buchanan's objective of developing a form of non-

Samuelsonian welfare economics.

Our demonstration rests on Buchanan's claim that individuals cooperate in small groups—they spontaneously internalize the external consequences of their actions—but do not cooperate in large groups. What we show, and this is original, is that Samaritan's dilemmas arise in what can be called "intermediary" situations, that is when individuals behave as if they were in a small group while they are in a large one, or the reverse. This is the first element we put forward. Then, this is the second aspect of our analysis, Buchanan was perfectly aware that this kind of situation could occur. He acknowledged it at the end of the 1950s but he did not took the situation seriously before the end of the 1960s. This is also what we show in this paper.

The originality of our analysis lies in the fact that it has never been shown that the Samaritan's dilemma is consistent with Buchanan's analysis of cooperation. This finding is interesting to shed new light on Buchanan's work. That is not all. Our analysis is useful also because of the role of "numbers" in the occurrence of the dilemma. Indeed, if it is true that our analysis means that the scope for cooperation is narrower than what Buchanan himself acknowledged, it also reinforces the importance of relying on small groups to guarantee cooperation among individuals.

Market failures, cooperation and numbers

One of the most frequently admitted claims in economics is that, as soon as interdependencies exist between individuals, markets fail to allocate resources efficiently. This is therefore the case when there are public goods or spillover—external—effects. Indeed, individuals being rational and self-interested have no incentive to reveal their preferences—their willingness to pay—for the public good or to internalize the costs of their action on others. This was, in particular, the view held by Richard Musgrave (1939, 1959)—

who spoke of "the absence of a general willingness to comply with the obligation to contribute." (1939, 220). This was also how Paul Samuelson concluded his article on "The Pure Theory of Public Expenditure": "It is in the selfish interest of each person to give false signals, to pretend to have less interest in a given collective consumption activity than he really has." (1954, 388-389)

Buchanan for hist part wanted to develop a "non Samuelsonian" perspective in economics. He himself used the expression in a comment he sent to Samuelson in 1955 about the famous paper Samuelson had published in 1954 (cf. Boettke et Marciano, 2020; Marciano, 2021). Buchanan meant that he refused the use of a social welfare function to determine the price individuals should pay for public goods (or external effects). To him, no external observer could know what were the individual preferences for public goods and therefore could say what were their marginal willingness to pay. As a consequence, such prices as those based on the use of a social welfare function would in all likelihood differ from what individuals were ready to pay. To avoid that coercive move, Buchanan suggested to rely on what individuals want to pay for the public goods they consume, or for the external effects their behaviors generate.

The suggestion made sense only because Buchanan—and, beyond, also the economists from the Virginia school of Political Economy—was convinced that individuals reveal their true preferences and therefore accept to contribute to the provision of the public goods they consume or internalize the effects their actions have on others *even if they are rational and motivated by their self-interest* (Marciano, 2016). A conviction Buchanan held for a long time (Marciano, 2013). And, when he started to admit that individuals could not contribute to the provision of public goods, Buchanan only partially abandoned his confidence in individuals. Voluntary contribution remained the rule. A condition had nonetheless to be satisfied to

guarantee that individuals would cooperate: that the group of individuals involved in the interaction be rather small. Thus, one may note, Buchanan put explicitly forward his first arguments on the role of the size of groups in the early sixties, that is before Mancur Olson (1965).

Thus, as the size of group increases, individuals more and more follow their self-interest in the narrowest sense of the word, that is: they do not take into account the welfare of others. As Buchanan noted in a rather early article, "the individual's interest in the welfare of his fellow citizen falls off sharply as the group is enlarged." (1961a, 340) Therefore, "as the size of the group increases, any tacit adherence to moral or ethical principles that might inhibit individual utility-maximizing behaviour becomes more difficult to secure" (ibid.; see also, among others, 1967, 1968a, 1968b, 1978; Buchanan and Tullock, 1962; Buchanan and Kafoglis, 1963). Individuals cooperate less as the size of group increases. This is what Buchanan called a "probabilistic" theory of free-riding (1965b; 1968a, 85-88). How does cooperation, and free riding, relate to the size of groups?

Different strategies in different types of groups
To Buchanan, individuals' choice to cooperate or not to cooperate unsurprisingly depends on the gains, and costs, they expect to receive and incur from their behavior. Those gains then obviously depend on how others behave. More precisely, since no one cannot know in advance how others will behave they depend on each individual's "own predictions about the behavior of others" (1965b, 3). Indeed, it is a matter of probability—"[t]he expected values depend, of course, on the probabilities that the individual assigns to the various patterns of behavior for 'others' than himself" (5) or, Buchanan repeated almost word for word, depends on the "probabilities assigned [by the individual] to each of the possible behavior patterns of others." (1968a, 85) These probabilities in turn depend on the impact or influence each

individual believes his or her behavior will have on others. Individuals thus cooperate after having contemplated wether or not their behavior will "exert some influence on the behavior of others in the group." (1968a, 86) However, the effect such a belief will have on cooperation can be positive or negative. An individual "may behave cooperatively hoping that his... "rivals" will emulate his... action." (Buchanan, 1967, 121) Or, by contrast, he may decide not to cooperate because he expects that "his own action in contribution will lower, not increase, the probability of others' making contributions of their own." (Buchanan, 1968a, 86) To have a definite answer, we need to take into account the size of the group.

Buchanan distinguished between two types of environments—large and small number environments. In large groups, individuals do not anticipate that their own behavior will influence the behavior of others—"only when the size of the group is critically large. Only in such large groups will the individual consider his own action to exert substantially no effect on the actions of others." (1965b, 9) As a consequence, individuals behave non-strategically, "simply react[ing] or adjust[ing] to the behavior of "others" in a manner similar to his reaction to natural environment." (1967, 113) "Natural" refers to the fact that individuals treat others as part of *nature*, taking their behavior as given and assuming that how others behave is independent from their own behavior—"The behavior of the other is embodied as data in the choice calculus, but the other person is not considered to be subject to influence or control, positively or negatively." (Buchanan, 1967, 111) Therefore, individuals behave as if they were independent from others. They ignore the interdependencies that link them to others. They simply maximize their own, private, utility. Or, as Buchanan put it, they follow "the private maxim" or "the expediency criterion" (1965b, 2).

Now, since the decision to maximize one's utility, to follow the expediency criterion or the private maxim comes from the belief that each individual is independent from others,

one understands that each individual makes this choice by ignoring what others do. Whether or not others cooperate, each individual privately prefers not to cooperate—"[i]n a group of critically large size, the individual will tend to adopt the rule of following the expediency criterion even if he thinks that *all* of his fellow citizens are saints" (1965b, 7; italics in original). Even if they understand that unconditional defection is not the best strategy and that would be better off by cooperating with others. Convinced that they are not able to influence the behavior of others, no one will change his own behavior. No reason can lead individuals to choose to behave differently—"Rationally, he cannot adopt the moral law as a principle for his own behavior." (1965b, 7) Or, to put in terms that will be useful for the rest of the analysis, individuals have a dominant strategy. They are unconditional defectors. Buchanan was rather clear about that: "The individual in a large-group, public-goods interaction... face[s]... no pressure or incentive to behave cooperatively", because he behaves independently from others (1967, 121). As a consequence, the individuals who are in large groups are trapped in what Buchanan called the "large number dilemma" (1965b), which is a form of prisoner's dilemma: "The dilemma is a real one, and it is similar to, although not identical with, that which is commonly discussed in game theory as "the prisoners' dilemma." (Buchanan, 1965b, 8). This situation corresponds to what Samuelson, and other economists, viewed as the standard case of market failure.

Let us note here that, to Buchanan, "The individual is caught in a dilemma by the nature of his situation; he has no sensation of securing benefits at the expense of others in any personal manner." (1968a, 83) Not cooperating, following the expediency criterion, means that the individuals maximize their own utility without taking into account or acknowledging the presence of others. Each of them behaves as if others were not there. In other words, choosing not to cooperate *in a large group* was not interpreted by Buchanan as meaning that

individuals would free ride. From this perspective, Buchanan found the terminology used in public economics about free riding "misleading" (1968a, 83). Indeed, free riding "suggests some deliberate effort on the part of the choosing individual to secure benefits at the expense of his fellows." (Buchanan, 1965b, 9) It implies that individuals try "to shift a major share of the burden onto the other while himself securing a share of the benefits." (1967, 114) They really adopt anti-social behaviors (see Marciano, 2015). Or, to use another of Buchanan's words, they try to "exploit" others. In other words, a free rider acknowledges and takes into account others, which is incompatible to how individuals are supposed to behave in large groups. Free riding is more a behavior that could arise, but don't, in small groups.

In small groups such as an "isolated setting" (Buchanan 1965b, 6) of 3 persons or "a desert island" (1965b, 6) or when "personal interaction is recognized" (Buchanan, 1968a, 86), the situation is different. Indeed, "utility maximization in a small number setting will not exhibit the observable properties of utility maximization in a large number setting" (Buchanan, 1978, 366). More precisely, individuals no longer follows their "narrowly defined self-interest" (Buchanan, 1978, 366) but rather adopt "moral or ethical principles" (Buchanan, 1961a, 340). Individuals adapt their behavior to the behavior of others or, to use Buchanan's words, they behave "strategically" (1968a, 91). They no longer ignore the interdependencies that link them to others. Indeed, by contrast with what happens in large number environments, individuals are aware that their behavior matter and may influence others: each individual "will tend to recognize that his own choice of a rule, and subsequent adherence to it, will to some considerable extent influence the similar choices to be made and followed by the other two members" (1965b, 6). Or, "So long as the interaction is limited to small groups, [the individual] will recognize that his own action can exert some influence on the behavior of others in the group." (1967, 115)

In particular, an individual who "contributes nothing... may assess the probability of noncooperation on the part of others higher than if he contributes some share. This change alone may be sufficient, on rational grounds, to cause him to contribute." (Buchanan, 1968a, 86) In other words, individuals cooperate because they know and anticipate that this behavior will lead others to cooperate too (and that defection would probably lead them to defect too). It thus seems reasonable to claim that, to Buchanan, the individuals who are in a small group or who are not narrow utility maximizers are unconditional cooperators, as long as they are in a small group or among other ethical individuals. They have a dominant strategy that consists in cooperating to the provision of the public goods or internalize the externalities their behavior can generate. Therefore, the large number dilemma disappears. Individuals cooperate, contributing to the provision of public goods or internalizing the external effects of their actions on others. Even free riding does not exist.

When is there a Samaritan's dilemma?
Thus, in Buchanan's analysis of free riding and cooperation, two main possibilities are put forward: the generalized prisoners' dilemma of large groups and the cooperative situation of the small groups. What about intermediary situations? What if in a group, whether large or small, some individuals follow the expediency criterion and others adopt the ethical rule of conduct?

Before examining how Buchanan came to acknowledge this possibility, let us see where the analysis discussed in the previous section leads us. The outcome of an interaction between individuals who do not follow the same rule of behavior is rather complex. One would have understood that individual behaviors depends on whether or not they behave independently from the others or strategically. And, in addition, adopting one behavior or the other depends on the size of the group. Thus, the outcome of an asymmetric interaction

depends on whether a narrow maximizers finds himself in a small group or if an ethical behavior finds herself in a large group.

A narrow maximizer by definition ignores the interdependencies with others. As indicated above, this kind of individual does not change his behavior, even if others cooperate, because he does not expect that not cooperating (or cooperating, for that matter) could change the behavior of others. When he enters a small group and interacts cooperators, and *when* he recognizes that there are cooperators around him, such an individual could be expected to cooperate. The fear of being sanctioned and excluded from the group should lead him to change his behavior. Then, the outcome of the game would be the cooperative situation, where both players cooperate. But there are cases in which the narrow maximizer could decide not to change his behavior: if or as long as he ignores others or believes that he cannot influence them or, and this is very important, if he realizes that the other members of the group might not be able to sanction and exclude him. After all, the costs of exclusion could be so high that narrow maximizers could not be excluded and remain in small groups. In that case, the narrow maximizer defects. It can even be said that he free rides and exploits the cooperator. Therefore, the outcome is the same as the asymmetric one described in Buchanan's "The Samaritan's dilemma" where the Samaritan of Buchanan's article is the individual who follows the small number environment rule of behavior and the recipient is the narrow maximizer.

The ethical individual entering a group of narrow maximizers faces a similar situation. He cooperates as long as he does not realize that the individual with whom he interacts does not behave strategically. The other, being a member of a group of narrow maximizers, defects. Therefore, the outcome corresponds to a Samaritan's dilemma. However, the dimension of free riding and exploitation does not exist. The narrow maximizers do not

behave strategically. They do not try to shift their share of the burden of the public good on the ethical individual. The latter is nonetheless the only one who cooperates in a world of defectors. This may not last. When the ethical individual finally understands the new situation, his behavior changes and he switches to the non cooperative strategy. The interaction between the two individuals becomes that of the prisoner's dilemma that already prevailed in the group. But, again, the outcome of the interaction depends on the rapidity with which the individual adjusts to the new environment and on the costs of adjustment too. One would remind that, as said in the introduction of this paper, an important assumption made by Buchanan in the 1975 paper was that Samaritans were incapable of changing their behavior and of *not* behaving charitably because of their "softness".

Therefore, a Samaritan's dilemma exists because or as long as neither the ethical individual nor the narrow maximizer realizes that the nature of the interaction has changed and that they no longer interact with someone who adopts the same behavior as they do. The outcome of the interaction remains that of a Samaritan's dilemma as long as the "confusion" lasts or as long as individuals find it not advantageous enough or too costly to change their behavior. In other words, Samaritan dilemmas are one of the three possible outcomes that can result from individual interactions in Buchanan's theory of cooperation based on numbers and the size of groups or, put differently, from his probabilistic theory of free-riding.

Towards the Samaritan's dilemma
That such dilemmas could arise was perfectly clear in Buchanan's own writing before he started to write explicitly on cooperation and the size of groups and, accordingly, before he wrote on the Samaritan's dilemma. Yet, it took him some time before admitting that such a situation was possible and durable.

What seems to be the first instance of a description of a Samaritan's dilemma can be found in the comment Buchanan made on the papers presented by Musgrave and, more interestingly, by Charles Tiebout at a 1959 conference in public finance he organized (see Marciano, 2013; Boettke, Marciano and Stein, 2021). Tiebout had discussed a situation that corresponds to the one described above. Newcomers arrive in a group in which a public good is already provided. They thus benefit from the good without having to contribute to its provision. Tiebout then put forward an institutional solution to deal with the problem. To him, zoning laws could be used to exclude these potential users from the consumption of the public good they did not have paid for (1961, 94; see also Tiebout, 1956, 420).

Buchanan did not disagree on the principle. Such laws or restrictions aiming at "[p]rohibition on entry" (1961b, 129) could indeed allow early settlers "to create a structure of property rights in 'taxpayers' surplus'" (129). In other words, the individuals who were financing the provision public goods could exclude newcomers—who were supposed not to contribute to the provision of the goods in question—to guarantee their surplus. But, he added, exclusion was costly. Indeed, to exclude the newcomers, the early settlers are forced to "forego capital gains in order to prevent entry of "undesirables" into the community." (128) And, as Buchanan explained, "this sacrifice of capital gains on possible land holdings may be more than offset by the retention of a greater share of taxpayers' surplus." (128). The costs of creating these excluding devices could thus be too large compared to the benefits. This meant that the early settlers will not enact, and then enforce, the laws that would be necessary to exclude the potential free riders arriving in the group although it would be collectively rational to do so. They were indeed in the situation of a Samaritan's dilemma.

After having acknowledged the possibility of such dilemmas, Buchanan did not spend more time analyzing them in the 1960s. Much to the contrary. He tended to ignore them. One

of the reasons can be found in the phenomenon he described in his 1959 comment: free riders are difficult to exclude once they are in the group; it is therefore crucial to exclude them before they enter the group. Unsurprisingly, thus, Buchanan studied and proposed mechanisms aimed at excluding potential free riders. This is what "clubs" are—"the theory of clubs is, in one sense, a theory of optimal exclusion, as well as one of inclusion." (Buchanan, 1965a, 13) Provided that property rights are correctly defined. Indeed, Buchanan wrote, property rights should "be adjusted to allow for optimal exclusion." (13) What if property rights could not be adjusted? Then, Buchanan concludes, "the " free rider " problem arises." (13) Which means that free riders would benefit from the good provided by the club members. Or, in other words, that a Samaritan's dilemma would take place.

Did Buchanan acknowledge the problem? No. He had unlocked a door that he would not immediately push open. In "An Economic Theory of Clubs" (1965a), Buchanan insisted on the importance for "allowing for more flexible property arrangements and for introducing excluding devices" (14), as if he did not want to focus too much on the risks of letting free riders enter clubs. In "Ethical Rules, Expected Values, and Large Numbers" (1965b), he also stressed that the large-number dilemma could be avoided by "reducing group size, or at least modifying the rules so that something similar to small-group results emerges." (10) In other words, he put the emphasis on the possibility to change property rights and re-design groups to avoid free riding and the occurrence of the Samaritan's dilemma. This is what he repeated a few years later, in *The Demand and Supply of Public Goods* (1968a), noting that in "*small* groups,... the possibility of excluding genuine non-conformists will normally be present." (87; italics in original).

At the end of the 1960s, Buchanan admitted the existence of the problem more frequently. Two papers from 1967 and 1968 are, from this perspective, particularly

importante. In "Cooperation and Conflict in Public-Goods Interactions" (1967), Buchanan demonstrated again how the size of groups affect the individuals' decision to cooperate and contribute optimally to the provision of a public good. Thus, in small groups, did he claim, "there will remain some motivation for the individual to behave strategically" and "some incentive for... tacit cooperation..., but as the group size grows this incentive becomes increasingly faint while the pressures toward "anti-social" behavior become increasingly strong." (115) Also, he demonstrated that strategic behaviors would produce different results depending on whether individuals choose between two or three possible strategies. With two strategies—to share the provision of the public good and to behave independently from others—, the outcome of the game could either be the optimal cooperative solution in which both players cooperate or the worst possible situation in which no one cooperates. Both were possible, even if the second one was more probable. Then, when a third strategy was introduced—exploitation or free riding—, the outcome of the game would be unstable: "Once this additional opportunity for genuine "exploitation" of the other person is recognized, dominance no longer characterizes the utility payoff matrix." (114) He thus admitted the possibility of asymmetric outcomes as in the Samaritan's dilemma. However, and this is important to note, Buchanan built his game matrix to show that such outcomes would not last.

And that was also the point he made in "A Behavioral Theory of Pollution" (1968b), that Buchanan came even closer to describing a Samaritan's dilemma. Buchanan demonstrated that free riders in "a cooperating depollution club" could achieve a "higher utility level than that achieved by club members." (355) In other words, Buchanan had demonstrated the existence of a Samaritan's dilemma—an asymmetric situation in which some individuals cooperate and others do not. He even noted that this equilibrium was

"suboptimal in the Pareto sense." (355) However, at this stage, he had not yet admitted that this situation could be a trap and that the cooperating club members could be facing a dilemma. Buchanan then noted that the cooperating members of the club could accept the situation, "acquiese in the free-riders' gains, if they observe the latter to be reinforcing, even if feebly, their own "depollution" efforts." (355) Free-riding could be tolerated if it was not too important and if free-riders evidenced a disposition to change their behavior. Or, put differently, Buchanan did not (at least, seem to) believe yet that the asymmetric situation of a Samaritan's dilemma could and would last.

These articles were the last Buchanan wrote before acknowledging a problem that he had identified in the late 1950s and that was implicit in his approach of cooperation and of free riding. About two years later, in 1970, he started to write "The Samaritan's dilemma", admitting that exploitation was a possible and stable (durable) outcome of an interaction between two individuals adopting a different rule of conduct.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that "The Samaritan's dilemma" was, as it is usually said, written in, and in reaction to, a specific context. Buchanan was pessimistic, very much affected by the situation in the Academia and, more broadly, in the American society when he wrote his essay. The latter however perfectly fits into the frame Buchanan had built to analyze cooperation, and conflict, in public economics. His probabilistic approach of free riding, his analysis of how the size of groups influence cooperation, does not only imply that individuals will cooperate if they are in a small group and behave strategically, or that they will not cooperate in large groups. As we have shown in this paper, Buchanan's insistence on small number environments also suggests that asymmetric and conflictual outcomes—under the form of exploitation—are possible and indeed inevitable. It suggests the possibility of situations that

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can be depicted by a game like the Samaritan's dilemma.[4]

Buchanan was aware of that very early, but admitted it only at the turning of the 1960s to the 1970s. Later, Buchanan will insist more frequently on the risks that such games, and their off-diagonal outcomes, could represent (for instance, Buchanan, 1977, 1993, 1998; Buchanan and Lomasky 1984). As Otto Lehto and John Meadowcroft note, Buchanan was then very much concerned that "the off-diagonal outcomes...could be relatively stable." (2021, 149) In other words, he was concerned that Samaritan dilemmas could take place. Now, Samaritan's dilemmas are much more problematic than Prisoner's dilemmas. While the latter corresponds to an anarchic situation, a situation of war of all against all that obviously requires a specific action. The former is not an exceptional situation. It corresponds to an equilibrium in a stable political-legal order that all the individuals accept, because they directly benefit from it or because it would be too costly or too difficult to get out of it.

That was one of the most important aspects and lessons of Buchanan 1975 essay. Individuals were not ready to accept the responsibilities that go with helping others—which includes not being charitable in the short term to secure long term benefits. They do not accept, put differently, to become "better" individuals (see Buchanan, 1979, 100). This anticipated the individuals' incapacity to assume the responsibility for their actions or choices that necessarily goes with freedom that Buchanan put forward forty years later in "Afraid to Be Free: Dependency as Desideratum" (2005).[5]

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4 By contrast with what Buchanan and Roger Congleton demonstrated—namely that Samaritan dilemmas can result from majority cycling—, we have shown that the dilemma is independent from the rule used to make the political decisions.
5 I thank John Meadowcroft for pointed this out to me.

Buchanan from the archives, Mercatus Center.

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