

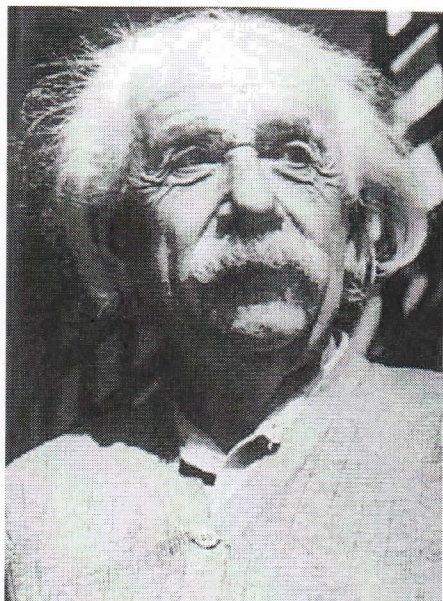
Dice Gods and the Meaning of Life

By Lorenzo Rusconi

This is just a brief introduction to an idea which I have been working on since the last few months. It has been difficult to shrink it into such short discussion, since there are so many more points I have explored, which will eventually come in due time in the form of the book I am writing. If you are interested you can e-mail me your comments at dicegodsnlife@hotmail.com and you can also find me quite regularly on NetGammon playing and chatting under the nickname of DiceGods. I am always up for a good game or an interesting conversation...

Have a nice one. Lorenzo Rusconi

"God doesn't play with dice"



(Einstein)

I am a Backgammon player.

I have been for quite sometimes. I just got sort of addicted to it. You know, the usual addiction escalating route. I started with family and friends when I was young, then playing it on-line, eventually reading books about it, ultimately going to local and national tournaments (not that I have ever won one, still, I am a work in progress). Basically, as you might have perceived, it became quite a big part of my Life. Even my love relationships at times have been affected by it; as if I would ever think or dream of making love to a leather backgammon board with

latex straps and brass checkers for God's sake!! Still, you try explain it to her. (Mind you, I definitely would have liked to get to know better that that lady which consistently kicked my ass on backgammon on the island of Ko Samui, leaving me with a crushed ego and the lowest possible level of self-esteem).

Anyhow, going back to it, You can't really breakdown the stages of such development, they just naturally followed one another, bringing me here, slowly making the last step of my evolutionary backgammon life . . .

To share the Knowledge that undeniably is discovered, when, as in love, you give all of yourself to someone or something, without limits nor expectations, there and only there your meaning of life finally becomes clear to yourself, and there is where I am taking you now.

This is because I feel the knowledge I have found through backgammon is not of a technical nor professional level; that, I leave it to experts like the ones I have read to improve my playing skills. My knowledge is more of a philosophical and practical level, not only for the brain and the ever present ego, but for the mind, the soul, and



ultimately life itself. In fact, I believe backgammon has so many similarities to what I consider reality to be, that I have started to feel and look at backgammon as a practical tool to enhance my life's choices and situations, sort of training me to live life, eventually helping me to find my meaning in life. I could almost agree with you that I could say this of any hobby or passion, but I believe it is not the case. Backgammon has something special, and here I am showing you why. Mastering backgammon is mastering life.

So if you feel you are open to other's people experiences and willing to share your knowledge with them, possibly learning from each other, please read on, and so, I wish you will enjoy it as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

Backgammon is a peculiar game, it has been around for centuries, its ancestors include most of the ancient games, all the way up until the 1920's, when an unknown genius in New York created what is known today as the "Doubling Cube". That particular invention mostly made backgammon the popular game it is today, modern backgammon, known to the *aficionados* as "the cruelest game on earth".



I like that basically the actual creator of something is unknown. Sometimes I feel the same about life. I don't believe it is so important to know or believe on what created Life, why we are here, and all those existential mind demons. The point is that here it is, it doesn't matter when and who created it (if anything did it at all), but it is here and now, for us to be lived. Backgammon is the same, we don't ultimately know who created the modern version of it and where exactly it came from, but it is here and now, we just have to play it and enjoy it.

By this I do not imply that there is no God, but that for our immediate existence that belief alone does not help us to lead a good and meaningful life, God might reward us on the after life, something that we cannot verify on this existence, and as Aristotle has been quoted as rightly saying, in the uncertainty of the doubt, it is much better to live a life in line with spiritual beliefs and moral practices . . . just in case . . . God might be there, watching upon us and letting us decide our good fortunes or misfortunes to be then judged once gone from this actual existence, but the fact itself that if he existed and he did give us freewill, stresses that it is still down to us and not to him what we are going to make of our lives. So once again, here is life in front of us, we might not know everything about it, but here it is for us to explore and learn from day one, understanding the causes and effects of our actions upon us and upon others, living or material entities they might be.

To begin with, why is it beneficial to learn this awkward game then?

When you start learning backgammon, you are taught its rules, laws,

and limitations. As in Life, the better knowledge of all laws and rules, scientific and moral, the better equipped to understand your surrounding reality. In backgammon you are imposed a structure on which you have to move and respectfully abide, a system on which you are an active player, like the student in front of an empty blackboard ready to be filled. As it often happens, in life it is so easy to just ignorantly lay back and take in what comes your way, passively acknowledging the "necessity" of your life and being lead by it, following what you believe the natural process of things was meant to be for you, and that is it.

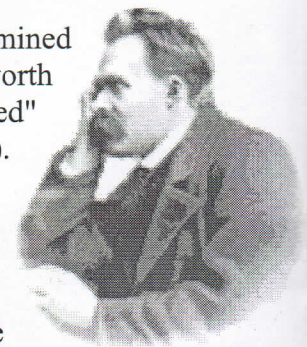
Well, as a backgammon player you are taught to act, to be aware of your particular situation, to know the rules and to move on with your strategy, with your aims and dreams (especially at tournaments), incessantly trying to achieve what your role asks from you with a deep knowledge of the limits and laws of the game itself. You are thrown into a personal dynamic world, in which you have to take control of your play, accept what the dice give you and will upon them your individual choice of action, re assessing your situation and your style at any time. It becomes a continuous affirmation of yourself as an individual entity, thus every move you make, if you already knew it or not . . . acknowledges you into existence, your existence.

In life there has always been a fundamental question: are human beings determined entities, or do they have a free will. Are our actions already written somewhere, as all our life and the moment of our death, or at any time we have freedom to choose and to act, and therefore decide our own destiny.

Is there anybody watching over us and deciding our fate, or are we ultimately lonely in our choices, mistakes and decisions.

I don't believe yet anybody has been able to completely answer such question (science seems to be getting closer to it), and few people actually dwell thinking about such subjects anyway, as most people consciously dismiss them as too abstract and not worth spending time upon them. But they are important. After all, like one of my favourite thinkers was quoted as saying:

"An unexamined life is not worth being lived" (Nietzsche).



Basically, how does it feel to live a life without knowing why we do what we do? We could believe in an Entity that has created us and has already decided what we will do in our life, leaving us only to act out its universal plan, waiting for us to do mistakes he planned and punish us accordingly; or we could just believe in our self and our strength and do anything that pleases us without restrains. I doubt either way alone would make you a true and meaningful person, as both from my point of view hold some truths and have to be considered when analysing our life and our decisions.

In backgammon these two apparently opposite views are united and applied together in order to achieve your goal. The dice are sort of given to you, they could be compared to what some call destiny, others karma, the Will of God or just for the hard-core material-



ist, mere natural processes. They are here and cannot be changed, you have to use what the Dice-Gods have given you, but these Gods don't ultimately choose what you are going to do with the dice. Here it is when your free will comes into play, you have to choose, among the few limited possibilities that the structure of the game allows you, and act. In that moment nobody can help you, you have the freedom of choice and you have to use it fast, for in backgammon as in life, no-one waits forever.

I find it a fascinating way to see how my life works, and how to live by it. Some things are totally given to me, as to anybody else, I can't change them nor ignore them: like my family, where and when I was born, ultimately even the day I will die, or some of my misfortune and some of the good luck I have had and will have in this life. Living in illusion about the things that cannot be changed cannot bring any true benefit nor meaning into your life, but accepting certain limitations in your life can only enhance your strength and determination to go on and create what you can of your true life. And by accepting what you cannot change, you will be able to focus all your energies into what you can actually change or modify.

To me this concept completely shifts my outlook and my priorities in life. Most people concentrate their energies and thoughts on what happens to them, sometimes not even caused by them, and this leaves them unable to cope with the circumstances of life and without the strength to react, ending up by just getting pulled by life. However, learning to play Backgammon teaches you to focus not on what happens to you, like what dice have come out at any

one time, but rather on acknowledging them, and on what you are going to do with them next.

It is not what happens to you that counts, but how you react to it, how you move on from that point, and only you can be held responsible of what move you choose to make, you cannot blame anything nor anybody, and if you do a mistake, you have to acknowledge it, and hopefully try to fix it, but it still is your responsibility to do so. So many times things happen to us, bad things, that hurt us and make us suffer, and do not allow us to move on with life, but by acknowledging it, understanding it and accepting it, then we will be able to do what is necessary to heal ourself if we can, or at least through such process, knowing what is happening to us, overcome our fears by truly knowing what we are in nature and build upon it the future self we always naturally strive for.

Backgammon is right there, in your face, it doesn't allow you to delegate, to postpone, or cheat, you have to face what comes your way and overcome it, in the bad and in the good. Such outlook and attitude in life will allow you to change what you have to when you have to, to accept what you can't change, and it will force you to take responsibility of your actions and accept the inevitable and mostly unpredictable consequences, keeping you grounded to reality.

This takes us to the statistical dice factor in backgammon, which shows another important fact of life that so many time people seem to have forgotten; that backgammon, like life, is not fair. There might be some after life court of justice, but here in our life it has never existed and regrettably mostly needed. Bad things and sad

things just happen, entangled as they are with the rest of the knowable and unknowable events that continuously unfolds in the whole universe. Sometimes when you are about to win and only one combination out of all the 36 possible ones would actually turn the game around, and so it happens, anger does not help, nor blame, nor shouting "but it is not fair, it is all luck!!!" and a lot worst which I have heard in a few languages around the globe...

Well, the bare fact is that this is just the way that it is; things are not good nor bad, fair nor unfair, they are natural in and for themselves. Backgammon can teach this too, by accepting whatever comes your way, without blaming the unfairness of it all, but by seeing your true situation, you will be more capable of changes and opportunities in your life. Therefore, the better knowledge and skills, the better equipped to face misfortunes and possibly change the situation around, learning from it as much as you can.

This now brings us to a brief discussion of the doubling cube and its psychology.

The introduction of the doubling cube into the game, allows a player to double the stake of the game if he feels in advantage, and allows the opponent to accept it and play double the value of the game (with the option of doubling back himself if the situation changes to his/her advantage), or refuse it and lose the game at the level it was being played on.

This addition to the game has psychological and philosophical correlations and implications to our existence, and a good knowledge of its use can enhance further your knowledge of yourself. When I



think about the doubling cube, or I am contemplating its use in a game, I recall few philosophical concepts from my University days. The doubling cube in backgammon doesn't only make you react to what happens to you, but when you are using it, it allows you to truly affirm yourself. By using the doubling cube, I believe you exercise what Nietzsche called your "will to power". Your nature is to overcome yourself, to face your fears and limitations and push them to the limits of your existence. By doubling an opponent you are just doing that.

You don't exactly know if you are going to win, but by offering it you impose yourself on the game, you will yourself into existence, it makes you stronger and makes you feel alive, in control. However, as mostly misunderstood in Nietzsche too, it is not a power to destroy, but a power to create, create your life and your situations. From time to time nothing makes you feel more alive than being able to stand up and affirm who you are by making your own choices, by making a strong move, risk a bit to make you feel for one moment really special and unique in your own way. Life is also about this, taking your chances and enjoy the ride, and always remember, as a great comedian and true philosopher, the late Bill Hicks, used to say about life...



"Life is just a ride".

No matter how real and important it all seems to be, never forget that it is just a ride, make it a special one, and it will not matter when and how it will end.

Furthermore, when you happen to find yourself on the receiving side of a doubling decision, you are forced to look at your actual situation, and act accordingly. In backgammon you are taught that at times you cannot always get what you want, and to give up when you still have time to do so. So many times in life we push ourselves over our limits, thinking we will always make it out of an awkward situation, either out of pride, or because we have grown to believe in something we are not, and we will find ourselves in situations we cannot deal with, deeper and deeper. Our super ego takes over and pushes us wholeheartedly into uncharted territories, and it can be as tempting as a beautiful mermaid can be.

By mastering the doubling cube you are taught to be humble, to accept a certain situation and let go of it, to give it up hopefully for higher benefits later. The Buddhist theory of attachment is at the core of our existence and in play in backgammon. Only when we will be able to let go of things we will be able to reach happiness, understanding the impermanence of things and situations. If you know your position and understand your limits, you are forced to let go and settle for a lesser damage, but if you will not learn that, in Life as in BC you will eventually lose more than you were supposed to.

Then again, it is not over until it is over, so if you feel you still have a real chance - based on knowing how to analyse your situation - you should go for it, accepting the possibility of a greater loss, but

also knowing you have done all you could possibly do. Ultimately we all sort of end the big game in life, we cease to exist don't we? So lets learn from it all and live fully while we are at it. After all, it doesn't really matter when one dies, what matters is that he/she has explored all the potentialities that their particular existence allowed them to, after that, how can it matter if it is over, if at any one time it was "complete".

For me, this is what backgammon is also about, it is not ultimately about winning, it is about truly living the game, each moment, taking out of it all that you possibly can and have a great time while at it, with all its ups and downs, it is not the end of the journey which matters, it is the journey itself.

In Life, we have to be able to accept some losses and natural limitations, but also to fight for our gains and potential rewards to the natural limits of our existence, and if things do not go as one has planned, well, guess what, shit happens, so change your strategy and fly again...

We will not always be right in life, so we also have to learn to take ourselves not so seriously all the times, no matter how strong we believe in ourselves, from time to time, we will all act as fools . . .

So, after such brief discussion, and what I believe I have learnt through playing backgammon, what is then the meaning of life?

Well, that there is no meaning nor structure in it other than the one you give to it each and every moment of your life, that it is here and now to be lived and shared. To know its strengths and limitations, to embrace it consciously and ful-



ly, always with the humbleness that naturally comes from knowing its constantly changing reality and your contingent existence in it. That you have to take it seriously, but be able to laugh at yourself from time to time, and to explore it to the maximum of your particular potentialities, and finally, that one day it will end, like everything else, but also that it doesn't matter, for what is important is not at the end, it is while you are at it . . . life is a ride, play it fully . . . and enjoy it.

Lorenzo Rusconi
