Prologue
Sorrento, Italy, summer of 2008

A family of four (father, mother, son, and daughter) on vacation, taking an evening stroll along the coast; scenic view of the Mediterranean.

Son: “Daddy, what do you do at work?”
Father: “At work? Hmm, how shall I explain? Actually… I play games, sort of.”
Son: “Games? Really? Ha, you’re kidding, right? At work? That’s cool! What kind of games do you play? And with whom?”
Father: “All sorts of games, with all kinds of people. People come to our lab, and we ask them to play a game. Usually it’s about dividing some things, money for example, or solving a puzzle, or deciding who gets what. Say you have €100; how would you split that between you and someone else? Would you actually split it? Does it matter who the other is? Do you think it has to be fair? That sort of thing.”
Son: “Why?”
Father: “Good question… so we can see what they think is fair, for instance, or what they should do. Or whether they trust others. That tells a lot about them. And us. I mean, people in general. How nice they are to each other, or how nasty. Selfish, maybe. And then we can predict what they might do under certain circumstances.”
Son: “So that’s your work?”
Father: “Yes.”
Son: “Oh.”

Next morning, breakfast table; father and son are sitting across from each other, the others are still sleeping. Father studies the local newspaper to see what they could do that day. Next to bread, cheese, and yoghurt, there are only three individual sized jam cups on the table: Two strawberry and one apricot flavored.

Son: “Daddy, if I asked you to choose one of these jam cups, which one would you take?
Father: (briefly looking up from the paper) “What? … uh … I’ll take the apricot, thank you.”
Son: (slightly upset) “But Daddy, that’s not very nice of you.”
Father: “Why not?”
Son: “Now I can’t choose anymore!”

This was how and where the seed for this dissertation was planted, a while before I got involved: A walk on the beach, followed by a simple question at breakfast. Featured were an 11-year old boy who keenly observed the world and the people in it, and a psychology professor on vacation whose mind may have been focused on anything but work. But right away, the professor snapped to attention. His son might actually have come up with a new way of understanding important aspects of human cooperation.