

Balance

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One fundamental principle of human relations is that all individuals pursue self-interest, *i.e.*, competition. This is observable in all living organisms, for survival and reproduction in nonhuman species, as it is in humans. But human interests may be seen to be more varied and individually defined, less simple. Evolutionary biologists have no difficulty explaining competition – individuals who survive and reproduce pass behavior that promotes survival to their offspring. But species, subspecies, and other groups also have another survival characteristic - cooperation. The evolution of cooperative behavior in individuals is more difficult to explain, since the cooperating individual may be compromising its self-interest, but it is generally observed, and must promote the survival of species. Naturalists report an almost infinite variety of cooperative behaviors for survival and reproduction: hive insects, pack animals, harems, pair bonds to nurture offspring. But it is noteworthy that the patterns of competition and cooperation are limited, and particular to the species. The human species, in contrast, varies widely *within* the species, from culture to culture. But the fundamental duality of competition and cooperation remains.

I would suggest that we should see competition and cooperation as two basic axioms for reasoning about human custom, law, and ethics, since they are universally observable in all living things, as in humans. All individuals do, and should, pursue self-interest, and in human relations, these interests vary. But all human societies and groups define limits to protect cooperative interests: laws (enforced by government coercion) and ethics and customs (maintained by social disapproval). In nonhuman species the forms and limits are mostly genetically prescribed, whereas in humans they may be learned and may even be negotiated.

An amusing example familiar to most of us might be behavior at a traffic light. Upon observing that the light has changed from green to yellow, some drivers stop as quickly as possible, others speed up to get through, and yet others go through even after it has turned to red (possibly with a raised middle finger to other motorists!). There is presumably a law operating here, but also custom and courtesy, and significant variation among individuals.

Rhetoric of religious, social, and political activists tends to frame the duality of competition and cooperation in polemic terms. On the political left, “capitalism” tends to be the term of supreme evil, and “socialism” the obvious good; on the right, traditional conservatives exactly reverse these two. There are even anarchistic radicals on *both* sides who each seem to say that if government could be abolished, we might enjoy (as

they prefer) a socialist utopia or a capitalist utopia! Pietistic rhetoric of many religions exhorts believers to abandon self-interest entirely in service to others or to a holy cause.

It seems to me that all this is misguided; rather we should acknowledge the duality of competition and cooperation and study how to negotiate laws and customs that protect peaceful pursuit of individual self-interest, encourage productive, cooperative intercourse, and are acceptable to as many persons as possible.