

Why Competition is a Big Myth Take

By Alan Rayner 8.5.2008

In 'The Screwtape Letters', from a senior devil to his apprentice, CS Lewis (1942) refers to 'the whole Philosophy of Hell' as resting

"... on a recognition of the axiom that one thing is not another thing, and, specifically, that one self is not another self. My good is my good and your good is yours. What one gains another loses. Even an inanimate object is what it is by excluding all other objects from the space it occupies; as it expands, it does so by pushing all other objects aside or by absorbing them. A self does the same. With beasts the absorption takes the form of eating; for us, it means the sucking of will and freedom out of a weaker self into a stronger. 'To be' means 'to be in competition'."

By the sound of it, our modern human culture is utterly under the spell of this philosophy, along with its associated Darwinian and capitalist maxim that life is a struggle for existence in which we can only succeed by occupying a space or 'niche' in which we can prove ourselves fitter than and exploit others. This is a maxim that we teach ourselves to believe in throughout our education and business and governmental systems, scarcely stopping for a moment to reflect on whether it has a sound evidential or logical basis. If we did, we might come to realize that it is no more and no less than a convenient supposition, a simplistic figment of restrictive imagination that cannot do justice – indeed does great injustice – to the reality of natural evolutionary processes and our actual human experience of living and loving. But it has a very strong allure because it gives a sense of power over other, a false sense of freedom and security that can fortify self or group against the fearful uncertainty that lies beyond its immediate locality.

So, what could be wrong with the idea of being in competition? In a word: *everything!* To be in competition means to be in opposing, not complementary relationship, with the underlying objective being for one to gain or 'win' through the other's loss. This is the situation envisaged by Shakespeare's Hamlet, when he ponders:-

'To be or not to be, that is the question: whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them?'

The very idea of opposing things or forces depends *completely* on the assumed independence of matter from space such that the latter can come under the controlling influence of the former. Such independence ensures that any one thing or occupying agency is absolutely discontinuous from another thing in accordance with the definitive axiom known as 'the law of the excluded middle' upon which rests the *whole* philosophy of Hell.

But for such absolute discontinuity to hold, i.e. for there to be no continuity from one thing to another, the boundary between the inside and outside of each must be completely fixed and closed. That is, each thing must be a 'something' opposed to 'nothing', a completely definable 'object' or 'subject', which counts as an independent singularity or 'whole'. This is the paradoxical 'idealization' of natural form that is embedded in the numerical and geometrical foundations of classical and modern mathematics and objectivist science. The individual 'self' or 'set' must be an exception from its spatial neighbourhood in order to stand against, not be included within its 'sea of troubles'. Only by such means can someone or some group have the temerity to objectify himself or itself and other, and by so doing feel *free* to claim, as Albert Einstein did, that 'the environment is everything that isn't me', which opens the door to abuse of whatever is regarded as 'outside' as somewhere or something to lay waste.

Alas, poor Yorick: herein lies the whole source of the joy-killing nonsense upon which the myth of competition is constructed via the simplistic and arbitrary imposition of discrete limits upon natural energy flow! To be in opposition to other requires the

presence of a discrete boundary. The presence of a discrete boundary prevents any communication or flow of energy across itself. So any discretely bounded entity is locked inside of itself and so inert with respect to its surroundings: its sole source of sustenance is internal. The closest that real live organisms get to such a condition is when they produce 'survival capsules' – spores, seeds, cysts, sclerotia, pupae etc – that enable them to suspend their animation under adverse circumstances. This is what real biological survival implies – not competing like Hell as energy availability diminishes, but entering a dormant phase that conserves what has already been assimilated. These dormant phases provide continuity within and between generations, which enables regeneration of growth potential through variably opening boundaries as energy availability increases.

There is no complete discontinuity in real organic life on Earth between genes, individuals, populations, communities and ecosystems; there is only continual reconfiguration of living system boundaries in a pool of space everywhere, through cycles of birth, growth, death and decay that correspond directly with the waxing and waning of energy supplies. It is the variable distribution of energy supply, not competition, which governs living patterns, processes and relationships. Organic life comes as a gift of predominantly solar energy via the infinite cosmos, which is packaged on Earth in finite but recyclable carbon. It is not a struggle for sovereign rights of ownership of local material resources. Matter cannot occupy space without closing itself down in frozen still life. Space permeates matter as it breathes in warmth and melts or dissolves into myriad distinguishable but not absolutely definable fluid dynamic forms of energy flow, some harder, some softer but none completely isolated within a permanent hard edge until or unless all possibility of opening closes.

So, what are the implications for a human culture that bases its thinking and governance on the paradoxical material independence from and control over space that underpins notions of competition and individual or group rights of ownership? In a few words, conflict, imperialism, eugenics, distress, loss of creativity, loss of loving relationship, selfishness, disintegration and unsustainable development out of phase with natural energy flows. Does this sound familiar? If so, what can we do about it – or, more to the

its circulation around a stationary Earth at the centre of the Universe. Moreover, we were able to construct an extraordinarily complicated mechanistic picture, the Ptolemaic system, based on this interpretation, and to use this without question or evident failure in our calendars, navigational aids and astronomic and astrological predictions. But eventually it just ceased to make good sense, i.e. to be consistent with evidence not supposition, and the less 'obvious' but simpler and more coherent Copernican system emerged. This did not need to include the *ad hoc* 'epicycles' used to explain the apparently erratic loop-the-loop paths of the planets or 'coincidence' to explain the 365 day periodicity in the cycles of movement of constellations. These now redundant explanations were quickly forgotten.

How, then, might an inclusional interpretation make more sense of natural evolutionary processes? To begin with, it can help by requiring neither an *ad hoc* stationary reference frame against and within which to plot the movements and spread of genes, organisms and populations, nor of definitive boundary limits within which paradoxically to isolate the variably permeable bodies of these local identities from their spatial neighbourhood. By the same token, it removes the need for either an external or an internal driving force, design or designer to bring about movement or evolutionary change, since these are implicit in the fluid logic and geometry of a natural energy flow in which matter and space are mutually inclusive. Correspondingly, it is fully consistent with evidence implicit in the development of contemporary scientific theories of relativity, quantum mechanics and non-linear dynamical systems, whilst removing the need for these latter to be framed mathematically within a fixed structure. It provides opportunity for new mathematical and scientific framings based on dynamic relational natural boundaries, not artificially imposed limits. It releases our creative potential from the distress of trying to live our lives as if these limits existed.

What, then, about all that 'obvious' aggression that we find in natural and human communities – how can this be understood if not in terms of competition? The point here is that apparent aggression need not signify *opposition* of one *against* other any more than the erosion of a river's bank need imply that the stream is at war with the landscape,

or than the mountain ridge that forms at the watershed between two river basins implies that the two sides are at loggerheads. In natural flows there are confluences and divergences that can lead both to *differentiation* and *integration* of local identities depending on the quality and quantity of energy supply within and amongst the variably resistive and yielding interfacings of their spatial neighbourhood. Since these identities are *distinct but not discrete*, they neither strictly *compete* nor *co-operate*, but relate complementarily depending on their local situation, so as to balance their inflows and outflows in an energetically and evolutionarily sustainable way. Natural territorial boundaries are correspondingly the dynamic product of co-creative energetic interplay, which can help to protect and sustain local distinct identity and diversity, not an intention or requirement to join or eliminate opposing forces. The apparent consumption or replacement of one by another is not an act of forceful extermination of the former from somewhere to nowhere, but vital to natural processes of evolutionary reconfiguration and continuity that underlie all kinds of ecological succession and community development. Here death feeds life through the inclusion of space, life doesn't feed death through the exclusion of space upon which so much human conflict and waste is predicated.

Whereas differentiation and integration are therefore understandable as natural processes contributing to the evolutionary diversity and complementary relationship of distinctive local informational identities in non-local space, competition and co-operation are – at least in the rationalistic sense these terms are usually used – artefacts of prescriptive definition. In this rationalistic sense, diversity itself becomes the enemy, a departure from 'ideal form' and 'line of best fit' that needs to be straightened out into conformity if life is to be made ordered, predictable and free from the conflict – not the rich complementary relationship – that comes of difference. Competition and conformity destroy the diversity and dynamic, synergistic relationship upon which evolution depends, in a hegemonic march to unsustainable monoculture whose influence on natural and human communities is cancerous.

In terms of the way we educate one another and embed this in the way we live and relate to one another and our surroundings, there is therefore a huge difference between

competing with one another to achieve prescriptive targets defined by set standards or 'norms', and learning, through improvisation, to be receptive and responsive to diverse knowledge and viewpoints. The prescriptive, selective approach is restricted within its own rigid definitions as self-fulfilling prophecies, and so gets stuck with its apparent 'successes' whilst eliminating its 'failures' as worthless 'junk' into 'somewhere else'. Not only is it a source of profound distress and waste, but it is also unsustainable in the long run, where context is continually evolving. The improvisational, inclusional approach enables co-creative mutual understanding and transformation of all through all, in an evolutionarily sustainable way that respects and values diverse contributions to an ever-changing theme.

Hence there is nothing wrong with striving for excellence in dynamic relationship with others whose efforts can guide us – and who we can guide through our efforts – to appreciate the possibilities that reside within our uniquely situated and complementary personal identities. There is everything right in being able to differentiate and integrate between and amongst our diverse capabilities. But there is everything wrong in striving for supremacy within centres of complacency or 'ivory towers' that can look down with lofty arrogance and deep ignorance – at best with charity at worst with contempt – on the riff-raff of their natural neighbourhood.

So, as the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth approaches, perhaps we can celebrate both his wonderful recognition of the evolutionary kinship of all life, in all its diverse natural communion, and deliverance from the diabolical, hegemonic oxymoron of 'natural selection' as 'the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life'.