

Bragging Rights

The Sides of the Social Cooperation Coin

A hydrogen bomb is an example of mankind's enormous capacity for friendly cooperation. Its construction requires an intricate network of human teams, all working with single-minded devotion toward a common goal. Let us pause and savor the glow of self-congratulation we deserve for belonging to such an intelligent and sociable species.

-- Robert S. Bigelow, 1969. *The Dawn Warriors*

Yesterday's newspaper mentioned mass graves just discovered
where the other side was doing its thing not so long ago.

The next page bore a photograph of an old Afghan man,
arms outstretched, eyes imploring: eighteen,
he said, were sleeping together in his house,
all of his family, when our side dropped those bombs
aimed at suspected enemies departed weeks before.

Two, the old man said, sobbing,
had emerged from the rubble,
two: he and his small daughter,
all that remained.

Today's newspaper indicated that overall
our side is proud and happy
because its bombs have been 70% accurate.

During the transfer to their new hive I tried to
grant each worker honeybee the chance
for a normal, natural lifetime,
tried to prevent accidental deaths,
tolerating the willing martyrs doing angry
buzzes near me, knowing I was the intruder.

Some were inevitably caught or squeezed,
or smashed by my awkwardness.

I swatted one down from the red spot it left on my neck.

A few dozen workers rattled lifeless in the shipping box,
three were flattened forever on the rim of their new home,
others crawled with terminal feebleness on the ground below.

One, Deena noticed as we were leaving,
struggled in an old spider web by the fence.

But I knew we had done well by usual standards,
that this nation of honey bees would survive to serve
my own extended family; despite the inadvertent
deaths of dozens, and the deliberate crushing
of those few seeking vainly to protect the rest,
this group, this propagule, this new almost-organism
would survive.

So it is with each representative of that
curious phenomenon we call the individual.
For every one is a nation of thousands of genes,
Lilliputian units seen only as selfish by many, yet also
cooperating far beyond human understanding in the
sending into the world of their half hives of sperm and eggs,
requiring their union to create individuals, the multiple offspring
of the nations of genes: accidents and martyrdoms span
their generations, yielding losses between generations, more
than in just the geography and timing of our own quick wars,
which we in our pride see as peculiarly human,
noble triumphs of we over they, good over evil,
scarcely realizing that all levels and kinds of life
are equally banal.

Thirty thousand genes, three pounds of bees, each dispersing
like the forces of multi-million-member nations
that can take away 16 of 18, shattering an old man's family
by accident, while boasting of accuracy
on targets chosen deliberately
but too late.

Accuracy is time too, not merely geography.

What kind of accuracy is it to hit an intended but innocent target,
while claiming it is not intended that innocents be targeted?

Already scout bees from a distant hive, having located the temporary sugar water feeder, battle guard bees at the new hive's entrance, return to tell with their bee dances their hive mates how to join them in the robberies.

I close down the hive entry to nearly the width of a single bee, like the gate to Machu Pichu, said to be only slightly wider than the essential llama, giving the little new nation, the little new family, its chance.

Nations of genes, tens of thousands;
nations of bees, hundreds of thousands;
nations of ourselves, tens and hundreds of millions,
two now more than a billion, duking it out
against the hostile forces of nature, scrambling
for the same inevitably limited resources, confronting
the rest of our own kind, the ones whose groups
seem to stand most directly in our (and we in their) way
in the endless ubiquitous balance-of-power races.

Every level and kind of life may be doing it, but surely only we have sympathy and empathy and pride, all three. But to what end – what end, precisely?

We, who alone among all kinds hold our own kind to be the most hostile of all hostile forces, to be the evil ones we seek sporadically to outcompete and destroy, have indeed destroyed, devastatingly and deliberately, at least 50 million in 48 mass murders in the immediately previous time now labeled, The Killing Century (some say several times that many, and even they leave aside measuring the accompanying suffering, pain, and misery). More died too soon unnecessarily during those ten tragic decades than may have existed across all but one hundredth of the span of human social and evolutionary history.

And every portion of it planned, conscious, willful.

Which, after all, of the cooperative emotions is quickest, most definite, achieves greatest intensity?
Not love of spouse or offspring, even, for we willingly give up either in defense of homeland,

and the collective of countrymen.

*I don't like your nasty insinuations!
My son is a hero, that's all!*

Can it be, then, patriotism,
all the others honed, compromised, subordinated,
in service of this singular passion,
the reigning power over obligate interdependence,
over the indivisibility of the coin that
parades the cooperative partners,
amity and enmity,
love and hate?

Do we seek, by hallowing our best cooperativeness
under the emblem of patriotism, to match in some distant era
the fabulous unity of development achieved by those
selfishly cooperative genes that for all their
molecular simplicity have gained a oneness
orders of magnitude more impenetrable than anything
else so far known in the so-far-known universe?

Do we polish self-interest behind
endlessly pious claims of altruism?

Has love, the within-group shaper, become
driver of the between-group hate?

Are we now requiring enemies
to generate the sweetest of friendships?

Are we now requiring friendship
to generate the essential enemy?

If so, no one wants to hear about it.

*I don't like your nasty biology!
My son is a hero, that's all!*

We brag at home, as if against ourselves,
perhaps to benefit ourselves.

The little girl said she and her father cry now,
most of every night, in the deep, lonely chill,

the darkness of Afghanistan's bitter winter.

I can understand that.
I too am a father.
My children once were small.
I have small grandchildren.

And all of that will go on.

Does not everyone know some things about
cold nights and lonely nights?

Does not *deliberate* call for a
special kind of responsibility?

God bless . . .
America?

Why not
every person,
everywhere,

equally?

Why not,
no exceptions?

Explain these things to me.

Exactly.

All I want to comprehend,
deeply and desperately,

is:

Why not?

