

Self-Interest Versus The Common Good

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This week I want to write a bit about extreme self-interest — otherwise known as “selfishness” — in a way that doesn’t come off reading like a sermon by some severely moralistic, hellfire-and-brimstone Puritanical minister. I don’t wish to become the new Cotton Mather. So, let me try to avoid that foolishness by an appeal to proportionality rather than absolutes.

Let’s assume that human beings (maybe not everyone, but the vast majority of us) are endowed with the ability to hold two paradoxical or even contradictory motivations at the same time. This is actually common in human experience: the short-term weighed against the long-term, pleasure weighed against duty, work weighed against play. In a twist on the *Us-versus-Them* dynamic, these various contradictions often play out as *Me-versus-Us* — the drive for personal self-interest (feathering one’s own nest, so to speak) juxtaposed with concern for the greater or more common good. The motivation to serve everyone’s welfare requires varying degrees of moral courage or self-sacrifice, sometimes including even putting our own lives on the line. Such willingness is typically considered noble or heroic, but it’s really quite common. People do it often.

One of those not-quite-Zen-riddle-but-close puzzle stories goes like this: A mother holding her newborn child is on a commercial airline flight when a sudden air pocket drops cabin pressure precipitously and triggers release of the oxygen masks from their overhead compartments. As those life-ensuring masks dangle from the ceiling, a question arises: *Whose mask should the mother put on first? Her child’s or her own?* The “correct” answer is her own. If the mother struggles to fit an oxygen mask on her infant child but inadvertently passes out before accomplishing that task, she risks both of their lives. By putting on her own mask first, our loving and faithful mother maximizes the chances of protecting her baby. In other words, self-interest here serves the greater good.

Politicians love that story, as do neoliberal business people. Not only do such people feel that pursuing their own self-interest better serves the greater good, they tend to believe fervently, with almost religious zeal, in “the invisible hand of the market.” This means that to them, self-interest is more than merely acceptable — it’s literally all that matters. *“What’s good for General Motors is good for the USA.”*

Bullshit. That’s a completely unfounded assumption and a convenient excuse for selfishness. In the zero-sum game of contrasting priorities, it amounts to 100%

Self-Interest and 0% Concern for the Collective. Sorry, but that kind of Greed is *not* Good.

Acting to further one's own personal ambitions or gratification is one thing. It's another thing entirely, however, to believe that such raw self-interest is the *best* or *only* way to serve the common good for everyone.

Greed — whatever we call it: avarice, avidity, selfishness, etc. — is an intense expression of ego-based personal desire, right up there with the masculine sex drive. [*By masculine, I mean the assertiveness inherent within all of us, both men and women, not merely the biologically male gender.*] This drive to satisfy and fulfill the self is inevitable and natural, and thus must be accommodated.

Serving the common good, however, seems to me equally natural. Humans are social creatures, and putting others first, especially others in the group we regard as "Us," feels good. We like belonging to something greater than ourselves. In principle, those two impulses are mutually exclusive, although certain circumstances allow them to dovetail and feel complementary. In the abstract, though, pure self-interest denies the common good and vice-versa.

It's pointless to extol only one drive and condemn the other, so perhaps we might try thinking of these motivations instead as a proportional ratio. How much self-interest is acceptable? How much concern for the common good is positive, productive, and necessary? What ratio works to produce the happiest outcomes?

100% to 0% in either direction (meaning all greedy self-interest or complete and total commitment to the greater good) is a recipe for disaster. A person driven entirely by self-interest (think sociopaths and narcissists, such as Donald Trump) will inevitably harm others and damage the collective. On the other hand, any individual devoted totally to the common good (and thus entirely self-denying) tends to be less effective as an agent in the real world, judged a fool or dreamer, and quite possibly martyred. Sainthood is way overrated.

OK, if 100%-0% doesn't work, how about 90%/10%? 80/20? 70/30? You can see where I'm going with this. In terms of proportionate ratios the bookends are 100/0 and 50/50. If 100/0 is worst, does that mean that 50/50 is best?

I realize that these ratios aren't fixed in us. They vary from time to time, affected by the panoply of variables that influence everyone — age, culture, inclination, and the ever-changing kaleidoscope of changing circumstances and particular situations. Often, they shift based on whichever motivation is easier or more convenient. But I'm not interested in convenience. Instead, I wonder about the deeper motivations that endure and resurface time and again in our daily considerations of what to stand for and how to behave in the world.

Beyond individual motivations, what interests me most are the changing ratios over time of self-interest versus the common good as memes within the larger culture, which are so powerful in terms of social acceptability.

During the first three decades of the 20th century, America pushed its individualistic inclination toward self-interest higher and higher. By the 1920s, I'd guess that America's overall ratio was about 90/10. Self-interest ruled, and the Common Good could go screw itself. Then the Great Depression hit, and in fairly short order, the ratio moved. Amazingly, when the going got tough, people banded together. I don't think America ever got close to 50/50, but the 1930s through 1950s saw the ratio move to 70/30 and perhaps even 60/40. Wealth inequality was moderate, and even corporations showed concern for the common welfare, if in a somewhat patronizing way.

The 1960s and '70s gradually moved back the other direction toward more self-interest, and the Reagan neoliberal '80s began a precipitous slide away from the Common Good. By the mid-1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union, full-blown selfishness reigned supreme in America and came to be considered not merely acceptable, but gleefully recommended. Welfare was abolished, the financial industry de-regulated, NAFTA and off-shoring destroyed our industrial base in favor of the global economy the rich thought so cool, and protecting the environment was increasingly ignored. The past 25 years have done next to nothing to change that trend.

No one becomes President without having made way too many deals with the Devil. Obama rode into town talking about "hope and change," but he'd already sold out. I'd argue that no significant resurrection of the Common Good occurred over his eight years in the White House. Obama's failure led directly to Donald Trump. And now to Joe Biden. Different styles, but no real change to the system.

I figure America is still at about 80/20 — 80% self-interest, 20% common good. Trump's obvious corruption may have tarnished selfishness, but it still rules. Heck, the whole American system is built around it. As a culture, America lies to itself about the Common Good. We're all hat and no cattle. Republicans are guilty as hell — they're nakedly, brazenly selfish in favor of personal wealth and unconcerned about the common welfare. But, in slightly more subtle fashion, so are Democrats and so-called liberals, as well as far too many progressives.

Enter the pandemic with 300,000 dead (soon to be half a million), the onset of economic collapse, and rebellion brewing on both sides of the political divide.

Is there any chance of America's moving the ratio back to 70/30? Could we even hope to reach 60/40? Yes, I think those possibilities may arise some years down the road. The scary part is how we get there. Short of a general strike or mass uprising from the grassroots (neither of which are currently very probable), what it will take to move the needle is more pain. A lot more pain.

I don't wish for further suffering, but it's what I see on the horizon. And even after that, there's no guarantee that we'll get our heads screwed on straight.

50/50 may be an unreachable ideal, but we'd better get close to that or we'll find ourselves in much bigger trouble than we're in already.