COMPETITION AND COOPERATION: EVIL TWINS OR FATED LOVERS?

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> Democracy is the belief that even when needs and ends or consequences are different for each individual, the habit of amicable cooperation—which may include, as in sport, rivalry and competition-is itself a priceless addition to life.
> John Dewey, "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us."

The competing global forces of homogenizing commercialism and absolutist sectarianism continue to engender a regime of fear and have all but eclipsed what John Dewey called the democratic "habit of amicable cooperation." The values of cooperation are increasingly seen as "unrealistic" and even taken as signs of weakness in the "real" world where only the "fittest" survive.[1] Policies spawned by a market ideology of competitive individualism continue to erode cooperative learning, democratic pedagogy, and the very notion of public education itself. Cooperative learning is one of the clearest contemporary examples of Dewey's "amicable cooperation" in the classroom. Widely recognized as indispensable for cultivating multicultural democratic citizenship, no other approach has proven as effective in promoting positive inter-group relations, increasing academic achievement, and building bridges across borders of difference. And yet, cooperative learning has largely failed to replace traditional individualistic pedagogy in the classroom. Few teachers systematically incorporate cooperative learning, often regarding it as a kind of "hamburger helper" diversion from traditional practice, or as merely a mode of social skills development.[2] Cooperative learning at its best cultivates conditions for mutual critique, for an engaged dialogic response to pluralism. Balancing competition and cooperation, cooperative learning is integral to the effort to create communities of critical inquiry.

The struggle over the values of cooperation and competition calls out for a clarification of both competition and cooperation, recognizing that they are not a dichotomy but mutually necessary both in society at large and in the practice of education. This essay examines the presumed antimony between cooperation and competition, beginning with a critical rejection of both anthropological and economic theories which claim competition to be the main driving force in human development. Instead, cooperation is acknowledged to be a basic human impulse that forms the background for healthy competition. Richard Bernstein offers the concept of "engaged fallibilistic pluralism" as a dialogic response which acknowledges that there are no uncontested procedures for adjudicating the claims of rival traditions and thus requires mutual critique in an atmosphere of ideological risk. Within this context Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of the "question" illustrates the necessity of risk in any

conversation. The classroom then becomes a staging area within which the challenging task of building bridges of understanding in an atmosphere of mutual critique can take place.

Conquest Competition Versus Cooperative Competition

Although competition is commonly considered a kind of rivalry, or a "striving of two or more for the same object," there are two relatively distinct definitions at work.[3] First there is a sense in which competition means to assail, to fall upon, assault an enemy, to engage in a conquest, the vanquishing of a foe. This "conquest competition**"** is a zero-sum conception that does not necessarily presuppose any rules, standards of fair play, or prearranged agreements. It is essentially another name for unrestrained aggression or all out warfare. The Oxford English Dictionary identifies the earliest meaning of compete as *compéter*, however, which means to "fall together, coincide, come together."[4] In other words, "compete" also means "to seek together." This *cooperative* competition, as opposed to *conquest* competition, does in fact presuppose a set of rules, procedures, and standards of fair play, without which the activity would not be termed "competitive."

Are humans inherently competitive or cooperative? Often the conquest definition, a kind of Hobbesian conception of humans as aggressive, competitive animals, is contrasted with the democratic, more peaceful, cooperative Rousseauean view. The Hobbesian view has come to be combined with a neo-Darwinist idea that competition and warfare serve the grand selective function which ensures that only the "fittest" individuals and groups survive, evolve, and progress. Recently this neo-Darwinist conquest perspective was powerfully reflected in Robert Kagan's widely read article "Power and Weakness."[5] According to Kagan, Europe's weakness presumably lies in its Rousseauean preference for cooperation, multilateralism, and negotiation. while the Hobbesian "possession and use of military might" by the United States actually ensures the continued survival of "liberal order" in an increasingly lawless world of international terrorism**.** Kagan's position relies upon neo-Darwinian theory in which egoistic conquest competition is the primary driving force in evolutionary change as such natural selection via survival of the fittest is viewed as the proper "architect" of basic traits and behaviors. Sociobiologist E.O. Wilson argues similarly that human social institutions such as law, religion, and government, along with concepts of human rights, are all inventions of the egoistic mind and as such are not natural in an evolutionary sense.[6] He and others see contemporary social contract theory as unrealistic and unnatural. This neo-Darwinist idea that competition serves a positive selective function is especially relevant to education as a central argument supporting the voucher movement and international comparisons on standardized tests.

Although the conquest view of competition is increasingly common in public discourse, it is sharply at odds with current research on human evolution

among anthropologists. In terms of evolutionary history, cooperation and facilitation among humans is at least as common as competition and warfare. This research suggests that mixed cooperation and occasional competition resulting in facilitation is a central tendency in ancient and contemporary nomadic hunter-gather societies. Agustin Fuentes, for example, concludes that "intergroup competition may not be a fundamental adaptive characteristic in human history."[7] He recognizes that there is a need to retheorize both competition and cooperation to move beyond this false dichotomous thinking.

Competition and the Marketplace of Ideas

The expression "the marketplace of ideas" represents a common belief that the best ideas will be chosen, or "purchased," and thus naturally prevail if they are allowed to compete in an unrestrained market of free speech. While this idea is often associated with John Stuart Mill, Jill Gordon points out that this metaphor does not accurately represent Mill's views on the nature of free speech.[8] Certainly a free exchange of ideas and the ability to criticize any idea is central to the idea of justice, pluralism, and cooperation. Mill argues, however, that these conditions are not characteristic of the way markets actually operate. Success in the marketplace is determined by the buying power of elite wealth and mass consumption. The marketplace is not in fact a level playing field. This consumer process does not necessarily identify the best idea; it simply indicates the most popular. Popularity may be based on many different things—lack of trust, selfishness, or self-aggrandizement. Further, an idea might be popular because it can be used as an ideological weapon to dominate or obliterate the other side. This notion that the aggregate of personal private choices adds up to the best idea or most democratic outcome is not endorsed by Mill.

Jean Piaget's concepts of conflict and cognitive difference, on the other hand, offer a useful example of cooperative competition. For Piaget, conflicts in the form of contradictions are crucial because they serve to bring cognitive differences into sharp focus, thus leading to a coordination, or cooperation, which will eventually reduce or resolve the conflict. Social interaction provides the requisite condition in which individuals can offer competing views of the world: that is, compare and contrast their perceptions with others and thus coordinate understanding. Difference or contradiction may indeed give rise to cognitive conflict and a state of disequilibrium. Opportunities for becoming less egocentric, being able to see the viewpoints of others, are greatly increased when individuals directly discuss competing views. In this social situation, any individual who wants to communicate and to be understood is required to adapt to the informational needs and conceptual frame of the other.[9]

Piaget argues that as long as individuals are alone they can say whatever they please. When they are attempting to communicate with others the need arises to be consistent from moment to moment, to think about what to say to be understood and believed. Piaget holds that the rules of logical thinking

cannot be taught directly; they must be learned through social interactions. Through the competitive exchange of thought in the dialogic encounter, individuals are obliged to make sense, to adhere to the grammar or logic of the language. In this sense *cooperative* competition is shown to be central to the very process of meaning making. As Piaget illustrates, competition and cooperation are necessary and complementary parts of the same process, namely, cognitive growth.

Engaged Fallibilistic Pluralism

Pragmatist such as Richard Bernstein make a similar point, but instead of cognitive conflict, pragmatists talk in terms of pluralism and fallibilism. Bernstein identifies fallibilism as one of the positive defining features of American pragmatism. This understanding that human knowledge is temporal, partial, and fallible, while avoiding wholesale skepticism, holds that any interpretation, accepted fact, or validity claim is never entirely final but always open to further interpretation, reexamination, critique, and modification. Critical inquiry should be a self-correcting process in which any claim must withstand the challenge of direct competition. Fallibilism according to Bernstein is not simply an epistemological position but an ethical virtue—a constellation of habits and practices—that must be nurtured and consciously cultivated. This requires sympathetic imagination, to give serious consideration to seemingly incommensurable alien ideas and create new ones. A fallibilistic orientation calls for a willingness to submit one's ideas to rigorous critical scrutiny, a commitment to test one's most basic ideas in public dialogue while listening closely to those who criticize them. This openness also demands a high tolerance for uncertainty as well as the fortitude to withstand intense competition from alternative ideas and to abandon or revise any belief when it has been refuted. Cultivating this virtue is far from easy and requires the development of a "critical community of inquirers."[10] Fallibilism for Bernstein demands not just a minimal toleration of differing views but active conscious engagement with difference.

While disagreements, conflicts, and disruptions are inevitable, unavoidable, and even necessary, Bernstein identifies the response as key. A dialogical as opposed to a conflictual response is based on the desire to achieve a mutual reciprocal understanding that does not preclude disagreement. Bernstein sharply contrasts this *engaged fallibilistic pluralism* with other forms of pluralism.[11] *Flabby pluralism* involves borrowing from other orientations as a kind of simplistic superficial poaching that does not engage in a serious give and take dialogue. We might wear pajamas, eat Chinese take-out, and listen to Reggae, but we never truly engage in understanding that culture. *Polemical pluralism*, rather than a genuine desire to learn from others, becomes an ideological weapon to advance one's particular orientation. We only learn enough about the other to tear down their ideas and argue for our own in an attempt at cultural colonialism. *Defensive pluralism* pays lip service to other

points of view, but is convinced that there is nothing important to be learned from them—you go your way and I will go mine. Each of these types of pluralism avoids engagement in any truly reciprocal dialogue.

By contrast, *engaged fallibilistic pluralism* places different ethical responsibilities on those engaged in dialogue. Although we are committed to our own ways of knowing and thinking, we are willing to listen without denying or domesticating the "otherness of the other." This means resisting the temptation to dismiss what is not easily translatable in an alien vocabulary; willingness to learn in effect "a second first language where we come to recognize the ways in which rival traditions are and are not translatable."[12] Bernstein gives focus to cooperative competition as *striving together*. The essence of this position is surrendering the polemical and redefining disputes as opportunities to learn by giving others a chance to express themselves. Dewey calls this an unencumbered exchange of ideas, a free interaction in human surroundings which engenders growth which both develops and satisfies needs by increasing knowledge. Conceived in this way, conquest competition is the antithesis of this cooperative competition.

Polemical or defensive perspectives have little interest in cultivating further competition. Belief in a process that ends in final conquest, in victorious winners and vanquished losers, does not indicate any faith in the virtue or ultimate utility of competition—just the opposite. Conquest competition strives toward the obliteration of an opponent, the elimination of a competitor, the cessation of rivalry. Conquest competition is better defined simply as warfare, as aggression, masquerading as that which produces fairness and redistribution based on superior merit, but in fact has no inherent interest in either. A pragmatic rebuttal to neo-social Darwinist, distorted Hobbesian ideology is ultimately a vigorous dedication to democracy and peace. Movement away from conquest and forceful suppression is a "faith in the possibility of conducting disputes, controversies and conflicts as cooperative undertakings in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself, instead of having one party conquer by forceful suppression of the other."[13]

Cooperation as the Background for Competition

As opposed to the "adversarial confrontational style," engaged fallibilistic pluralism takes on the form of "dialogical encounter" where participants begin "with the assumption that the other has something to say to us and to contribute to our understanding."[14] Applying Bernstein's notion of engaged fallibilistic pluralism acknowledges an element of competition within the search for common meaning. Competition itself assumes basic agreement on the terms of the contest but leaves the outcome open. Cooperation is thus the background which allows the idea of competition to arise.

The notion that understanding can only take place within an often unrecognized background arises from various philosophies. Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, promoted the idea that meaning does not begin with

chaos but with the "language game," which he defines as "the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven." Meaning depends on a shared context within which there is agreement on how to interpret words. Different types of uses are different "games" such as giving and obeying orders, describing an object, reporting an event, telling a joke, or asking a question. We can only interpret the correct meaning of the words if we have prior agreement on the game in which they are being used. The cooperation inherent in competition follows the same model.[15]

Alasdair MacIntyre's idea of "practices" also informs this mutuality between cooperation and competition. A practice is

> any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity.[16]

To enter into a practice, even a competitive and potentially conflictual practice, participants accept the standards of judgment that come with the practice. If one does not follow rules that make the practice what it is, then one is not really engaging in the practice. If one used chess pieces but followed the rules of checkers, then checkers, not chess, is being played. The game metaphor is pertinent for an examination of competition. For any competition to take place, there must exist a background understanding of rules, fair play, and standards of judgment.

Gadamer and the Question

Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy focuses on the background structures that allow understanding to take place. His notion of the question can be of assistance in putting engaged fallibilistic pluralism into practice. The heart of Gadamer's notion of the question is exactly the uncertainty required by the dialogical encounter, the fusion of our horizon of understanding with the other. Any group of people, in order to communicate at all, to ask a question, must begin with some shared understanding.

The "true" question is typified by "the fact that the answer is not settled." Gadamer contrasts this true, unsettled question with the pedagogical question, the rhetorical question, and the distorted question. The pedagogical question is a "question without a questioner." The meaning is settled beforehand, the answer hidden only from the one being asked. The answerer is wrong, then, until the predetermined answer is hit upon. The rhetorical question "not only has no questioner, but no object." With a pedagogical question, the answerer must find the predetermined answer. With the rhetorical question, the answerer need not even search, for the answer is not hidden. The distorted question herds the answerer into a preconceived direction while pretending to be an open question. The deception involved distinguishes it from the pedagogical

question. In all of these cases, the unsettledness of the true question, the openness to the answer, is short-circuited.[17]

Gadamer's "true question" begins with the Socratic recognition of our ignorance. The question itself indicates a shared horizon of understanding that our own understanding is limited. We realize that the other may have something to contribute to our own knowledge. The very setting of a question "implies the explicit establishing of presuppositions, in terms of which can be seen what still remains open." Because the horizon both allows and limits the direction from which the question comes, the direction which the question can go is also limited. Just because the answer is limited to a range does not mitigate its unsettledness, its uncertainty.[18]

The radical openness of the question, despite its rootedness in a shared horizon of seeking understanding, means that to question is to risk. An open question for Gadamer "always includes both positive and negative judgments…only a person who has questions can have knowledge, but questions include the antithesis of yes and no." In asking questions, in the dialogic play of giving reasons, of making arguments, one may at any time be found wrong. For educational theorists such as Piaget this risk, this wracking experience of wrongness, is at the heart of cognitive growth. The true openness of the question means not only that others may find us wrong but that *we may find ourselves wrong*, that new knowledge must supplant old, that we must come to terms with a new openness that raises even more questions. Against this openness of questioning, Gadamer contrasts the "power of opinion against which it is so hard to obtain an admission of ignorance." An opinion goes against the meaning of the true question, for an opinion does not need reasons. The claim that something is "just my opinion" removes it from the necessity of questioning dialogue, removes it from the risk inherent in the true question.[19]

In fact the openness of the questioner for Gadamer is complete. He consistently resists shepherding the question into any preconceived agenda. The questioner for Gadamer has "no political role as an educator."[20] However Gadamer's dedication to philosophical hermeneutics in general motivates him to shy away from any specific conclusions, his dedication to dialogue as the predominant mode of communication does lead his theory to specific ethical recommendations. Matthew Foster rightly points out that "Gadamer obviously has made a moral affirmation when he defends the right and responsibility of dialogue in all human concerns."[21] Truly open dialogue, keeping the question open, commits one to reducing any barriers of inequality within the setting of questioning: "every dialogue is the incarnation of some solidarity, of some friendship, and of at least one common reality."[22] Gadamer's implicit ethical commitment is brought to explicit recommendation in Bernstein's engaged fallibilistic pluralism, which sees "the regulative ideal of a community of inquirers or interpreters" as "an ethical or normative ideal."[23]

If all competition is cooperative, then what basis of judgment exists to declare that some forms of competition are destructive? Thomas Wartenberg offers a field theory of power which distinguishes dominative from transformative power. In any interaction, including education, there will be dominant and subordinate agents. Power is transformative whenever the dominant agent "attempts to exercise his power in such a way that the subordinate agent learns certain skills that undercut the power differential between her and the dominant agent."[24] When power differentials are used to reinforce division and domination, they are destructive. When they seek mutual benefit even within a competitive environment, they are transformative. Competition can push either toward zero-sum conquest or cooperative transformation. Engaged pluralistic fallibilism consciously chooses the latter through the method of vigorous dialogue.

Questioning as Classroom Ethic

The questioner in the classroom has an especially difficult role to play in this dialogic competition of ideas. In the current atmosphere of standardized testing as a measure of knowledge, the teacher as questioner is conceptualized as a purveyor of correct answers. Questioning never goes beyond the student finding, or stumbling upon, the correct answer. The openness of the result at the heart of the true question is absent. For Gadamer, questioners have the most difficult role because they themselves must remain open. They must be able to "prevent the suppression of questions by the dominant opinion" while at the same time realizing that they themselves must not suppress the question.[25] For Gadamer,

> questioning is not a technique of role playing. The questioner is always one who simultaneously questions himself. The question is posed for him just as it is for the other person…We always find ourselves in a dialectical tension with the prejudices which take us in and parade themselves as knowledge but which really mistake the particularity and partiality of a given view for the whole truth. That holds both for the person asked and the person asking.[26]

The question now is how to enact this type of open critical questioning in the classroom. The teacher as questioner would assume an attitude of humble but enthusiastic and contemplative argument. The questioner, after all, does not invent the question but voices the question from a shared horizon. This contradicts the more traditional role of the teacher as purveyor of correct answers and reinforces a more egalitarian model of common struggle with the question. That the teacher may be more knowledgeable than the student in a given area does not eliminate the openness of the question for the teacher as well as the student. There are few things more distasteful than the smugness of a preconceived answer. In the dialogic process of open questioning, facts are established, arguments are given, evidence is found. The dialogue of questioning comes from a direction and will move in a direction. Questions and

answers will be *judged*. The central notion, however, is that the answers are provisional, even if strongly held. In the pragmatic spirit, we may be committed to an answer but always with the open attitude that our answer may need revision due to new experiences.

The supposed antagonism between cooperation and competition is short-circuited when we look at questioning as putting meaning up in the air for all to grapple with. Competition and cooperation are not mutually exclusive but mutually necessary. Competition, even contentious competition, assumes common goals and methods of judgment. There must be some community which at least in some rudimentary way shares a horizon of understanding in order to question together. Competition often stands out in our mind exactly because it takes place within a horizon of cooperation; it shows up against this background.

The educator aids the critical community of inquiry in cultivating habits of dialogue. In fact, the educator has an ethical duty to both help establish a shared horizon of understanding and to open dialogue within that horizon. An important part of establishing the shared horizon is coming to conclusions on the facts necessary in the dialogue. All cannot remain open; every fact is not up for grabs. Much of the educator's task is certainly teaching factual information that establishes the basis for discussion. Once that shared horizon is established, though, the attitude and practice of openness, including competing and even conflicting ideas, forges the practice of critical inquiry. Facilitating the process of critical inquiry, of the competition of ideas within a larger horizon of cooperative questioning, can combat the accelerating polarization we see today that ignores our underlying connectedness in favor of the conflict which is only allowed by that connectedness.

Conclusion

So, are competition and cooperation evil twins or fated lovers? Competition outside the bounds of cooperation is really just another name for anarchic warfare. This dominative model must clearly be rejected as antithetical to the values of pluralism and community. Competition in any sense can only take place in a context of cooperation. As that competition is used toward the end of domination, it must be uprooted. As that competition is used toward the end of transformation, it must be fertilized. As for cooperation and competition within the arena of education, clarifying salient features and the reciprocal nature of competition and cooperation helps us employ the twins of fierce cooperation and amicable competition in the pursuit of more equitable, inclusive communities of inquiry. Lovers, then, is an appropriate metaphor for cooperation and competition—sometimes hot, sometimes cold, sometimes tender, sometimes tumultuous—but always together with the goal of mutual enrichment.

Notes

1. Robert Kagan, "Power and Weakness," *Policy Review* (2002).

2. Alfie Kohn, *What to Look for in a Classroom and Other Essays* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

3. *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "Competition," http://www.oed.com.

4. Ibid.

5. Kagan, "Power and Weakness."

6. Naoshi Yamawaki, "Evolution, Competition, and Cooperation from a Socio-political Viewpoint." in *Competition, Trust, and Cooperation: A Comparative Study,* eds. Yuichi Shionoya and Kiichiro Yagi (New York: Springer, 2001).

7. Agustin Fuentes, "Cooperation or Conflict? It's Not All Sex and Violence: Integrated in Anthropology and the Role of Cooperation and Social Complexity in Human Evolution," *American Anthropologist* 106, no. 4 (2004), 714.

8. Jill Gordon, "John Stuart Mill and the 'Marketplace of Ideas,'" *Social Theory and Practice* 23, no. 2 (1997).

9. Draga Vidakovic, "Learning the Concept of Inverse Function in a Group Versus Individual Environment," *Cooperative Learning for Undergraduate Mathematics* (1997), 176–77.

10. Richard J. Bernstein, "Pragmatism, Pluralism and the Healing of Wounds," in *The New Constellation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 328.

11. Ibid., 335–36.

12. Ibid., 336.

13. John Dewey, "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us," in *The Essential Dewey*, eds. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 342.

14. Bernstein, "Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds," 337.

15. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1958), 5 and 11–2.

16. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187.

17. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 326 and 327.

18. Ibid., 325 and 327.

19. Ibid., 328 and 329.

20. Matthew Foster, *Gadamer and Practical Philosophy* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1991), 269,

21. Ibid., 234–35.

22. Ibid., 237.

23. Bernstein, "Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds," 336.

24. Thomas Wartenberg, *The Forms of Power: From Domination to Transformation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 184.

25. Ibid., 330.

26. Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 59.