

Self-interest v survival: which will win out?

(a brief essay to examine the ideas behind the question)

‘Everyone thinks of changing the world,
but no one thinks of changing himself.’

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) in his 1900 essay *Three Methods of Reform*

We have an international scenario of **expanding population** (25 billion +), many millions of **displaced or refugee people**, climate change threatening **planetary ecosystems** and accustomed world practices, **global conflicts** over water, resources and land, growing **threats of nuclear and cyber attacks** ... while the wealth of the planet is controlled by 1% of the **richest people**.¹ That creates challenges for the norms that have governed human behaviour over centuries.

But more:

Where power-playing transactional modes of decision-making take precedence over co-operative global predictability ... **ask yourselves** ... has the **notion of self-interest versus survival** become **too-hard a concept** for our serious consideration? Have short-term comforts/wins become the only priorities? Until ... perhaps ... later generations will have **no choice** but to address the bigger issue? **What is the meaning of the lives we lead?**

Adam Smith, the Scottish philosopher (1723-1790), implied in *The Wealth of Nations*² that **self-interest** is a natural part of human motivation, engrained into our psyche. His ideas, along with others, evolved into *classical political economy* theory that contributed to public policy formation in Britain and elsewhere. **But is the natural psyche as Smith described? Or ... more just a reflection of the context of his era?**

Thomas Hobbes, an English philosopher (1588-1679), in *Leviathan*³ suggested that self-preservation and personal gain are part of the competitive state of nature ... unless some form of **social contract** restrains them. **What kind of restraint? Societies have always developed practices to prioritise and manage their versions of the interests of the group.**

¹ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/inequalities/2026/05/12/56000-people-own-three-times-more-wealth-than-half-of-humanity/>

² *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Adam Smith 1776

³ *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil*, Thomas Hobbes, 1651

Karl Marx (1818-1883) argued that *The Wealth of Nations* restricted any thinking process that might challenge the compliant adoption of capitalism⁴ – which, in his view, had **flaws in concept**.

With **Friedrich Engels** (1820-1895)⁵, he asserted that a philosophical underpinning that attributed natural instincts to personal gain in human motivation ... **missed the point**. Why?

Because historical social structures of feudalism and *bourgeois* production tended to **reverse-engineer understanding of natural behaviour** by taking ‘what is’ rather than ‘what might be’ or ‘what can be’ or ‘what should be’.

Over more recent decades, **dominating narratives** have **controlled public perceptions** ... for political/ideological motivations – **vested interest**.

Critics pilloried the Marx and Engels challenges about ‘**capital**’.

The public discourse swamped them with pejorative derogatory slurs.

Cold War ‘enemy’ rhetoric and ‘fearful’ derided terms (like communism or socialism) suggested that Marxist ideas were malicious threats from brainwashed autocratic regimes.

That is **conflating** someone’s idea of ‘**evil**’ with what was essentially an **intellectual critique** of capitalist economic practice.

Undoubtedly, some dictatorial regimes have used Marxist terminology and engaged in subjugation of their populations, over decades – but, **just perhaps**, those regimes are not actually indicative representations of the **philosophical points** that Marx and Engels were trying to make.

The vehemence of the public narratives has tended to **drown out any alternative analysis of ‘self-interest’ or the ‘social contract’ restraints.**

The ‘righteous’ ones choose not to examine their own community indoctrination that now appears to have us all on a deteriorating global trajectory ... except, possibly, for some ‘comfortable’ self-enriching power players. **Look in the mirror!**

‘Too often we enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.’ **John F Kennedy**. June 11, 1962. Yale University address.

⁴ *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie (Capital: A Critique of Political Economy)*, Karl Marx 1867

⁵ *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy*, Frederick Engels, 1844

So, let us pause to consider the **natural notion of the survival instinct** (in contrast to self-interest).

Bird or animal groups, prehistoric tribes or communities living on the edge of survival tend to have the social characteristics of co-operation and mutual dependence to overcome environmental threats – along with strong social bonds ... intuitive teamwork and altruistic behaviour.⁶

The **notion of the team being more important than the individual** gives a collective approach to food, shelter ... protection from threat. In that scenario, people (animals) work together to establish norms (customary restraints) and **survival priorities**. cf Inuit,⁷ Peruvian penguins,⁸ traditional Sparta.⁹

The idea that a person would give his/her life to protect others (or for the community's continuance) is a **respected expectation in many current societies (albeit anathema to many self-interested views)**.

In survival wartime, many people are prepared to die for a cause ... to enable others (even the species) to live on.

In current parlance, freedom fighters and terrorists are often just different (maybe misguided) sides of the same coin. **It depends on perception**, how people are conditioned to think, feel, act, to respond to oppression, disadvantage, threats to self ...

Yet, self-sacrifice is built into most cultural stories, songs and revered memorials.

Which brings us to **Trust** and **Confidence** – that the structures of society are **truthful**, conducted in the best interests of us all. **Probity** is the expectation that public institutions are operating with **honesty**, with the **highest moral standards** and independent **impartiality**.

When that trust in public institutions is broken ... by lies, deceit, corruption, dictatorial behaviour ... then **survival of the community is at risk**.

When **competing ideologies** allow divisive politics and public commentary to lock people into opposing '**enemy**' camps then **reliance on the community process is undermined**. When the **public debating of**

⁶ <https://medium.com/@jenny.feneley/altruism-as-a-survival-mechanism-2be05e33e020>

⁷ <https://www.connollycove.com/the-inuit-way-life/>

⁸ <https://blog.nature.org/2025/03/15/humboldt-penguins-on-the-edge/>

⁹ <https://engai.ai.com/entry/spartan-culture/>

viewpoints degenerates into abusive battles without the basic axioms of truth and mutual respect, then instinct draws us into **fight, flight** or **paralysis** modes.

Our public Constitutions set up a **debating framework** of *government and opposition* with the intent to have respectful discussions of differing viewpoints, even ideologies. The arbiters of such debates have strict rules of engagement along with a fundamental understanding that statements will be based on **testable truthful evidence** and be delivered with **courteous wit** and **civility**.

So, when **healthy public narratives** of *for and against, government versus opposition* **morph into a distasteful and abusive us v them mindset** ... without the discipline of respectful restraining protocols ... the conditions are set to **normalise** the abuse of power, derogatory language, blatant deceit ... the use of force, violence ... and even armed rebellion against rules-based order.

The biggest hindrance in finding resolutions to world challenges is ‘self-righteousness’ in any of its absolutist forms.

There is much more **nuance in life** than is implied by putting people in ideological boxes. Even Shakespeare, 400 hundred years ago, understood.

‘There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.’

Hamlet (Act 2, Scene 2) Shakespeare – published in First Quarto 1603.

The challenge is not an absolutist debate of right and wrong, good or bad. Absolute proof is always difficult.

‘No matter how many swans you observe that are white, you cannot prove that all swans are white.’

Karl Popper (1902 – 1994) (Austrian-British philosopher).

The obstruction comes from those who are sure – because they have come to ‘believe’ that they must be right ... frequently without testable reasoned debate – the type which requires evidential proof rather than just self-interest or faithful commitment or assertive opinion.

The surety of ‘**rightness**’ is usually an illusion – a mental leap of **wanting** it to be right rather than **knowing** ... based on logical proof.

'The greatest obstacle to discovery is not ignorance, it is the illusion of knowledge' Prof Daniel Boorstin (1914-2004) historian, 12th Librarian of Congress, USA in his 1983 book, 'The Discoverers'.

So, in returning to the initial question, **self-interest versus survival ...** we must address the fundamental global issues or face the consequences that most dinosaurs faced by not **recognising a changing environment** and **adapting behaviours** – *crocodiles might be the rare dinosaur exception.* **Personal greed can be addictive, just like the lure of absolute power** – but those 'siren calls' may well lead to crashing onto the rocks of denial and delusion. Likewise, those with **absolute dictatorial power for life can't risk giving it up ... on pain of death at the hands of the wronged.**

To paraphrase the words of Hamlet in Shakespeare's play (Act 5 Scene 2):

*'There is a destiny that shapes our ends
Rough-hew them as we will!'*

I prefer the word 'destiny' to the play's word 'divinity' as **destiny is more likely.**

So, which priority will win out? I refer you to the **opinion** of the actor who played Hans Solo and Indiana Jones.

"The planet will be okay.

There just won't be any damn people on it."

Harrison Ford, on 7.30 (the Australian current affairs program) in 2015.

Seen in geological time, that's some serious contemplation for the self-interested! Check what you're being told ... with testable evidence rather than opinion, rhetoric, delusion or vested interest ... question, with critical thinking!

The power in democracies actually lies with the 80%¹⁰ who understand the *give and take* of finding an honest workable path forward. There will always be the zealots and charlatans who will never change but, while they may wheedle their way into temporary influence, they are not the majority.

There is more to politics, survival and life ... than self-interest.

See <https://jimreaywriter.net/prime-minister-by-accident/>

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pareto_principle