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## CONSIDER THIS

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### #40 Evolution, Standards, and Open Source

As long-time Consortium Standards Bulletin readers will be aware, the *Consider This* essay is the part of the CSB where I allow myself to range as freely as I wish across the standards landscape (very broadly construed), utilizing the concept of the standard as a vehicle to go where I will rather than chafing under it as a constraint.

As a result, while many *Consider This* essays have in fact addressed traditional standards topics, others have ranged as far afield as the flatness of Kansas, using pancakes as the "standard" of flatness ([Standards, Similes, Pancakes and Kansas](#)), Internet conspiracy theorists and RFID chips ([Dan Mullen, Andrew Jackson, and the Dark Side of the Internet](#)), nationalism and food standards ([Soy Sauce, Kimche and the Golden Rule](#)), and, more recently, the thickening of Americans and resulting need to update the dimensions of the "standard American" as used by engineers ([Body Type Standards, Crash Test Dummies, and Sleeping with Big Agnes](#)).

As a result, I feel on fairly safe historical grounds in offering the following proposition this month, as we approach the November elections:

Evolution has seen fit to develop in the human species two standardized, instinctive, and largely opposite attitudes towards dealing with society. In America, we call the political parties that exemplify these attitudes as the Republicans and Democrat, but you could find clear analogues just about anywhere around the globe. Whether or not someone here or in Argentina chooses to formally affiliate with either of these parties (however named), she is likely to resonate much more decisively with the tenets of one of these ideologies or the other.

I would go further and suggest that from the process point of view, the evolution of these two standardized ways of balancing priorities of self and society represents the longest running open source project in human history.

Let's cover the easier of the two contentions first. Are political affiliations – or, more properly, those values that we lump together as representing either the "liberal" or "conservative" viewpoint - the result of nature or nurture? If not nature, then how does one explain the fact that two equally intelligent people, often raised in the same household, can hold such diametrically opposed and comparably deep-seated convictions, each firmly convinced that they are possessed of revealed truth?

I would submit (in all seriousness) that it is highly likely that it is genetic predisposition and not life experience that has led to both the instinctive depth of feeling as well as to the dichotomy. In support of that conclusion I would offer that there are so many different aspects of human and animal behavior that are clearly hardwired (from the flight response, to the urge to protect one's children at the expense of one's own welfare, to the building of distinctive nest shapes by different species of birds), that there is little reason to assume that conservatism and liberalism should stem from any other source.

In fact, I would go further and observe that the stereotypical outlooks of conservatives (take care of yourself; resist impositions on personal freedoms and high taxes) and liberals (take care of everyone; accept impositions on personal freedom and higher taxes in exchange for promoting the welfare of society) are each perfectly viable survival strategies, and hence are unlikely to have become so pervasive and durable in the absence of a clear relation to survival.

But if this were true, why would taking care of others (what environmental theorists refer to as "altruism") represent a survival skill?

This quandary has been a matter of debate for evolutionary theorists since the days of Darwin. That great thinker himself realized that altruism, if it could not be shown to provide a survival advantage, might represent a fatal flaw to his theory. Early theories focused on the "survival of the species," but it was soon realized that the individual would have no motivation to perpetuate the genes of another individual, simply because it was a member of the same species. Why then make any sacrifice for another?

The most detailed and persuasive arguments supporting altruism as a survival strategy were not conceived until almost 100 years after Darwin's concepts were first published. Although he was not the theorist who developed them, [Richard Dawkins](#), a brilliant Oxford don with a flair for making complex scientific theories accessible to the layman, brought them to the attention of a far broader audience. In his seminal work of 1976 titled [The Selfish Gene](#), he explicated the concept that all life forms exist for the sole purpose of transporting their genes down through time, making you and I akin to pitifully self-centered chauffeurs that have forgotten about the passengers in the back seat.

Although the selfish gene theory, when stated so bluntly, sounds both absurd as well as disquieting, it is downright spooky how accurately it predicts all aspects of human behavior – including altruism, particularly as regards the protection of close relations in addition to immediate family members.

Returning to conservatism and liberalism, then, how can these two very different outlooks each be explained in evolutionary terms, and in particular, how do we explain an urge to take care of someone outside of our family (i.e., our immediate gene pool) if it might imperil the perpetuation of our own genes?

Dealing with conservatism first, it is easy to understand that taking care of one's family is the next best thing to taking care of oneself, since many of an individual's genes are carried by that individual's parents, siblings and children. But how then to explain a liberal's desire to provide for the welfare of those that are unrelated, especially to the immediate detriment of himself and his family?

In fact, it is only slightly less intuitive to reflect that there would be many situations over the course of evolution in which personal and family survival would be dependent on the survival of the tribe, band or clan of which an individual is a part. Why? Because the band would share food, care for the sick when they could not fend for themselves, and provide for joint defense. Hence, the survival of the individual – and the perpetuation of his genes - is in significant measure dependent on the survival of the individual's band or tribe.

But assuming that this is a sound conclusion, why would nature preserve two strategies in the long term instead of just one?

The evolutionary theorist would respond that a single strategy would only make sense under constant conditions. Because there is little in the natural world that is constant, either in the near term (plenty and famine, flood and drought) or in the long term (global climatic shifts), a species with only a single, highly refined survival strategy is vulnerable to be exterminated when conditions change such that its single strategy no longer works.

As an example of conditions that could select to conservatism or liberalism, one could observe that in times of famine, watching out for one's own could be the best strategy, while in times of drought, only the collective might of a band might secure rights at a water hole, and later in evolution, survival during time of tribal war would be dependent on being part of an internally loyal and strong defensive force.

Similarly, for hunter-gatherers, members of a tribe enduring a time of want in one area might only survive if they have maintained cordial relations with adjacent bands, each of which is entitled to rely on the other in times of need. While one strategy may be superior for a while, with the result that one type of behavior begins to manifest itself more frequently in the gene pool, eventually conditions change, or the five hundred year storm or drought strikes. In that case, but for the remaining reservoir of genes favoring the opposing behavior, it might go badly indeed for the survival of the species, even though many individuals would still perish. Given the vicissitudes of environment and human aggression, both behaviors in fact may remain about equally viable, and necessary for species perpetuation, across any given period of time.

As a result (except at cocktail parties), society generally benefits from the existence of two different attitudes for relating to society rather than just one, albeit at the expense of a certain amount of stomach lining. Sometimes, it would seem, two standards really are better than one. Of course, evolutionary trends can also lead to extremes over a sufficient period of time. They can even lead to the evolution of new parasitic species, such as lobbyists, talk radio hosts, and authors of political rant books.

Having made, I hope, my first point, let me turn to my second contention. If indeed we have evolved two biological standards of political outlook, is this result in fact the product of a biological open source project?

I think so, at least to the same degree that selfish gene theory has actually turned us into delusionally unaware chauffeurs. Let's compare what makes an open source project what it is with how the human race (or any other species) evolves in the wild, and see if you agree, using a simple table to make the point.

### Characteristics of an Open Source Project Compared to Evolution

Open Source Project	Human Evolution
Anyone may participate	Assuming you're fertile, you're eligible
Participation is voluntary	So, there's always the priesthood
Operates as a meritocracy	Competition for mates
Forking is just fine	White ones, black ones, yellow ones and brown ones...
Anyone may create a derivative work	New species split off over time
No fixed versions; ongoing development	Evolution may be slow, but its ongoing
Goals can change on a daily basis	Evolution reacts to whatever conditions are current, regardless of what they are
No restrictive licensing terms	Teenage rebellion; cross-cultural and interracial marriage
Ongoing development and use is based on relevance to end-user needs and appeal to participants	Sexual appeal is necessary for procreation; maladaptations do not survive to reproduce

So, as you can see, if conservatives and liberals can be fairly seen as naturally evolved standards (or, better yet, as living, breathing reference implementations of these standards), then the process by which they have been created – and by means of which they continue to evolve – seems to be very like an open source project indeed.

Of course, the analogy can be taken too far, just as Dawkins' characterization of genes, taken to extremes, becomes anthropomorphic. Still, it is interesting to note just how far it can be taken, because apparently the same sensible rules that make natural selection a successful process also work in a consciously collaborative development environment.

All of which demonstrates yet another example of fractalism in nature, as something as seemingly modern, synthetic and intellectualized as standards and open source development seem, after all, to be but unconsciously derivative human replications of timeless evolutionary processes.

I find that rather comforting, as it suggests that both standards and open source are built upon very rugged and time-tested principles indeed.

Isn't it wonderful how art imitates nature?

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