

The Unfairness of Fairness

by Erik_Deckers

In my 3.9 decades on this Earth, I've come to the conclusion there is no such thing as true fairness. (I've also come to the conclusion that I'm getting old.) I first learned about fairness and cooperation from watching Sesame Street when I was four. Two Muppets were arguing over a piece of cake. Both wanted it, but neither was willing to give it up. Finally, one of them had an idea. "Let's share!" he said. It was the cake-flavored light at the end of the tunnel. So the first Muppet pulled out a knife, and threatened to stab the other if he didn't give up his share of the cake. Actually, that's not true. He said something to the second Muppet that has stuck with me forever: "I'll cut, you choose. That's 'cooperation.'" So he cut the cake, the other one chose it, and I learned a valuable life lesson that stayed with me for the next 35 years. Of course, I also thought "cooperation" meant cutting cakes in half, so what did I really learn? I was able to apply that lesson a couple years later, when my little sister and I were faced with the very same problem over a piece of cake. So I did what I learned from Sesame Street. I pulled out a knife and threatened to stab her if she didn't give up her half. Okay, that didn't really happen. I very carefully and precisely cut the cake down the middle and let her choose. And that became our practice over the next several years. One cut, the other chose, with only a minimal amount of stabbing. The problem was we never wanted to share in the first place. One of us would express an interest in the last piece of something, which automatically meant the other person wanted it too. It wasn't so much that we actually wanted it. It was more like we didn't want the other person to get all of it. As a result, we both got really good at making that precise cut, to insure the other person didn't get a single micron more than the first. We did it with such laser precision; scientists would monitor us to calibrate their lab instruments. But it was our own desire to see the other person get less that made this fairness so unfair. In order to inconvenience the other, we were willing to settle for less than what we really wanted. This is commonly known as "compromise," and it creates huge problems that lead to global conflicts. When I was in college, I learned that compromise is actually the worst outcome, because neither party gets what they want. Let's say you and I are going out to lunch. (Can you spot me ten bucks?) I want Mexican, and you want Italian, so we need to decide where to go. If we go to a Mexican or an Italian restaurant, one of us gets exactly what we want, but the other doesn't. That's win-lose. If we go to a place that serves both Mexican and Italian, we each get what we want. That's win-win. But let's say neither is willing to budge -- I'm not in the mood for pasta, and Mexican food gives you gas -- so we compromise and settle on Chinese. As a result, neither of us gets what we want. This is lose-lose. According to scholars who study this kind of thing, it's actually better for a situation to end in win-lose than compromise. Because in terms of total satisfaction, there is more satisfaction in win-lose than compromise. Of course, most scholars think Mexican food is spicy, so they stick with turkey sandwiches and avoid the entire situation. Unfortunately, a lot of bad things have been perpetrated in the name of compromise. Compromise bills are passed by Congress that benefit both parties, but hose their constituents. Cease fires and peace treaties give neither side what they want, so they're guaranteed to be broken two weeks later. Two little kids fight and bicker over the last helping of creamed corn, even though neither of them really wanted it in the first place. So don't compromise, don't settle for 'almost.' Strike up a deal. We'll do Italian this time, and get Mexican next time. You vote for my bill this time, and I'll vote for yours the next time. Or do what you should have done in the first place. Get a bigger cake.

The Unfairness of Fairness by Erik_Deckers