A fair share

Why do we share?

Sharing is an insurance policy, according to Professor Ken Binmore. If an animal shares its food, then when it's short on food it can expect others to share reciprocally.

Sharing among humans - 'fairness' - is a natural evolutionary response to interacting with others. It is in our interest to share, as long as our sharing is likely to be reciprocated in times of need.

Hunter-gatherer societies surviving into the twentieth century all operated social contracts where food was mostly shared on an equal basis.

Don't be unfair

The lesson is that people who don't expect a reciprocal payoff in the future will be reluctant to share on a long-term basis. In other words if there's little chance of being repaid for sharing, people are unlikely to bother.

Even reforms for an improved society will not be agreed upon if it means redistributing costs and benefits in a way that feels unfair. A society will not simply change the unwritten codes by which it operates unless the general sense of what is fair has changed, suggests Professor Binmore.

Professor Ken Binmore works at the ESRC Centre for Economic Learning and Social Evolution (ELSE).

Further reading

- Ken Binmore: "The origins of fair play" (ELSE Working Paper) PDF

Darwin Today has been produced for Darwin Year celebrating Charles Darwin's bicentenary. The resources highlight the continuing importance of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection in contemporary research. **Darwin Today** is produced by Research Councils UK (www.rcuk.ac.uk)