



A World of Comparisons

Considering the extent to which comparisons govern our thoughts, we are given little guidance on how to make them. Here, a look at the instinct to compare, and how to exercise it without falling into its traps...

□ One of the strangest statements ever made is that comparisons are odious. It was first committed to paper in the 15th century by Archbishop Biorado, Archbishop of Scandio, and has been repeated in literature and conversation ever since. Comparisons have their pitfalls, yes; we should be careful about how we make them. But it is difficult to see how, in and of themselves, they can be "loathsome and hateful," to quote the dictionary definition of the pejorative the Archbishop used.

In fact, great good flows to human beings from their ability to compare; we would all be lost without it. It allows us to make contrasts, draw parallels, and cite examples; as such, it is an invaluable aid to thought. Comparisons lend us the power of judgment, and sharpen our critical faculties. How could we assess the relative worth of things, conditions or persons without measuring them against some sort of criteria?

With no standards of comparison, we would not be able to tell what is good or bad, better or worse, more or less, bigger or smaller. We would never be able to distinguish what is remarkable or extraordinary.

Fortunately we stand in no danger of being so deprived, because we could not stop making comparisons if we tried to. Human beings seem to have an instinct to compare. We make comparisons every hour of every day, beginning in the morning when we look out the window and quite unconsciously compare the weather with that of yesterday. Living as we do in a society of choice, many of us are virtually creatures of comparisons we have formerly made.

We have compared alternatives in choosing our occupations, places of residence, friends and even life-long companions. Our personalities are the result of past comparisons to the extent that they have influenced our attitudes and tastes.

Comparisons are central to the way humans learn. Teachers use analogies to illustrate the similarities or contrasts among entities and ideas. We read books which make the meaning of ideas clear through comparisons that have been converted into similes and metaphors. We communicate our own thoughts and information in these same convenient figures of speech, using them automatically to emphasize or elucidate our points.

No more valuable tool exists in man's (or woman's) attempt to understand the universe. In the immortal works of scholarship which were to dominate western education for a thousand years, Aristotle laid the groundwork of intellectual inquiry by placing comparable things and conceptions in related categories. Aristotle was the father of the scientific approach, and many of the great discoveries of science have been made by employing his technique of collating similarities and noting exceptions. Charles Darwin hit upon his theory of natural selection ("survival of the fittest") partly by comparing the beaks of four species of thrushes in the Galapagos Islands. Although the birds were all of the same genus, their beaks were of different shapes and sizes because they had been adapted to feeding conditions in their particular home territories.

Today, scientists of all descriptions use comparative techniques to build up bodies of

knowledge and open the way to discoveries. Medicine could hardly function without the ability to match reactions from various tests. The social sciences — economics, sociology, anthropology and the like — depend heavily on statistics that would be meaningless without comparative standards. It does no good, for example, to know that a certain number of pigs were born in the country in a certain month without knowing how many were born a month or a year earlier. But with the knowledge of past experience at hand, an agricultural economist can track what point has been reached in the hog cycle, and forecast what is likely to happen to the price of pork.

*Comparison points the way
to what is just and fair*

Comparative statistics show the way to public policies by indicating potential problems in health care, the environment and so forth. By matching up figures, public authorities are able to detect trends in the society, and make plans to meet emerging social needs.

Statistics also exert a strong influence on business strategy. Companies need to know how their present performance and market conditions measure up to previous periods, and how they are faring versus their competitors. The larger companies raise the capital they need by selling stocks and bonds, the price of which is largely determined by investors, often taking their lead from financial analysts who make comparisons of the financial status and management of various companies.

Comparisons play a pivotal role in a market economy. The advertising to which consumers are exposed frequently contrasts the properties and quality of the product being promoted with that of its chief competitors. Advertising recently has swung from comparing a product with an anonymous "Brand X" to comparing actual products and services directly. Consumers, of course, make their own price and quality comparisons in deciding what to buy, and where.

In any field where competition exists, comparisons are endemic. Sports are dominated by

standings and records which compare one team's or athlete's performance with the rest. Television networks have their fortunes tied to audience ratings. Comedians, authors and potential beauty queens are judged in comparison to their peers.

While politicians might protest that they would never, heaven help them, put partisan rivalries ahead of the public good, the democratic system is exceedingly competitive. Political parties are always urging us to contrast their virtues with the others' glaring faults. In deciding how to vote, we compare the policies, personalities and abilities of those who aspire to run our collective affairs much as we would compare goods in a supermarket. The politicians' handlers resort to some very fancy psychological "packaging" to make their candidates stand out.

Comparisons are essential to democratic life. Despots have always tried to keep their people in the dark lest they compare their circumstances with those of others who enjoy more freedom and prosperity than they do. The instinct to compare, however, is not easily suppressed.

The recent epochal events in the Communist world were basically the result of people weighing their way of life against that in the western democracies and finding their system wanting. Though the Eastern Europeans obviously desire an improvement in their economic condition, they revolted primarily against a lack of liberty.

Here we come to the most significant function of comparisons in mass human affairs: they tell us when a society is being unjust, unfair, or repressive. The civil rights and womens' rights movements began with observing the difference in the treatment of different groups. Comparisons of social conditions always lead to drives for more equality. They tend to prevent the majority from abusing minorities. In this way, they help to make the system work not just for some, but for all, as it is intended to do.

*A bird is not a butterfly,
a dollar is not a dollar*

Considering the extent to which comparisons rule the world, it is surprising how little formal guidance we are given on how to make them. Undoubtedly some comparisons are odious, or at least dangerously misleading. What is it that makes them that way?

The standard warning not to compare apples and oranges is of little use, because they do not make a bad comparison. They fall into the same general category, and they can be substituted for one another up to a point. We would be better off being told not to compare apples with, say, T-bone steaks; both are foodstuffs, but their price and applications are so different that they are really in different categories.

Aristotle wrote that comparisons or contrasts are only valid when they are between things that are similar generically. In his classification of animals, he declared that it is not enough to go by surface resemblances such as the possession of wings; some ants have wings and some do not, but they are obviously related. A bird and a butterfly both have wings, but there the practical similarity ends.

An extension of this rule is that things that are called the same names are not necessarily the same; for example, a dollar is not a dollar. It is a Canadian dollar or a United States dollar or a Hong Kong dollar or what have you. Canadians often forget to take into account the difference in value when they compare prices and other conditions in Canada and the U.S.

Nor are things that are nominally the same at different times. If a Canadian dollar is not a U.S. dollar, neither is a Canadian dollar in 1990 the same as a Canadian dollar in 1970. Comparisons are worthless if they do not recognize that everything changes. You are not the same person you were ten years ago.

For a comparison to be valid, it must have roughly equal weight on both sides. It would be silly, for instance, for a critic to compare an amateur theatre group's production with one on Broadway. Advertisers deal in unbalanced comparisons when they contrast their product's strong points with the weak points of their competitor's. This is a common tactic in argumentation, often encountered in courtrooms, but it is no less invidious for that.

A sound comparison takes into account everything that is known about its subjects. There are times, however, when there is so much to be known about the subjects that valid comparisons cannot be made.

An example of this is the habit people have of comparing cities within the same country and

declaring one or the other's superiority. In fact, the respective advantages and disadvantages of each place tend to cancel out the other's. Some aspects of life are better or worse here, some better or worse there.

Without a sure knowledge of the subjects concerned, comparisons give rise to delusions. When people put the present up against the past, for instance, the past always seems to win. But most of us only see the bright side of the past, even if it is within our own scope of memory. "Those who compare the age which has fallen with a golden age which exists only in the imagination, may talk of degeneracy and decay; but no man who is correctly informed as to the past will be disposed to take a morose or desponding view of the present," the great historian Thomas Babington Macaulay wrote.

A conscious effort must be made to achieve objectivity

One general rule to keep in mind is that the comparison is always in the eye of the "comparer." We think through our own perceptions, which arise from preconceived beliefs, experience, and sheer prejudice. We tend to view things in two broadly different ways, depending on our dispositions. "Some minds are constitutionally synthetic, and see differences everywhere; others are constitutionally analytic, and see resemblances," Will Durant wrote in a critique of Francis Bacon's philosophy. Bacon himself observed that "the human mind resembles those uneven mirrors which impart their own properties to different objects ... and distort and disfigure them."

We must therefore make a conscious effort to achieve a degree of objectivity, checking for distortions which arise from our peculiar attitudes or emotions. Admittedly, this is fighting human nature to a considerable degree. Another philosopher, Bertrand Russell, once conjugated an irregular verb thus on BBC Radio: "I am firm. You are obstinate. He is a pig-headed fool."

This goes to show that the most unreliable comparisons you can ever make are between yourself and others. There is always a tendency to exaggerate another's good or bad properties. If the comparison is favourable to you, then the odds are that you are underestimating the other party. If it is

unfavourable, you are probably not taking everything into account.

"The crop always seems better in our neighbour's field, and our neighbour's cow always gives more milk," wrote Ovid. The tendency to overestimate the good fortune of others may come from the fact that we usually see them at their best; a proverb cautions that we should never judge a man on Sundays if we do not know what he does the rest of the week.

Another proverb decrees that you must walk a mile in another man's shoes before you presume to know about him. Uninformed comparisons between persons can give rise to envy, which is not only a deadly sin but also demeans those subject to it. You cannot feel envious of someone without feeling in some way inferior to him or her. "Jealousy is the fear and apprehension of another's superiority, and envy is the uneasiness we feel under it," the poet William Shenstone wrote.

The healthiest comparison is with your former self

Envy is a multiplier of misery; it makes us feel bad when good things happen to others, as well as bad about our own relative condition. It can become so obsessive that it is almost an affliction. An English author once wrote to the effect that if he wanted to punish an enemy, he would load him with the burden of always envying someone.

Envy breeds another sin, that of covetousness. When we envy another and covet what he or she has, we may again be indulging in false assumptions and exaggeration. "If we did but know how little some enjoy the great things they possess, there would not be much envy in the world," wrote Edward Young.

On the other side of the coin, we may unconsciously use false comparisons to assert our superiority over those who are not intrinsically inferior, but simply less fortunate than ourselves. Here again, the law of compensation comes into play; some things in the other's life may be better than in yours, and some worse.

On the evidence it would seem that we should never compare others to ourselves, but, human nature being what it is, that would be impossible. The most we can do is put personal comparisons into perspective. The novelist Hanna More proposed a level-headed formula for doing this: "When you are disposed to be vain of your mental accomplishments, look up to those who are more accomplished than yourself, that you may be fired with emulation; but when you feel dissatisfied with your circumstances, look down on those beneath you, that you may learn contentment."

In any case, personal comparisons are not all bad by any means. They stimulate competition, which leads to accomplishment. They make us think about what paths to avoid ("I wouldn't want to be like him") and what paths to take. They lead to emulation, which in turn can lead to a happier and more useful existence. If we wish to improve ourselves, we need models to serve as examples. But models have their limits; no one ever did anything really worthwhile by slavishly copying another, and in the end, we alone are responsible for what becomes of us.

In measuring ourselves against role models, the same rules apply as to any other comparison. It must be relevant, balanced, and complete. Many the sad soul has come to grief trying to live up to a successful parent who lived in different circumstances and had a different set of aptitudes. For their part, parents should avoid the natural trap of contrasting their offspring with themselves — "when I was your age, I was holding down two jobs," etc. The differences in the times, conditions and temperaments must all be given due weight.

Since we can't avoid comparisons, personal or otherwise, we can at least try to ensure that they are constructive and well-founded. In the process, we might compare the persons we now are with the persons we were in the past. If there has been no — or not enough — improvement, we should ask why, and what can we do about it. That could be the most meaningful comparison we ever make.