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THE RIGGED SHELL GAME OF DOMINATION HI-  
ERARCHY

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We have a remarkable tendency to perceive (believing is seeing) cross-species dominance hierarchy in other animals. Naturally it would be very satisfactory could we find a precedent in nonhuman Nature. So, we observe interactions between individuals of different species and leap to the conclusion that some species are "dominant" over others. We are forever seeing "aggression" in nature; we like to read malevolence into the behaviour of a meat-eating predator, or belligerence into the behaviour of a grosbeak at a feeding tray. We forget that the predator and the seed-eater are merely feeding, and that feeding is basic and urgent.

Granted, we sometimes see birds of different species competing, as it were, for possession of a prized nesting-hole. This we swiftly transpose into interspecies aggression (striving for dominance), when what it really is, is competition for a nesting-hole. It would take the wildest foray of the human imagination to interpret it as illustrating an interspecies social dominance issue, complete with mutually understood rank. But we do it all the time.

Interspecies acceptance of social dominance hierarchy would be impossible, at least in part because the multitudinous species involved would not be able to understand each other's conventional symbols of rank: rituals, signs, language. A peacock displaying in front of a goose is going exactly nowhere. In the simplest terms, communication is generally understood as the transmission and reception of *mutually understood* signals. You have a sender and a receiver and a message understandable to both; otherwise, you do not have communication. The dominance hierarchy in a group of social beings is based on a system of signs and signals which, whether the individuals learn them or are born with the knowledge or both, are usually fully understood and acted upon by all concerned.

On the other hand, the conceived human dominance hierarchy is completely one-sided. This is not communicated, because we are the only ones who understand the message. There is massive transmission, but no reception. Our physical power is so great, however, that, at least to our own satisfaction, we are able to display our dominance whether or not nonhuman beings "get the message." Thus we are able to fool ourselves as to our role. One of our prime self-delusions is that nonhuman Nature *accepts* our dominion, as part of the natural order of things.

I am strongly persuaded to the view that in "real life," which is to say non-human Nature, there is no such thing as dominance. Dominance may well be an inference to which we attribute reality, or, if you will, a human projection. It seems to me that what we anthropomorphically call "subservience" or "submissiveness" or even "obsequiousness," but what is in fact *compliance*, is the inherent drive that makes the biosphere go round.

If indeed "dominance" is manifested and hierarchy maintained at least as much by the actions of compliant individuals as by the actions of Alpha — perhaps more so — then the failure of nonhuman Nature to receive our message of superiority, to accept our dominion, and to act accordingly creates a genuine problem. Here perhaps is a root cause of much of our cognitive dissonance with respect to wildlife. But since the one thing the Rational Being cannot do is leave the question open, we must *pretend* that nature is indeed complying, and is playing its proper reciprocal subservient role. And that is exactly what we do.

But it is one thing to pretend and another to make the pretence *rational*. We have a neat way of doing it. Since wildlife cannot or will not see us in a dominant light (we are not of their species, therefore we are socially irrelevant), all we have to do is see wildlife in a human light. Then everything falls into place. We do this by seeing wildlife *comparatively*. We judge wildlife species by human standards *in order to find them wanting in human qualities* so that they may be appropriately ranked and filed. Because our standards are specific to us, no other species can possibly meet them. Man is thus the rational measure of all things; the proof is universal, and the perceived hierarchy is firm. There is not a word of protest; we infer compliance. (Consider if you will the possible outcome were united gerbils of the world to declare gerbil qualities as standards for determining interspecies hierarchy. Perhaps indeed they have done so, and live in total comfort and assurance.)

It is essential for the interspecies dominant to cast other species in his own image, not to see himself in theirs. The beloved dog is "almost human." To anthropomorphize the nonhuman is much more salutary from an ego point of view than it would be to zoomorphize ourselves. After all, we are but one species and Nature is millions; it is more satisfactory to assign roles to those bewildering multitudes in the monospecific human hierarchy. To attempt to do otherwise would be meaningless, because the only universal meaning is in human supremacy. . . . No shell game was ever more remorselessly rigged.

There was behind my parents' house a city ravine, with a little stream running through it. At one end, before the stream disappeared into a large pipe, there was a little marshy area where the water spilled shallowly to one side. There, there were toads and frogs and newts. If you lay very quietly in the grass at the water's edge, you could observe them. The longer you looked, the more deeply you were mesmerized...possessed. There was no world whatever, outside that world...nothing beyond shimmering light on water, smooth clean muck, green

plants, trickling sounds, flickering tadpoles, living, *being*. That was when the pain started.

The knife of separation is cruel. I not only remember in a factual sense but I can *feel* to this day the anguished frustration, the knowledge that I could never — not ever — be more than a boy on the grass, excluded from that world wholly and eternally. But why? Why pick on me? I wished it no harm; I only wanted to be part, to join, to "plug in." The denial was impersonal and cold and final. It has gnawed at me ever since — not all the time, mercifully — but much of it.

I wept over it, in a dogwood thicket. In the certainty that through no apparent fault of my own I was being unjustly denied something that was as fundamentally important as air, I felt much anguish at times. Unpredictably, of course, as it is with preadolescents, there would be unexpected moments of pure and inexpressible joy and happiness when the "free flow" between Nature and myself was unobstructed and open. Such moments always seemed to happen accidentally: why couldn't I *will* them? Always there was a mix of sadness and pleasure. My early experience with Nature was bittersweet; it still is. I rejoice in wildlife and I despair, in equal measure.

The other morning I was awakened smartly at dawn by the close whooping morning song of a troop of gibbons. Rushing out the door, I very nearly fell over an unfamiliar blonde five-year-old in spectacles and blue pyjamas, sitting elbows on knees, chin cupped in hands, unmoving, intent. She glanced up somewhat sternly, as though to shush me, and softly whispered "Monkeys." I was rude enough to ask whether she could see the apes (I wanted to). She shook her head, wiping me from her world wholly and finally. At last I had the grace to sit and listen too.

The jungle shrieked and shook and crescendoed and echoed and re-echoed, and a mynah bird picked up the theme. I have heard many a dawn chorus in many a place, but I shall never forget that one, that quality. The overwhelming primate celebratory songs, the green dripping rain forest, the faint glowing early light, the intense little kid, the toads and the frogs and the newts, and — once again — free flow.

When I was very young the experience was entirely accidental, unpredictable, ungovernable. It came and it went, and much of the anguish in the awareness of separation was caused by one's lack of control of free flow. You couldn't hold it, and you couldn't command it. It just happened — and then it was gone. A frequent fear was that it might be gone for good; but is never was. It is still here, still alive and well, and thanks to some non-rational, experiential, unreasonable, acultural, non-intellectual, emotional contrivance that defies all logic, in the right circumstances may now be summoned almost at will.

A day or two before the gibbons and blue pyjamas episode I found myself at 2:30

in the morning on a vast moonlit beach watching a seven-foot-long leatherback sea turtle dig a deep pit in the loose sand, lay forty-two eggs in it, cover the nest, and laboriously make her way back into the shimmering South China Sea. Since I was watching in the usual schizoid way of the naturalist, marvelling at it all whilst at the same time paying keen attention to each minute detail and considering the chances of hatching success, hatchling survival, turnover, and all the rest of it, it was prudent to hold the free flow for later.

That moment came when the great reptile finally heaved her immense bulk to meet the first wavelet at the shore. A dancing splash wiped the grainy sand from one enormous eye. A shuddering abyssal breath, another ponderous lurch, and her foreflippers were in the water. The slope is gradual here, and the turtle was still treading sand for more than twenty yards. But the heaves became easier, more rapid, more fluid, and at last she floated.

She remained on the surface for several moments, possibly to catch her breath. In those moments, as gentle ripples broke soundlessly over the gigantic carapace, now wetly silver in the moonlight, my universe was no longer mine alone. It was ours. With the leatherback turtle, I slipped beneath the smooth surface of the sea...As the ceaseless cycle turns, universe without end, life without beginning, pulse without destiny, form without function, love without self, circling among unknown stars, we are once again *in touch*.

I do not know how long I stood there in the shallows, but when I again perceived the ocean in a "waking" way the turtle was long gone. I was quite alone. The group of which I was part had moved a little distance down the beach to watch another leatherback going through the same ancient procedures. Though I too watched the second one, there was really no need to, and I knew it. All had been accomplished and incorporated — finally and forever — already.

Now, my point in reporting all of this is not to apply one more layer of mystery (mysticism) to the wildlife experience, but rather to emphasize that when I say that the fate of the sea turtle or the tiger or the gibbon is mine, I mean it. All that is in my universe is not merely mine; it is *me*. And I shall defend myself.

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