

“Nature of the Beast”

precis: Images of animals as inherently and predominately competitive and ferocious are commonplace. Yet how accurate are those images? How might we benefit from their reexamination?

Consider for a moment the kind of messages and values in circulation in our culture about animals and competition. “Survival of the fittest.” “It’s a dog eat dog world.” *Homo homini lupus est*, is a Latin proverb meaning “Humans are wolves to other humans.” These are a few idioms we have in Western culture to support our overall view that competition, aggression, and dominance is an intrinsic and natural part of existence.¹ Even our major institutions, like nations or capitalism, were built on the assumption that human competition is our natural way of being. I am not going to attempt to suggest that is plain false. Clearly competition is a part of Nature. What I want to get us all thinking about today is **how true is it** that competition is the fundamental order of animals and Nature?



Allow me to preliminarily suggest that the narrative “competition is natural” is an incomplete and unfair human perception that does animals and also ourselves a disservice. What makes it incomplete or unfair? First, animals are more than biological machines genetically programmed to always behave a certain way. It may not be normal or common for predators to become friends with the types of animals that would normally be their prey.² But it can and does happen. Even carnivores, with a biological need for flesh to survive, can have needs or a set of unusual circumstances that transcends the dictates of evolution and their genetics. Many animals have the capacities and potentials to make choices as individuals. Animals, including us, can be more than Nature’s automatons merely acting out what Nature genetically programmed into us.

Second, our human perception of Nature has been tinged by the goggles of competition. When we look at Nature, we expect to see competition, and that is exactly what immediately comes to our notice. We have historically failed to appreciate cooperation sufficiently. The reason we didn’t see it wasn’t because it is rare. Let’s explore two examples of cooperation among animals together.

¹ Cover of Thomas Hobbes *Leviathan*. Open source

² Image of tiger who befriends pigs. From: <http://miniatureyorkshireterrier.blogspot.com/2012/01/tiger-and-her-baby-pigs.html>
Open source

The first example of cooperation is of chimps. In the video reading earlier,³ imagine what we might have perceived what was happening if we didn't have the benefit of the captions. The amount of noise and moving around seemed to display a whole lot of competition and conflict. The captions helped us look past the competitive drama and notice the rest of what was happening: affirming social bonds and getting assurance from your allies, making noise and gestures to diffuse the drama, conceding that the conflict has gone far enough, and ultimately reconciling with a kiss and grooming. World famous primatologist Jane Goodall noted, "Chimps are very quick to have a sudden fight or aggressive episode, but they're equally as good at reconciliation."⁴ A multi-authored article in the academic journal *Animal Behavior* explains how chimpanzee cooperation and reconciliation is informed by the personalities of individual chimps. Evolution has given them capacities for both conflict and cooperation. Yet how they engage in conflict and cooperation varies by individuals. So again, this is not pure genetics at work. Individual chimps impact their societies with their personalities and the choices they make.⁵

Our second example of cooperation is of wolves. Earlier I used the expression "Humans are wolves to other humans." The expression is based upon the image of wolves as predatory and cruel. Famed primatologist and ethologist Frans de Waal said that the expression is an injustice against canids who are among the most gregarious and cooperative animals on the planet. After all, he noted the cooperative and social qualities in wolves is what prompted humans to domesticate them and produce dogs.⁶ The picture here is from an animal behavior experiment in Austria.⁷ That



table has a rope running through it. Two animals have to pull at the same time to pull it forward. If just one pulls, the rope comes out and no snack for them. This experiment was conducted hundreds of times with different pairings of wolves and dogs. Of 416 attempts, wolves cooperated and got the reward 100 times. Of 472 attempts, dogs got the reward 2 times. This experiment is confirming that our cultural image of wolves as

³ "Conflict and Reconciliation," Chimpanzee Sanctuary Northwest, Sept. 12, 2014.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdKUM6fLOgY>

⁴ From an interview with David M. Ewalt on Sept. 17, 2005, excerpted at https://www.forbes.com/2005/10/19/goodall-jane-chimpanzee-aggression-comm05-cx_de_1024goodallhurt.html?sh=1bef7e4f4cbc

⁵ Christine E. Webb et. al. "Individual differences in chimpanzee reconciliation relate to social switching behaviour," *Animal Behavior* 90 (2014), 57-63. Digital version can be found at:

http://www.emory.edu/LIVING_LINKS/publications/articles/Webb_etal_2014.pdf

⁶ Frans de Waal, "Moral Behavior in Animals," TEDxPeachtree, Nov. 2011.

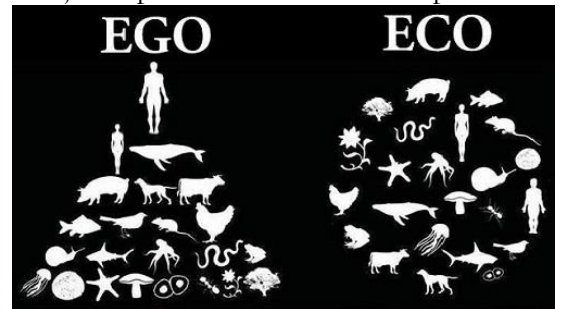
https://www.ted.com/talks/frans_de_waal_moral_behavior_in_animals#t-73511

⁷ Image from "Importance of a species' socioecology: Wolves outperform dogs in a conspecific cooperation task," Sarah Marshall-Pescini, Jonas F. L. Schwarz, Inga Kostelnik, Zsófia Virányi, Friederike Range. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* Oct 2017, 114 (44). For brief synopsis of the article see: <https://phys.org/news/2017-10-wolves-cooperative-kind-dogs.html>

One of those benefits could be moral growth. If animals are more than genetically-programmed machines designed for conflict and competition, if they are also beings capable of cooperation, beings who can transcend genetics to make choices as individuals, beings with consciousness, with inner emotional and moral lives, with intelligence and abilities we have largely failed to fully appreciate—then perhaps they are not so inferior and we are not so special or superior. Grossly overestimating our own superiority is the essence of anthropocentrism.¹² How we have treated and are treating non-human animals stems directly from that belief. In our culture, the animal kingdom has historically been arranged hierarchically—which is an inherently competitive model—with humans at the top. And we have the power and might to say that model is right. But is it right? Changes in science and ethics are suggesting it is not entirely correct or right. There have always been alternative models in our culture and in other parts of the world.¹³ What if we fit within Nature in a much more horizontal than vertical way, as one kind of animal among many? Or maybe as a gigantic interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part—not a self-designated privileged part, not a superior part, not a compete our way to the top and dominate it part—just a part? If Nature is a complex place of both competition and cooperation, full of beings behaving in amazing and sometimes surprising ways, perhaps animals deserve better consideration and treatment than we are currently giving them.



A second benefit would be deepening our spirituality. Imagine what our personal and collective relationships with animals, the environment, or Nature could be if we didn't believe it was necessary to compete our way to the top and then serve as the planet's overlords. What might those relationships be like if they were based upon a notion of "we" rather than "us." We had a guest in January, Rev. Dr. LoraKim Joynor, who suggested that when we opened ourselves up to the wonder and awe of animals and Nature that it could bring ourselves and our relationships with them to a different and more holistic spiritual place.¹⁴



¹² Image by Gerd Leonhard, from Creative Commons

¹³ Ahimsa (total nonviolence) hand symbol in Jainism, open source

¹⁴ Joint virtual service with UU Community Church of Hendricks County and First Unitarian Church of Hobart, 10 Jan. 2021.

Finally, a third benefit concerns violence itself. If we, as humanity, believe that competition is inherent and intrinsic to existence for all species—that living is a gigantic never-ending survival of the fittest—we are far more likely to be secure in our own uses of violence as necessary and natural. Perhaps that gives us permission to turn to violence and scarcity far too readily and easily in how we relate to Nature, to animals, and to one another. Cooperation is just as genetic and natural as competition and violence. We may be undervaluing that part of ourselves because our ideologies and institutions emphasize competition, making competition feel as though it is the natural order of things. It is indeed a part of the natural order of things, but it is not the full picture of Nature’s complex ways.



Why is the narrative of animals’ supposed competitive ferocity and cruelty so strong and persistent? In the end, that narrative may say more about human perceptions and needs than it does animal realities. The narrative of competition allows us to treat animals and the planet as we wish, because it allows us to tell ourselves we are engaging in competition, which is perfectly natural. And it lets us off the hook, and I chose that phrase purposefully, for our own selfishness and violence. A more complex view of animals, one more consistent with emerging science and modern ethics, a view that appreciates that animals are more than simply competitive, violent, selfish, and brutal programmed biological machines engaged in a cosmic survival of the fittest, forces us to acknowledge the same thing about ourselves. Animals, human and nonhuman ones, do have a competitive side. But evolution has also provided animals with a cooperative side.

I invite all of us to reconsider our cultural narratives about animals and competition. Our 7th principle beckons us toward such a reexamination. Our relationships with animals, with Nature, with the environment, and with one another, would all benefit from a rethinking about competition and its role in the animal kingdom.