

PECKERHEADS



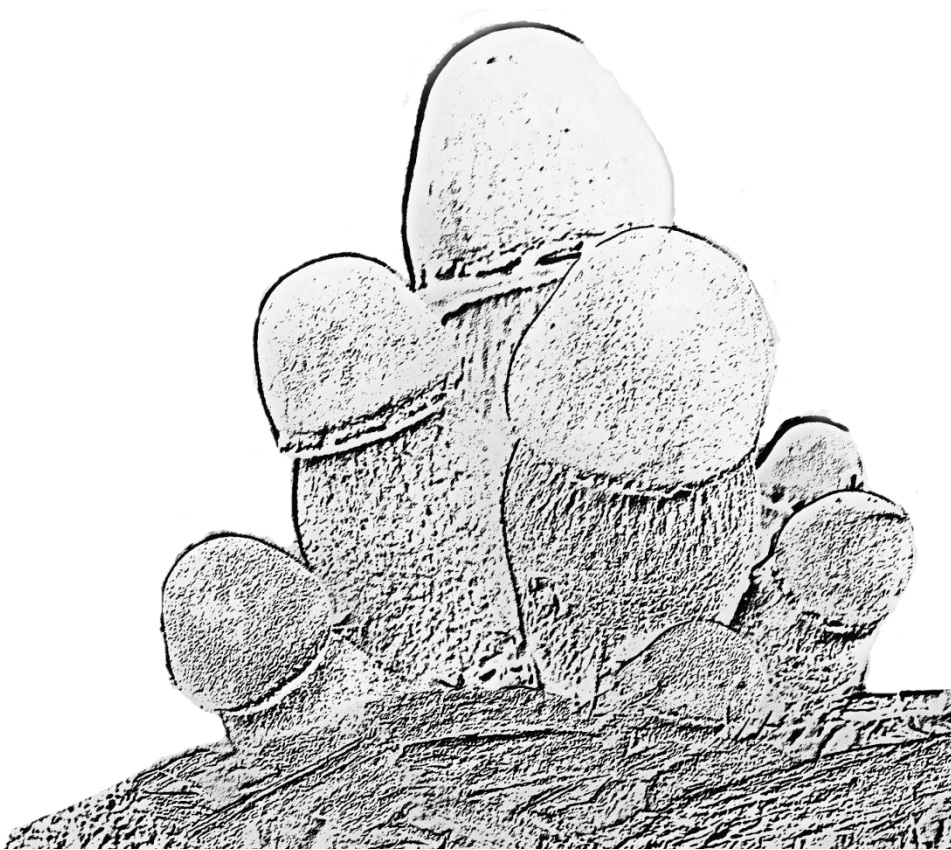
A Brief History of the
Human Pecking Order



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Phallus esculentus mushrooms

Carl Linnaeus

“father of modern taxonomy”

Species Plantarum (1753)

INTRODUCTION

“The tale is exciting: challenges from younger pretenders undermine the power of an aging patriarch. The old male loses his hold, and the once peaceful social order explodes into violence as ambitious contenders vie for power. The story tells us of dramatic clashes between the powerful, though ultimately, the outcome hinges not on brute strength but on intricate political machinations and subtle shifts in support from the masses, who yearn for peace and stability. Although a new order will emerge, the tale’s ending dangles uncertainly. The potential for renewed conflict among the rulers remains, and it is only a matter of time before another episode begins in the incessant struggle for power.”

Or so says Barbara Smuts, professor of psychology and anthropology at the University of Michigan, in a review of 1982’s seminal *Chimpanzee Politics: Sex and Power among Apes*, by Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal.

But human beings aren’t apes, we’re peckerheads, which can’t be literally true, of course, since most of us lack beaks. Metaphorically speaking, however, history and everyday life attest to the term’s accuracy.

Humankind, like every social animal, orders itself into some type of “dominance hierarchy,” where those at the top gain access to greater resources and better mating prospects. (Those in doubt should look around the front row of any major sporting event.) And while we often hear about the

“alpha male,” the hierarchy applies to females as well. They just hide it better.



This book describes the nature and genesis of human dominance hierarchies, and what it means for us today. A major thesis of the book is that the divisive polarization around the globe, and particularly in the United States, is in large part a battle between competing modes of dominance.

Among most species, might makes right—the law of the jungle. But as societies coalesced, humankind transitioned to the rule of men—the strongest, most ruthless, and cleverest. The Enlightenment, which championed bright makes right, helped usher in the rule of law.

But there’s a problem: Suppose you don’t happen to be all that bright? Not really great at interpreting the fine print. Then further suppose that you happen to be brawny and

strong, a good fighter. Or, if you're a female who isn't herself brawny and strong, that your womanly attributes guide you to be a mother and a homemaker, and, as Tammy Wynette might put it, stand by your man?

Which arrangement might you then prefer? Rule by educated elites, or by less smart but rugged traditionalists?

The fundamental reality is that we favor a dominance hierarchy that favors *us*. Strongmen and their kin do better when they exploit the law of the jungle or the rule of men. Intellectual and empathetic types strive to enculturate the rule of law. That dichotomy is today's political bottom line.

FOLK EGALITARIANISM

There's a recurring story about people who once existed equitably within egalitarian cultures. The narrative spans from Adam and Eve, to hunter-gatherers, to Aboriginal Australians (who are probably closest if you don't count the subordinate status of women).

This book is not about social equality versus inequality. In the West, the concept of equality versus inequality didn't come up until the 1700s. In the Middle Ages, people just assumed that rank and inequity had always existed. This book helps explain why they were largely correct.

A recent appraisal of medieval literature by two Italian scholars found no evidence that the Latin terms *aequalitas* or *inaequalitas*, or any English, French, Spanish, German, or Italian cognate was used in describing social relations until

the time of Columbus.¹ In other words, while social equality and inequality are relatively recent concepts, at least in the West, *Peckerheads* intends to take us back to their natural origins.

In March 1754, France's Académie des Sciences, Arts et Belles-Lettres de Dijon announced a national essay contest about the question: "What is the origin of inequality among men, and is it authorized by natural law?" One entry came from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose "Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind," marked one of the initial Western attempts at understanding social inequity.

In brief, Rousseau proposed that the development of agriculture, about 12,000 years ago, prompted agrarians to attach themselves to a piece of land. He suggested that the resulting institutionalization of private property was the primary origin of inequality between haves and have-nots.

The French academy's original question assumes that inequality *had* an origin, and thus that equality had once been the norm. That seems like folk egalitarianism, and a bit ironic for Rousseau, since in 1754 France was ruled by Louis XV, an absolute monarch, and within French culture, "nearly every aspect of human social interaction—eating, drinking, working or socializing—was marked by elaborate pecking orders and rituals of social deference."²

And what does the Academy even mean by "equality"? Equality of opportunity, equality of outcome, equality under

the law, equality of living conditions, equality of governance? Our philosophical aspiration is that we're all created equal. But we're not. Are we equal in worth? Perhaps. But not in attributes. Most of us have no prospect of winning the Nobel Prize in Physics, dancing the lead in Swan Lake, or starting at quarterback in the Super Bowl.

Plus, "The authors who submitted their essays to this competition were men who spent their lives having their needs attended to by servants. They lived off the patronage of dukes and archbishops, and rarely entered a building without knowing the order of importance of everyone inside. Rousseau was such a man: an ambitious young philosopher, who was at the time also engaged in an elaborate project of trying to sleep his way into influence at court."³



Rousseau and others notwithstanding, *Peckerheads* is also not about “toxic masculinity.” It’s about how people of all genders—currently numbering 74 and counting—feel inside themselves about their status relative to others. It’s about the actions that those feelings provoke. And how we can advance on the pecking order by elevating ourselves or by degrading the other. But mostly it’s about why we peck at each other even when it’s mutually counterproductive.

THE BEGINNING

In the beginning was the Word, and depending on who you believe the word was either God or *zilch*. We either derive from a Big Guy or a Big Bang. In either case, human beings began on a level playing field, meaning that the Academy was technically correct, in that equality—at a zero level—was once the norm. Religionists might say we’re all equal in the eyes of God, perhaps because we’re a bunch of sinners. Or less biblically, peckerheads.

In a mere 199 words, Genesis 1:26 to 1:30, God made man in His likeness, and then woman, gave them dominion over plants and animals, and commanded them to reproduce. But that’s only the trailer for the story of Adam and Eve, told in Genesis 2:4 to 3:24 and summarized below.

God created Adam and placed him in the Garden of Eden with only one restriction; that he not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If Adam did he would die. God then created Eve to be Adam’s companion. Adam and

Eve were unashamed of their nakedness until a snake convinced Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, which she shared with Adam, whereupon they felt shame and covered up with fig leaves. Adam told God that Eve had given him the fruit, and Eve told God the snake had tricked her. As punishment, God made snakes and humans enemies, made childbirth painful, and made men toil for their food. God then expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden.

The Almighty had previously commanded the two of them to reproduce, and we know it's a sin to defy God's will. Yet the Bible contains no reference to conception or birth until Genesis 4:1, well after Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden. In other words, there's no record of a single conception or birth in the Garden, even though we have to assume that Adam and Eve were following God's directive to multiply.

We're forced to conclude that Adam and Eve broke Eden's one and only rule posthaste. As soon as God made man and woman in His image, they violated His sole edict. Now imagine being the first man or woman. If God spoke directly to you and commanded you not to eat this one particular item, would you say, "I'll see what I can do"?

And what kind of father tells a child "Don't do X," then follows with, "because if you do, Y will happen"? That would be allowing for, if not insinuating, X. God forbids Adam to eat the fruit then adds, "for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Why mention the day that you eat of it?

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The Lord might as well specify next Tuesday and ask Adam to mark it in his planner.

When God confronts Adam he blames Eve. Eve blames the snake. God had warned Adam he would die if he ate the apple, but as if that weren't punishment enough, He serves up more. He makes enemies of humans and snakes, then saddles women with painful childbirth and men with toiling to eat. Adam is kicked out of Eden and will work for food. He's the ancestral homeless person.



OR BANG ...



That dot—that's home—that's us. That's where everyone we love, everyone we ever heard of, lived out their lives. Every hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, superstar and supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species. On a speck of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of

this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

Our posturings and imagined self-importance, and the delusion that each of us has some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by that miniscule point of light.⁴

All of the above comes from astronomer Carl Sagan, who seemingly might have added, “Peckerheads!”

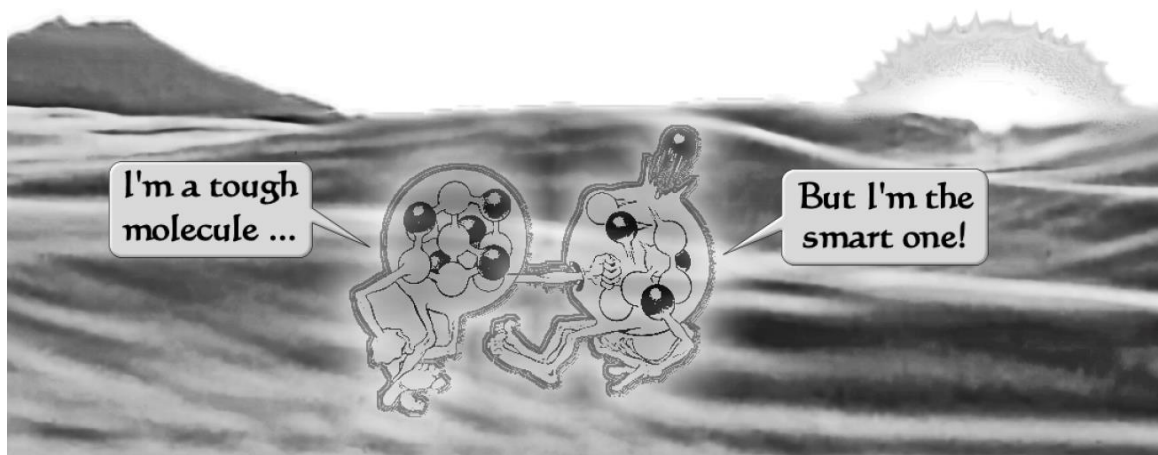
ORIGIN OF LIFE

The Big Bang resulted in cosmic clouds of hydrogen atoms, along with some helium and traces of the next two or three lightest elements. Gravity—the attraction among molecular entities—coalesced the clouds into celestial bodies, including neutron stars, the densest objects known (if you don’t count politicians), which can quickly explode into a supernova.

It’s virtually certain that within those few explosive seconds, supernovae fused and blasted into space all of the known elements, which then loitered around the universe until gravity re-congealed them, sometimes into planets, from which may arise inhabitants. Although our behavior belies it, we are indeed made of stardust.

Life began when inorganic atmospheric molecules, sparked by lightning and sunlight, joggled into organic ones. The newly minted organic molecules, along with the usual lineup of inorganic suspects, floated around Earth’s seas in a primordial soup.

By happenstance, a remarkable molecule formed that was able to make copies of itself, a “replicator.” As the initial replicator cast off clones, some had minor atomic variances, and the soup became populated by variants of the replicator, all of whom had “descended” from the original. Some had survival advantages, perhaps by lasting longer, replicating more rapidly, or replicating more accurately. The inadvertent competition called natural selection had begun.



Molecules, of course, are neither tough nor smart. They're byproducts of the Big Bang. Take viruses (please!). Ebola might seem tough because it quickly extinguishes its host. Great business plan: kill the customer. The common cold, on the other hand, circulates continuously because it allows us to party on, slow dance, and smooch. As for Covid, natural selection will likely dictate that over the long run its variants will become more contagious but less debilitating. That's a smarter business plan: acquire more customers and allow them to spread the word.

LAW OF THE JUNGLE

Viruses have no nervous system, no brain, nothing we would typically call consciousness. But they do adapt and evolve, which makes them all the more dangerous and all the less lovable.

Lacking consciousness or intent, their survival becomes a simple numbers game. Make more copies and pass them around. There's no pecking order, in part because viruses lack beaks, but mainly because they lack minds and feelings.

What does it mean when people say "life is a jungle"? Biologist Richard Dawkins tell us that some of the original replicator strains, "may even have 'discovered' how to break up molecules of rival varieties, and to use the building blocks so-released for making copies of their own. These proto-carnivores simultaneously obtained food while removing competing rivals."⁵

"Obtain Food and Remove Competing Rivals" might be the bumper sticker for the law of the jungle. Although we should probably add, "Find Mates."

The phrase was introduced in Rudyard Kipling's 1894 work *The Jungle Book*, where it described the behavior of wolves in a pack. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, the law of the jungle is, "a code of survival in jungle life, now usually with reference to the superiority of brute force or self-interest in the struggle for survival."

That sounds like the opposite of rule of law. (Though historically, a middle phase has been the rule of men.)

No animals were harmed
in the writing of this book.
Hopefully no people will
be harmed in reading it.

I can't wait till
people evolve ...

Why? So we
can eat them?

No. So that they can
invent canned food.



As the replicators evolved, they developed protective chemical coats, similar perhaps to a primitive cell wall. The most successful replicators in the battle for survival now go by the name “genes,” and each of us—body and mind—is a DNA-built self-defense machine for spreading them around. That’s the undermost reason we peck at each other, and sex each other. Concurrently if you’re into that sort of thing.

DINOSAURS

Dinosaurs dominated Earth from around 200 million years ago until their demise approximately 65 million years ago. The only survivors were avian dinosaurs, the ancestors of birds.

Dinosaurs tended to be tough but not too smart. Big bodies with small brains. Not all were brutes, but the most famous ones (thanks to Steven Spielberg and others), were dangerous bullies.

People are saying, well actually there are no people yet, which makes it even more amazing that they talk about me -- a bully with a small brain and small hands.

Hey -- I own Steven Spielberg. Also the libs and the Slovenian bride concession.

So don't be a "DINO" (Dinosaur In Name Only) -- or smart -- because I love poorly educated creatures. And they love me.



Now as then, bullies constitute a major segment of the peckerhead population. (Where's an asteroid when we need one?)

MAMMALS

Small mammals have been around for nearly 200 million years, but didn't become dominant until the too-large-to-survive dinosaurs went, well, the way of the dinosaurs. In 2001, a Chinese fossil was identified as the remains of a tiny, furry animal that was a relative of mammals today, but lived 195 million years ago in the Early Jurassic period.

Early true mammals ranged in size from scarcely bigger than a bumblebee to squirrel-sized, which is how some of them kept away from predatory dinosaurs and dodged an asteroidal demise. After dinosaurs became extinct, the number and diversity of mammals exploded.

But mammals didn't simply step into ecological roles vacated by the dinosaurs. It took several million years for the mammals to evolve larger bodies and bigger brains, thanks in part to a changing environment that included fruits and berries, as well as some new kinds of forests.

Recent research reveals that the relative brain size of mammals at first *decreased* because their body size increased at a much faster rate. The studies suggest that it was initially more important to be big than highly intelligent in order to survive in the post-dinosaur era. It was around 10 million years later that mammals began to develop larger brains. The perennial battle between might versus bright makes right.

About 50 million years after novel forests and brain development favored our tree-dwelling ancestors, upright-walking hominids appeared. We, the peckerheads.

¹ Graeber, David (2021-11-08T22:58:59.000). The Dawn of Everything . Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition.

² Graeber, David (2021-11-08T22:58:59.000). The Dawn of Everything . Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition.

³ Graeber, David (2021-11-08T22:58:59.000). The Dawn of Everything . Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan. Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space. 1994.

⁵ The Selfish Gene. Richard Dawkins. 1976. Kindle Edition.