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The Handicap Principle

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In the 1970s, biologist Amotz Zahavi developed a theory to explain some of the most perplexing behavior and physical displays in the animal world. He called it the “handicap principle”.

Loosely defined, the handicap principle says that animals will deliberately waste resources in an ostentatious way as a signal to others of their overall fitness. They will accept a theatrical “handicap” if it furthers their evolutionary aims.

The simplest example is the ridiculous plumage of the peacock. You see them strutting around the farm or zoo displaying a huge fan of feathers. The display offers no direct survival advantage. In fact, it is a significant burden, since carrying it around makes the bird more vulnerable to predators. Why, then, did it evolve this way?

Obviously, the display is a turn-on to the female peafowl, who has evolved a corresponding preference for big feathers. To put it in our terms, she figures, “Wow, if he’s got this fancy, expensive car, he must really be strong and powerful!” Like females everywhere, she tends to fall for the display and overlook underlying fitness. Only *after* she marries him does she find out he’s just a jerk with big feathers.

Males are by no means immune to such deception. Take human female breasts, which are unique in nature. They are far larger than they need to be to give milk and positively humongous compared to other mammals. For pure survival, they are significant handicap, flopping around and getting in the way as they do. They exist mainly as a signal to the male of overall fitness.

And the male falls for it! In his animal brain, he thinks, “Wow, if she’s got knockers like that, she must be really fertile!” It’s a somewhat honest signal because breasts consist of fat and to produce them you have to have energy to spare. But in another sense, it’s just advertizing, which is vulnerable to all kinds of manipulation and deception.

Is breast size related to ones actual suitability as a mate? Most of us would say no—intellectually at least—yet males and females still play the game: women dressing up their breasts for display and men going gaga over them as though they meant something.

Zahavi would understand.

Once you grasp the handicap principle, you see it everywhere, especially in the social world. When most people gain extra resources, what’s the first thing they do? They usually put those resources on display with some kind of pompous purchase that serves no purpose other than crowing to the world, “I have extra resources.”

The flashy car, the high fashion, the palatial home—all of these supposed “luxury” items are actually a burden to use. For example, no luxury car is as reliable or easy to maintain as an economy model. The only reason for owning such absurdities is displaying them, to try to prove to others your underlying quality.

But there is also real quality, which is separate from any signal. As a species, it may be our destiny to put on empty displays, but as individuals, we need to recognize these displays as fundamentally phony and distracting.

Animals use signals because they save energy. If you’re a buck deer and you see that some other guy’s antlers are

bigger than yours, you’re not going to mess with him because it’s a good bet he’s more powerful. Likewise, if you’re driving down the highway late at night and need a place to sleep, you might just stop at the motel with the biggest and prettiest sign. You guess that with all they have invested in the sign, it’s probably not a fleabag.

These open signals can tell you something, but they aren’t very subtle and they’re not usually telling you the whole story. As soon as you have the means, you should be probing below the surface, trying to differentiate actual quality from advertized quality.

Actual quality is what really works over time. The best way to judge it, if you can afford to do so, is some sort of operational testing. The best way to choose a mate is not breast size or car size but to actually interact with the product for a while, under conditions closely resembling its intended long-term use.

Our society is based largely on signals—on advertizing, hyperbole and pompous displays that have little to do with underlying quality. That’s just how society works.

But that doesn’t have to be the way that *you* work. The only lasting satisfaction in life comes from quality—both detecting it in others and producing it yourself. The strutting peacocks producing fancy signals will always get more notice, but they rarely *feel* successful. They’re fakers and deep down they know it.

In the long run, it’s better to be real.

—G.C.

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