

# HUMANITY – EARTH’S APEX PREDATOR

*A Reflection*

**By  
Jay B. Gaskill**

We survive and thrive because we humans are the apex predators on planet earth.



**A former apex predator at work**

Our secret weapon as apex predators is our dramatically enhanced capacity for social cooperation, in a word – for civilization. Our single most important technology is the social organization made possible by language, literacy and a common moral order.

The current postmodern ethos is a muddle of incoherent ideas where confused notions of cultural and moral relativism cohabit with vague notions about “rights”.

A return to the common sources and ultimate authority of fundamental human moral wisdom is central to any recovery from this cultural dead end. The alternative is a descent into a form of cannibalism.

Let me open the discussion by posing a question:

***Why are there reasonably consistent rules that apply within a working cohort of thieves?***

The short answer is that the so-called “thieves’ honor” rules were acquired and perpetuated during the hunter-predator era of the human story.

Gangs of thieves are really hunting teams; they are predator cohorts that cooperate in a common endeavor – to acquire resources by a combination of force and stealth. For success, a certain basic trust must be established, and a division of spoils agreed to. While modern thieves tend (in my professional experience) to screw up, this happens because they tend to violate their own agreed norms. But the utility and validity of the rules they

---

apply to themselves are real, and surprisingly instructive for the rest of us. Five rules are necessary for the success of any criminal enterprise:

**1. *Veracity***

Without some minimum truth fidelity and avoidance of significant deception, the baseline cooperation for any criminal enterprise quickly disintegrates. There is a kind of Darwinian selection in operation here. The criminal cohorts that fail to follow the rules are the first ones caught.

**2. *No theft from fellow thieves***

**3. *No serious assault on fellow thieves***

**4. *Promise fidelity among fellow thieves***

**5. *Obedience to leadership***

These “thieves’ honor” precepts are often observed in the breach, but that begs the point: These five norms are at the core of *all moral systems that are necessary to support civilization*.

Think about it: The rules needed for the close cooperation of a criminal cohort or a Paleolithic predator-hunter team are the same rules necessary for the accomplishment of any similar, survival-related task among otherwise independent, intelligent actors.

The rules that are the foundation of civilization’s necessary moral infrastructure are the “thieves honor” set writ large. The evolution was from hunting team to clan, to village, to tribe, to country, and so on. Within a given cohort, these essential norms apply equally to all members, but are subject to an agreed or imposed leadership principle. In primitive cohorts, this is the alpha-predator / follower model. There are other more sophisticated models as well, especially for larger, community-based cohorts.

**Any working civilization represents, at a minimum, the extension of these hunter-cooperation norms to the entire civilization’s scope of authority; and therefore represents at least a partial universalization of the predator-cooperation rules. This creates an expectation of equality of rule application within specific cohorts, one that has gradually been universalized to apply to humanity at large.**

## **PREDATOR WISDOM**

We humans are now the planet’s dominant predators. However we now choose to order our individual lives, whether by eating sprouts and beans, or shrink wrapped mammal parts, our species-as-civilization exists in a predator-prey relationship with the rest of the ecosphere.

We need not feel guilty. Our predator heritage is the inevitable end result of the successful emergence of intelligent life on any planet. The question is not whether we will continue to be predators, but whether we will be responsible ones.

Aboriginal peoples, like the North American and Greenland Inuit, preserve a tradition of prey-reverence, a deep respect, both spiritual and practical, for the animals we humans kill to feed ourselves.

**The predator-prey relationship eventually carries the obligation to conserve, i.e., the conservation ethos is concomitant with long-term predator status. The protection and preservation of prey in all its forms “goes with the territory”.**

Pre-intelligent predators tend to overgraze. Early humans acted like other pre-intelligent predators. But we were provided with the gift of intelligence for a number of reasons (e.g., in order to self-organize into civilization), but one of them was to develop the capacity to solve the overgrazing problem.

### **PRINCIPLED REASONABLENESS**

Several group norms form the “normative architecture” of civilization. They can be restated as an integrated set of moral injunctions. Biblical scholars find them among the Ten Commandments. Think of “Do not murder, assault, steal, or lie” as applications of a larger body of core principles and norms that are designed to ensure the reciprocal respect for human dignity. The resulting general rule can be stated in one sentence:

***“Respect the volitional autonomy of others within the context of a rule set that restrains others from impairing your own.”***

Without the recognition, allegiance to, and enforcement of core moral (or *normative*) principles that are accepted as impersonally valid, that is as “objective,” any human organizational system will decay into a corrupt form of predator-perversion - a system that consumes its own young for “the greater good.”

Human-on-human predation is a form of ***cannibalism*** – whether literal or metaphoric, because the outcome is the consumption of individual human dignity.

The worst 20<sup>th</sup> century authoritarian states were products of the same cannibal mindset, often disguised as a humanitarian project that “of necessity” treated millions of people as disposable objects. The process of such degenerate behavior begins with a single tendency: Any system of governance that is not founded on a principle-driven respect for individual human dignity inevitably degrades into a base and deadly tyranny.

In practice, a vital, morally based civilization must generate and utilize institutions that uphold the entire set of objective normative principles in a real-world framework. The

day-to-day operations of these institutions are worked out *on a case-by-case basis*. *This is the function of law and legal institutions.*

Any such principle-driven system also entails a logical hierarchy of main and subordinate moral (or ordinal) principles. And, of course, those pesky application issues will inevitably arise -- all principles tend to conflict at the margins. Their resolution is the function of adjudication by fair, honest, principled judges.

In any principle-driven regulatory environment, a policy of *reasonableness* is essential to allow necessary flexibility and adaptability. A dynamic stability that upholds the objective principles follows. But without *objective* principles that are *reasonably* applied, moral authority declines and a civilization degrades into chaos. Without principled, objective principles, all adjudication devolves to personality and politics. Then, as the poet Yeats warned us, “the centre does not hold<sup>1</sup>.”

The term “predator civilization” is redundant because all civilizations are predatory. But not all are founded in the essential moral principles. There is a minimum set:

- The respect for one’s volitional autonomy, as a reciprocal obligation of citizenship within civilization (I will respect your human dignity as you respect mine) writ large;  
The arrangement supported and optimized by bright-line rules of conduct as in-do not lie, cheat, steal, pillage, rape, assault or murder.
- Mutual respect for human dignity is the only model of moral order, and reasonable accountability is the only enforcement regime that can sustain any viable, peaceful, working civilization of predators over the long haul.

There are only two competing models: a civilization caught in decay and dissolution; or one brought down in brutal totalitarianism.

We humans are still predators and cannot escape that role. Our choices remain as follows:

1. to be a prey-conserving civilization, or to become extinct;
2. to remain free, responsible predators, or to become prey.

**JBG**

---

**Copyright © 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2015 by Jay B. Gaskill**

A license to link to this article or to publish pull quotes from it (with full attribution) is hereby granted. For all other permissions and comments, please contact the author via email at [law@jaygaskill.com](mailto:law@jaygaskill.com).



The author served as the chief Public Defender for the County of Alameda, CA, headquartered in Oakland for 10 years, following a long career as an Assistant Public Defender. Then, Mr. Gaskill left his “life of crime” to devote more time to writing.

His website, the **Policy Think Site**, is at -- [www.jaygaskill.com](http://www.jaygaskill.com).

Read more about Jay B Gaskill at -- <http://jaygaskill.com/WhoIsJayBGaskill.pdf> .

---

<sup>i</sup> William Butler Yeats, *The Second Coming*, 1919, in part - “...Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere The ceremony of innocence is drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity...”