



The Handicap Principle: A Missing Piece of Darwin's Puzzle

By Amotz Zahavi, Avishag Zahavi

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Ever since Darwin, animal behavior has intrigued and perplexed human observers. The elaborate mating rituals, lavish decorative displays, complex songs, calls, dances and many other forms of animal signaling raise fascinating questions. To what degree can animals communicate within their own species and even between species? What evolutionary purpose do such communications serve? Perhaps most importantly, what can animal signaling tell us about our own non-verbal forms of communication? In *The Handicap Principle*, Amotz and Ashivag Zahavi offer a unifying theory that brilliantly explains many previously baffling aspects of animal signaling and holds up a mirror in which ordinary human behaviors take on surprising new significance.

The wide-ranging implications of the Zahavis' new theory make it arguably the most important advance in animal behavior in decades. Based on 20 years of painstaking observation, the Handicap Principle illuminates an astonishing variety of signaling behaviors in animals ranging from ants and ameba to peacocks and gazelles. Essentially, the theory asserts that for animal signals to be effective they must be reliable, and to be reliable they must impose a cost, or handicap, on the signaler. When a gazelle sights a wolf, for instance, and jumps high into the air several times before fleeing, it is signaling, in a reliable way, that it is in tip-top condition, easily able to outrun the wolf. (A human parallel occurs in children's games of tag, where faster children will often taunt their pursuer before running). By momentarily handicapping itself--expending precious time and energy in this display--the gazelle underscores the truthfulness of its signal. Such signaling, the authors suggest, serves the interests of both predator and prey, sparing each the exhaustion of a pointless chase. Similarly, the enormous cost a peacock incurs by carrying its elaborate and weighty tail-feathers, which interfere with food gathering, reliably communicates its value as a mate able to provide for its offspring. Perhaps the book's most important application of the Handicap Principle is to the evolutionary enigma of animal altruism. The authors convincingly demonstrate that when an animal acts altruistically, it handicaps itself--assumes a risk or endures a sacrifice--not primarily to benefit its kin or social group but to increase its own prestige within the group and thus signal its status as a partner or rival. Finally, the Zahavis' show how many forms of non-verbal communication among humans can also be explained by the Handicap

Principle. Indeed, the authors suggest that non-verbal signals--tones of voice, facial expressions, body postures--are quite often more reliable indicators of our intentions than is language.

Elegantly written, exhaustively researched, and consistently enlivened by equal measures of insight and example, *The Handicap Principle* illuminates virtually every kind of animal communication. It not only allows us to hear what animals are saying to each other--and to understand why they are saying it--but also to see the enormously important role non-verbal behavior plays in human communication.

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The wide-ranging implications of the Zahavis' new theory make it arguably the most important advance in animal behavior in decades. Based on 20 years of painstaking observation, the Handicap Principle illuminates an astonishing variety of signaling behaviors in animals ranging from ants and ameba to peacocks and gazelles. Essentially, the theory asserts that for animal signals to be effective they must be reliable, and to be reliable they must impose a cost, or handicap, on the signaler. When a gazelle sights a wolf, for instance, and jumps high into the air several times before fleeing, it is signaling, in a reliable way, that it is in tip-top condition, easily able to outrun the wolf. (A human parallel occurs in children's games of tag, where faster children will often taunt their pursuer before running). By momentarily handicapping itself--expending precious time and energy in this display--the gazelle underscores the truthfulness of its signal. Such signaling, the authors suggest, serves the interests of both predator and prey, sparing each the exhaustion of a pointless chase. Similarly, the enormous cost a peacock incurs by carrying its elaborate and weighty tail-feathers, which interfere with food gathering, reliably communicates its value as a mate able to provide for its offspring. Perhaps the book's most important application of the Handicap Principle is to the evolutionary enigma of animal altruism. The authors convincingly demonstrate that when an animal acts altruistically, it handicaps itself--assumes a risk or endures a sacrifice--not primarily to benefit its kin or social group but to increase its own prestige within the group and thus signal its status as a partner or rival. Finally, the Zahavis' show how many forms of non-verbal communication among humans can also be explained by the Handicap Principle. Indeed, the authors suggest that non-verbal signals--tones of voice, facial expressions, body postures--are quite often more reliable indicators of our intentions than is language. Elegantly written, exhaustively researched, and consistently enlivened by equal measures of insight and example, *The Handicap Principle* illuminates virtually every kind of animal communication. It not only allows us to hear what animals are saying to each other--and to understand why they are saying it--but also to see the enormously important role non-verbal behavior plays in human communication.

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Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Since the time of Darwin, altruism and other forms of cooperation have puzzled evolutionary biologists. Several theories have been proposed to explain these behaviors, but each has weaknesses in the framework of traditional natural selection. The Zahavis, working with babblers (group-living birds), developed the handicap principle and signal selection to explain these apparent paradoxes. (Their theory proposes that when an animal behaves altruistically, it does so to increase its status within its group as a partner or rival.) This book presents their evidence, elaborated in many technical papers since the 1970s, to explain such behaviors in babblers and such diverse organisms as slime molds, social insects, peafowl, and human children playing tag. The handicap principle is an important new theory that explains many seemingly diverse problems in evolutionary biology. This book is highly readable yet rigorous enough for specialists. Essential for any academic collection and worthwhile for general collections. --Bruce D. Neville, Univ. of New Mexico Lib., Albuquerque

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Review

"Among the most revolutionary and controversial concepts in modern behavioral biology is the handicap principle developed by Zahavi. After initially encountering resistance, it has been receiving increased acceptance for its success in explaining an enormous variety of animal behaviors and anatomical structures, from gazelles' seemingly suicidal displays to men's beards. Read this fine book, and discover what the excitement is all about!" --Jared M. Diamond, Professor of Physiology, University of California at Los Angeles

Language Notes

Text: English (translation)

Original Language: Hebrew

Users Review

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Ella Cook:

Do you one of people who can't read enjoyable if the sentence chained inside the straightway, hold on guys this kind of aren't like that. This The Handicap Principle: A Missing Piece of Darwin's Puzzle book is readable by you who hate the straight word style. You will find the information here are arrange for enjoyable studying experience without leaving also decrease the knowledge that want to deliver to you. The writer regarding The Handicap Principle: A Missing Piece of Darwin's Puzzle content conveys thinking easily to understand by many individuals. The printed and e-book are not different in the information but it just different as it. So , do you even now thinking The Handicap Principle: A Missing Piece of Darwin's Puzzle is not loveable to be your top collection reading book?

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Mary Clement:

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