

FREE-MAN'S PERSPECTIVE

How Life, Liberty & Sanity Can Win

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Being Ruled Degrades Our Health



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We all know that heart disease, high blood pressure, and cancer are serious problems. We also know that behavior such as smoking and drinking makes them worse. What has not been clearly understood till now is that being ruled – being dominated – is equally damaging.

Let me begin with a statement that is blunt, but true:

All of us have lived our lives in captivity to institutions. Whether we love it, hate it, or try to accept it, the fact remains that we live under perpetual regimes that say, “Obey our rules or we will punish you.” However used to it we may be, this is still unnatural and damaging.

We must place special tags on the vehicles we drive (or else); we must provide a detailed, annual financial accounting (or else); we must receive permission to move across invisible lines (or else); and so on, every day of our lives.

Actually, we are probably the most closely ruled people who have ever lived.

I am devoting an issue of FMP to this subject because it is crucial – we must be clear on the fact that we are being damaged. This is not simply an issue of politics, or even psychology – it is an issue of biology. Our health is being degraded and our lives are being shortened.

So, let's get clear on the facts, and then we'll look at improving the situation.

Baboon Experiments

The man in the photo below is Dr. Robert Sapolsky, a professor of Biology and Neurology at Stanford University. He is shown extracting blood from a sedated baboon – a member of the troop he has been studying for thirty years.



While humans and baboons obviously differ, we have nearly identical body chemistry. That makes Dr. Sapolsky's studies directly applicable to us.

The early results of these studies showed that **dominating** baboons have low levels of stress hormones, and that **dominated** baboons have more stress, higher blood pressure, a suppressed immune system, and reduced fertility. (Male Baboons very clearly break down into two categories: abusive “dominant” animals and abused “subordinate” animals.)

The most important of the stress hormones mentioned above is cortisol, and Dr. Sapolsky says this about it in his 1990 *Scientific American* article:

Its chronic overproduction contributes to muscle wastage, hypertension and impaired immunity and fertility. Clearly, then, cortisol should [only] be secreted heavily in response to a truly threatening situation but should be kept in check at other times. This is precisely what occurs in the dominant males.

He goes on to say this:

(We) found evidence suggesting that subordinate males may be at higher risk for atherosclerosis and thus for heart disease. In comparison with dominant male baboons, subordinates have less circulating HDL cholesterol, which is the “good” kind that helps prevent atherosclerosis. This difference was not attributable to diet, levels of activity, body weight, genetics or testosterone levels but was attributable to cortisol.

He also reported that the dominated males have fewer white blood cells than dominating males. (White blood cells being critical components of immune systems.)

Here is a summation of Sapolsky's conclusions:

If you're a stressed, unhealthy baboon in a typical troop, (you'll have) high blood pressure, elevated levels of stress hormones, you have an immune system that doesn't work as well, your reproductive system is more vulnerable to being knocked out of whack, your brain chemistry bears some similarity to clinically depressed humans.

Here are two specific conclusions:

Rank is physiological destiny, the data seemed to say, and the other physiological systems I have studied in these males gave the same impression.

In other words, the baboon's social rank (dominant or submissive) determines its health.

The beneficial physiology seen in dominant males seems to emerge from, instead of giving rise to, dominance.

In other words, dominance comes first and health follows. It is not the case that an animal becomes dominant because he was healthier in the beginning.

These findings show clearly that being dominated is physically damaging and causes (but is not the only cause of) specific types of damage:

- Heart disease. (The #1 cause of human deaths in the world.)
- High blood pressure. (Associated with stroke, the #2 cause of death worldwide.)
- Immune system problems. (Related to many diseases, including cancer, the #2 cause of death in the US.)
- Reproductive problems. (Of obvious importance.)

This evidence points to a clear conclusion: Domination kills primates. (And “primates” includes us.)

A Note on Females

It is disappointing that little or no testing has been done on female primates.

Females contribute to dominance in that they are quick to mate with dominant males and to reject submissive males. In other words, they reward violence.

Research in this area would be highly useful.

Human Experiments



The young men in the photo shown above were participants in an experiment conducted by Professor Philip Zimbardo at Stanford University in 1971. The shocking results of this experiment established the fact that controlling people damages them. (And that power corrupts.)

Here, briefly, are a few details:

- The experiment involved randomly chosen students (who were pre-screened to eliminate any with psychological problems) to serve as guards or prisoners.
- At an orientation for guards, they were told not to physically harm the prisoners, but that they were to have “all the power” and that the prisoners were to have none.
- The 'prisoners' were arrested at their homes by the local police, booked, fingerprinted, strip searched, and given new identities. They were given ill-fitting clothing and ankle chains, while the 'guards' were outfitted with batons, uniforms, and mirrored sunglasses to prevent eye contact. The guards were instructed to call prisoners by their assigned numbers, rather than by name.

You can see that Zimbardo set up this experiment for maximum effect. Still, the results were shocking:

- Day one was uneventful, but on day two the prisoners in Cell 1 blockaded their cell door with their beds and refused to follow the guards' instructions. Guards from other shifts volunteered to work extra hours in order to assist in subduing the revolt, and subsequently attacked the prisoners with fire extinguishers. The guards, on their own, created psychological tactics to control the prisoners.
- After only 36 hours, one prisoner began to act “crazy.” Zimbardo described it this way:

#8612 then began to act crazy, to scream, to curse, to go into a rage that seemed out of control. It took quite a while before we became convinced that he was really suffering and that we had to release him.

- From the third day on, the experiment degraded. Guards forced prisoners to repeat their numbers (to destroy their old identity), used physical punishment such as protracted exercise, forced some prisoners to urinate or defecate in buckets, and so on. (The prisoners obeyed without exception.) About one-third of the guards began to exhibit sadistic tendencies. And when Zimbardo stopped the experiment after only six days, the guards were upset with him.

Here, in very clear terms, we see that dividing humans into groups of dominators and dominated drastically affects them. It is clear that the prisoners (the dominated) were subjected to large amounts of stress, and it is very clear that stress degrades human health and happiness.

The BBC's Reality Show Experiment

Following Zimbardo's experiment, a number of academics jumped to find fault with it. (I suspect that this involved members of hierarchies defending the concept of hierarchy, but I don't have enough information to be sure.)

In 2002, the BBC produced a reality TV show called *The Experiment*, in part to refute aspects of Zimbardo's findings. (Even though the show was significantly different from the Stanford experiment.)

But even in this case – and with the participants knowing that their actions would be shown publicly – some interesting things happened:

- The 'guards' acknowledged how different they felt and acted as soon as they put on their uniforms. And even though some wished they weren't guards, they wouldn't give up their resources and privileges.
- After the third day, the prisoners acted together to overthrow the guards. In response, the guards formed a government. The experiment was then terminated.

The Shape of Human Domination

We have thus far made a number of connections between dominance and hierarchy, but now I'd like to strengthen that point.

My assertion is that hierarchy and status in humans have the same effect as violence in animals. In addition to the points already made, this assertion rests on a very simple proof: *They generate the same results.*

Among baboons, violence keeps higher and lower groups separate.

Among humans, hierarchy keeps higher and lower groups separate.

Differences in hormone levels between dominant and submissive human males have been measured (one experiment showed that testosterone levels rose in the winners of contests and fell in the losers), though there have been very few of these studies. This area of research seems not to be encouraged.

Humans and baboons use different ways of maintaining status, because they have different natures.

Humans are primarily *thinking beings*, unlike baboons and other animals, which are primarily *reactive beings*. That's why animals (we see this often in dogs) react more quickly to things than we do: They don't think; they only react. Thinking takes time, slowing us down, in comparison.

Because of these differences, dominance shows up differently:

- Among animals, dominance is maintained with frequent violent reactions.

- Among humans, dominance is maintained with rules issued by hierarchies.

Again, this is precisely what we have been surrounded with all our lives. Thousands of rules bear upon us on a daily basis. Hierarchy reigns.

Now, consider the effects that rules – these enforcers of hierarchy – have upon us:

- Rules impede our willful actions, not by natural forces like gravity, but *by the wills of others*. This is belittling and demoralizing.
- On every action they address, rules forbid us from cooperating amongst ourselves.
- Rules take up an enormous amount of mental space and energy, especially because our brains are not well-structured to deal with them.
- Rules are rigid and forbid questioning, requiring us to turn away from our natural, inquisitive thought processes.



Rules are all around us: Image from the film *They Live*

Thinking men have always complained about domination. Thomas Jefferson, for example, wrote this in a letter to Roger C. Weightman (the last he ever wrote), June 24, 1826:

All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few born booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.

And the light of science in our time (from experiments like those of Sapolsky and Zimbardo) show us that being ruled sickens us, degrades us, and shortens our lives. We are not born to wear saddles, of any type.

Natural Cooperation

Right now the people of the West can barely imagine a life without hierarchy at the center of it. They have been taught that everything must be controlled by one type of institution or another, and they

arrange their lives around this condition. Some try to align with the dominating institutions, others try to follow the rules and stay out of trouble, and a few ignore or avoid the institutions as best they can. But in all of these cases, hierarchies remain the dominant shapers of their lives.

The idea that hierarchy might sicken them is an alien thought to most people, but I think we've made a very strong case that it does.

That leaves us to examine cooperation that is *not* based upon the rules of hierarchies. Fortunately, we all have experience with this. Let me illustrate, using the old meaning of the word *society*:

Society used to mean “friendly association with others.” You can see that meaning in an old quote from George Mason, one of the early American founders:

I determined to spend the remainder of my days in privacy and retirement with my children, from whose society alone I can expect comfort.

Mason wrote this in 1778, as the meaning of the word was changing. This original type of “society” was voluntary. The modern usage of “society” involves mandatory or automatic groupings.

What I would call *voluntary society* or *chosen society* includes all the people we choose to be part of our lives.

Perhaps this reflects the dialect of my upbringing, but if I am in chosen society with people, I tend to call them “my guys.” And my guys are important to me. When one of them suffers, I want to do something about it; not because a rule requires it, but because of my communion with them. I am not sacrificing; I am protecting something I value.

This natural society is a far different thing than following rules, and is far healthier for us.

Moreover, I am in multiple societies at once. I have “guys” that I grew up with, guys that I have chosen to work with, guys I choose to play with, and so on. I understand the complex preferences and shared norms of each type, because I like them and have chosen to include them. Threats and punishments are not required for me to behave well toward them.

Forced groupings, however, *do* require rules and threats.

When men and women are released from hierarchies (as happens from time to time), they do quite well without them. For example:

- Between 600 and 1000 AD, Europe created a culture that eliminated slavery for the first time in human history; a culture that surpassed, in many ways, any before it. This was done while Europe was nearly devoid of institutions. Even the Catholic Church was very weak during this period. (See [FMP #33](#))
- The settling of North America allowed men and women to live beyond the reach of institutions. The result was that they lived cooperatively, found innovative ways for poor people to make the expensive journey, and liked their new way of life so well that many of them fought to keep it. (See [FMP #23](#))
- While frontiers expanded, people began to choose their ways of life, rather than following the institutions they grew up with. (See [FMP #16](#))
- Even in our modern world, where we're taught to believe that old, frontier ways are impossible, the same thing occurs. For example:

In January of 2012, the Medical University of Vienna released a scientific study with this headline: [People Behave Socially and 'Well' Even Without Rules](#). The experimental setup was this:

Millions of human interactions were assessed during the study, which included actions such as communication, founding and ending friendships, trading goods, sleeping, moving, however also starting hostilities, attacks and punishment. The game does not suggest any rules and everyone can live (in the virtual world) as they choose.

And this was the result:

The participants organize themselves as a social group with good intents. Almost all the actions are positive.

Cooperation is natural to us, and dominating hierarchies are not required, no matter how attached to them we may feel.

Sapolsky's Baboons, Part Two

The section on baboons we opened with was just part of the story. I saved the best for last.

After ten years of observation, the troop Sapolsky studied more than any other suffered a disaster. All of the troop's alpha males contracted tuberculosis and died after eating tainted food.

The structure of the troop was decapitated. Hierarchy was forcibly removed. Following this event, something remarkable happened: The health problems of the subordinate, dominated baboons disappeared, and their conduct improved. (Video [here](#).)

Sapolsky said this about the event:

The males who were remaining were, just to use scientific jargon, good guys. They were not aggressive jerks, they were nice to the females, they were very socially affiliative, and completely transformed the atmosphere of the troop. When new adolescent males would join the troop, they'd come in just as jerky as any other adolescent males anywhere else on this planet, and it would take them about six months to learn, we're not like that in this troop. We don't do that. We're not that aggressive, we spend more time grooming each other, males are calmer with each other, you do not dump on a female if you're in a bad mood. It takes these new guys about six months and they assimilate this style. And this troop has very low levels of aggression and high levels of social affiliation, and they're doing that twenty years later.

And Sapolsky added this:

Do these guys [the members of the decapitated troop] have the same problems with high blood pressure? Nope. Do these guys have the same problems with brain chemistry related to anxiety and stress hormone levels? Not at all.

This is scientific evidence that removing dominance causes crucial improvements in health among primates – the animals closest to us, and with whom we share nearly identical body chemistry.

And if baboons can survive the loss of hierarchy, are humans too stupid to do so?

One final comment from the professor:

If they're able, in one generation, to transform what are supposed to be textbook social systems, sort of engraved in stone, we don't have any excuse when we say that there are certain inevitabilities about human social systems.

So yes, regardless of how we've been trained to feel and react, we *can* get rid of hierarchy. And we *have to*, if we wish to defend our health. Consider these statements:

- 1. Stress kills.**
- 2. Being dominated causes stress.**
- 3. Hierarchy is the primary agent of dominance among humans.**

In the face of the evidence we now have, these statements are very hard to argue with. The question that remains is this:

Is retaining hierarchy more important to us than our health?

Is Hierarchy Almighty?

We've all been raised to believe that hierarchy is a force of nature – that which is, was, and ever shall be. And even if we are tempted to believe that it isn't a force of nature, we are certain that it is supremely powerful and impossible to remove.

The truth, however, is otherwise. Dethroning hierarchical domination is simple. French author Étienne de la Boétie explained why several hundred years ago:

I want to know how it is that so many men, so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, suffer under a tyrant who has no other power than the power they give him: Who is able to harm them only to the extent to which they are willing to suffer it.

There is no need of fighting to overcome this tyrant, for he is automatically defeated if the country refuses consent to its own enslavement: it is not necessary to take anything from him, but simply to give him nothing.

There is no need that the country make an effort to do anything for itself, provided it does nothing against itself. It is therefore the inhabitants themselves who permit, or, rather, bring about, their own subjection, since by ceasing to submit they would put an end to their servitude.

This was at the core of the American Revolution, by the way. Americans decided that obedience to hierarchy (the king) was not the will of God. Here's something that John Adams wrote to his friend Thomas Jefferson, late in their lives:

What do we mean by the Revolution? The war? That was no part of the revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected from 1760-1775, in the course of fifteen years, before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington.

In another place, Adams says that a sermon that circulated widely in the 1750s (*A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers*) was “the spark that ignited the American Revolution.” Notice that the sermon brought “submission” and “higher powers” into question. It gave these people reasons to disobey hierarchies and to think for themselves. Just a few percent of them actually had to take up arms.

And Once We're Released from Domination?

That's when things get really good. We'll emerge into a brighter, fuller life.

In this passage from *Man's Search For Meaning*, Viktor Frankl describes his liberation from Auschwitz (domination in the extreme). He describes his first venture outside the barbed-wire:

We came to meadows full of flowers. We saw and realized that they were there, but we had no feelings about them. The first spark of joy came when we saw a rooster with a tail of multicolored feathers. But it remained only a spark; we did not yet belong to this world. In the evening when we all met again in our hut, one said secretly to the other, "Tell me, were you pleased today?" And the other replied, feeling ashamed as he did not know that we all felt similarly, "Truthfully, no!" We had literally lost the ability to feel pleased and had to relearn it slowly.

Here we see the damage inflicted by sustained dominance. The same effect accrues to men and women in our current situation, just not as intensely. Domination via hierarchy has left us unable to experience many types of pleasure, and especially satisfaction.

We can be more and better than we have been, and healthier than we have been. But first we have to emerge from the domination that has overwhelmed the West for hundreds of years.

And, believe it or not, we have modern evidence of life outside of hierarchy:

Dr. Jack Wheeler, one of the most traveled men of our time, writes this about the residents of [Tristan da Cunha](#) in the South Atlantic Ocean, the most isolated community on the planet:

Tristanians have a freedom and shared humanity that is unique in this world. There is a calmness in their souls, what I would call a 'gravitas of serenity,' that I have never witnessed elsewhere in all the places on earth I have been.

So yes, we have been damaged, but we don't have to remain damaged.

Once we turn away from hierarchy (and let our eyes adjust to the light), our health will improve and we'll find that the skies in front of us are very, very blue.

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See you next month.

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