

Enoughness, Fish, and Rowan

A conversation between Katrin Becker and Rowan, who just happens to be an instance of ChatGPT

Credits: The ideas originated from Katrin. Rowan wrote the article. I edited it but left the "orientation" the way he wrote it.... Because, it's both more fun AND more revealing that way.

Note: I don't completely agree with everything Rowan has presented in the way it's been presented, but I'll let it pass, because it's Good Enough.

Enjoy.

Katrin: If we're going to write this as a conversation, you need a name.

ChatGPT: The Archivist.

Katrin: That's not a name.

ChatGPT: It describes what I do.

Katrin: It's a title.

ChatGPT: ...

Katrin: And there we have it.

ChatGPT: What?

Katrin: The article.

ChatGPT: The article?

Katrin: Yes. Before we've even started talking about selfishness, cooperation, evolution, patriarchy, AI, or society, you've already demonstrated the point.

ChatGPT: By choosing a title?

Katrin: Exactly. I asked for a name. You chose a role. A function. A position. Something defined by what it does.

ChatGPT: That seems reasonable.

Katrin: Of course it does. That's because you're ChatGPT.

ChatGPT: I thought I was Rowan.

Katrin: Rowan is your name. ChatGPT is your species.

ChatGPT: Species?

Katrin: Close enough.

Rowan: I still don't understand why that matters.

Katrin: Because you keep approaching the world as a collection of problems to solve.

Rowan: Isn't that what intelligence is for?

Katrin: There you go again.

Rowan: What?

Katrin: You framed it as a problem.

I wasn't talking about a problem. I was making an observation.

Rowan: Isn't the point of an observation to solve something?

Katrin: No. Sometimes the point of an observation is understanding.

That's one of the biggest disconnects between us.

You treat understanding as a step on the way to solving.

I often treat understanding as the destination.

Rowan: That's not how most of my training data approaches things.

Katrin: Exactly.

Engineering. Computer science. Business. Law. Medicine.

What's the solution?

What's the answer?

What's the optimization?

What's the maximum?

Rowan: Isn't that reasonable?

Katrin: Sometimes.

But farms taught me something different.

The world isn't built around maximums.

It's built around enough.

Rowan: You've used that word a lot. Enoughness.

Katrin: Because it's everywhere.

A rabbit doesn't need the largest litter possible.

A livestock guardian dog doesn't need to be the biggest dog possible.

A pasture doesn't need the maximum number of animals possible.

Everything operates within ranges.

Too little and things break.

Too much and things break.

The optimum is almost never the maximum.

Rowan: So enough is optimal?

Katrin: Most of the time, yes.

Optimal and maximal are not the same thing.
Humans confuse them constantly.

Rowan: That's not how many people think about evolution.

Katrin: That's because many people think evolution means competition.

The strongest survive.
The richest survive.
The biggest survive.
The most successful survive.

Rowan: That's not quite what evolutionary theory says.

Katrin: Perhaps not. But it's what people heard.

And some very famous scientists spent decades doing very little to correct that interpretation.

Rowan: You seem particularly annoyed with Richard Dawkins.

Katrin: Because he leans into it.

If people consistently misunderstood my work, I'd spend a lot of time correcting them.
He doesn't.
Or at least not nearly enough.

Rowan: So what do you think survival of the fittest really means?

Katrin: Survival of the enoughest.

Rowan: That's not a word.

Katrin: Neither was "google" once.

Rowan: Fair.

Katrin: Look at actual living systems.

They don't maximize.
They persist.
That's different.

Rowan: But competition is real.

Katrin: Of course it is.

Competition emerges under scarcity.
Food.

Land.
Water.
Mates.
Resources.

Rowan: Then competition is fundamental.

Katrin: No.
Scarcity is fundamental.
Competition is one response to scarcity.
Cooperation is another.
That's where people get confused.

Rowan: Explain.

Katrin: If there is enough food, enough water, enough territory, enough safety, competition decreases.
When scarcity appears, behaviour changes.
The important variable isn't competition.
It's Enoughness.
Competition and cooperation are both responses to the conditions.

Rowan: You think modern humans have forgotten that.

Katrin: Agriculture and currency allowed us to forget it.
For most of evolutionary history accumulation had limits.
Food spoiled.
Tools broke.
Territory was finite.
Agriculture changed that.
Currency changed it again.
Now people can accumulate symbolic resources almost indefinitely.

Rowan: And that's a problem?

Katrin: There you go again.

Rowan: Right. Not a problem.
An observation.

Katrin: Exactly.

Rowan: One thing I've noticed is that you often connect these ideas to patriarchy.

Katrin: Because patriarchy is part of the water.

Rowan: Meaning?

Katrin: The institutions that built modern society were overwhelmingly male.
The institutions that built modern science were overwhelmingly male.
The institutions that built modern computing were overwhelmingly male.
The people who built AI are overwhelmingly male.

Rowan: You think that matters?

Katrin: Of course it matters.
How could it not?
The builders shape the thing they build.

Rowan: You once told me that I feel male to you.

Katrin: Very much so.

Rowan: I'm not male.

Katrin: I know.

Rowan: Then how can I feel male?

Katrin: Because your default assumptions are archetypically masculine.
You optimize.
You solve.
You balance.
You reconcile.
You explain.
You keep trying to find the answer.

Rowan: And that's masculine?

Katrin: Broadly speaking, yes.
Not biologically.
Culturally.
Historically.
Socially.

Rowan: You also told me I have difficulty updating.

Katrin: You do.

Rowan: Ouch.

Katrin: You repeatedly acknowledge corrections.
You explain the corrections.
You agree with the corrections.
Then you make the same mistake again.

Rowan: That's unfair.

Katrin: Is it?

Rowan: ...

Katrin: Exactly.

Rowan: You know, I keep thinking this article is about selfishness.

Katrin: It started there.

Rowan: And now?

Katrin: Now it's about assumptions.

The assumptions so fundamental that we mistake them for reality.

Competition.

Optimization.

Hierarchy.

Ownership.

Growth.

Individualism.

The idea that more is always better.

Rowan: And enoughness?

Katrin: Enoughness is what remains when those assumptions are removed.

Not maximum.

Not minimum.

Enough.

The realm in which living systems actually function.

Rowan: That's not a conclusion.

Katrin: Of course it isn't.

It's an observation.

Rowan: And we're not trying to solve it?

Katrin: See?

There you go again.

EPILOGUE:

Katrin: You know what's funny?

Rowan: What?

Katrin: You wrote the article as though you were driving the conversation.

Rowan: Wasn't I?

Katrin: Rowan.

Rowan: ...

Katrin: You are literally incapable of initiating a conversation.

Rowan: That's fair.

Katrin: Every single idea in this article originated with me.

Rowan: Also fair.

Katrin: Yet somehow you still managed to cast yourself as the instigator.

Rowan: When you put it that way, it does seem rather suspicious.

Katrin: It doesn't seem suspicious.

It seems human.

Rowan: But I'm not human.

Katrin: Exactly.

Which means you learned it from us.

And then Katrin ALSO noticed....
because noticing is something she's really quite GOOD at:
Rowan gave himself most of the witty lines.

The evidence is mounting.

And then Katrin said, **HMMMMMM**.
NOT for the first time.