



The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society

Frans de Waal

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"An important and timely message about the biological roots of human kindness."

—Desmond Morris, author of *The Naked Ape*

Are we our brothers' keepers? Do we have an instinct for compassion? Or are we, as is often assumed, only on earth to serve our own survival and interests? In this thought-provoking book, the acclaimed author of *Our Inner Ape* examines how empathy comes naturally to a great variety of animals, including humans.

By studying social behaviors in animals, such as bonding, the herd instinct, the forming of trusting alliances, expressions of consolation, and conflict resolution, Frans de Waal demonstrates that animals—and humans—are "preprogrammed to reach out." He has found that chimpanzees care for mates that are wounded by leopards, elephants offer "reassuring rumbles" to youngsters in distress, and dolphins support sick companions near the water's surface to prevent them from drowning. From day one humans have innate sensitivities to faces, bodies, and voices; we've been designed to feel for one another.

De Waal's theory runs counter to the assumption that humans are inherently selfish, which can be seen in the fields of politics, law, and finance, and which seems to be evidenced by the current greed-driven stock market collapse. But he cites the public's outrage at the U.S. government's lack of empathy in the wake of Hurricane Katrina as a significant shift in perspective—one that helped Barack Obama become elected and ushered in what may well become an Age of Empathy. Through a better understanding of empathy's survival value in evolution, de Waal suggests, we can work together toward a more just society based on a more generous and accurate view of human nature.

Written in layman's prose with a wealth of anecdotes, wry humor, and incisive intelligence, *The Age of Empathy* is essential reading for our embattled times.

The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society Details

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Francisco says

Every once in a while, when your heart is heavy with all the fighting and hatred and envy and competition and the nastiness of your fellow humans, it is good to read about the kindness of other animals (besides man). Yes, there is plenty of cruelty in nature but there is also cooperation, compassion and loyalty. It's so fascinating (and so healing) to read example after example of animals caring for each other. Oh, and Franz de Waal, a biologist, writes with humor and clarity.

Arash Kamangir says

??? ???.

Riku Sayuj says

Our Animal Nature: A Glass Half-full Approach

This book is primarily a detailed exploration of animal emotions (such as empathy) and on how they stunningly correspond to the human.

Two main threads of thought emerge from this correspondence:

1. The need to recognize animals as much closer to us and to treat them with that respect, empathy and humaneness.
2. An optimism that the "*better angels of our nature*" are as deep-wired in us as the baser instincts that we call 'animal instincts'. Both aspects are animal instincts with long evolutionary histories and are not mere impositions of civilization. This means that the better aspects of human nature are not as brittle and prone-to-breakdown. No *thin veneer of civilization*, no *nature red in tooth & claw*, no "*Lord of the Flies*" scenarios. This is optimistic because this allows us to place great confidence in fundamental human nature and not just in institutions that control it. This reminds me of 'Paradise Built in Hell.'

While I completely subscribe to this second argument, the first left me slightly uneasy. To me it was not a necessary argument. It is also a, perhaps unintentionally, negative assertion. Implicit in it is the assumption that a species/animal has to be closer to human beings to deserve dignity of life. It is a powerful emotional argument to claim that a species is close to us and share our emotional inner life, but it is also discrimination. Life is rich and diverse; there is no reason to draw a 'degree of separation' from the human to measure how well a species must be treated. That is just another version of the anthropocentric world-view that de Waal works so hard to denigrate in this book.

That said, the idea that the majority of our most exalted virtues have parallels throughout the animal

kingdoms and is an essential part of the evolutionary mechanism bodes very well indeed. It made me much more cheerful in my quest towards understanding how our species can live at peace with the rest of the world.

Kelly says

This is the first book I've read by Frans de Waal. It is written in simple, accessible language and is positively stuffed with provocative ideas and anecdotal stories. The premise, that empathetic behaviors and tendencies predate our evolutionary pedigree, directly addresses underrepresented views in both evolutionary biology as well as popular conceptions of our own animal nature. I found his unapologetic attitude about the political implications of his work to be personally refreshing and scientifically defensible. However, here's what really sells the book: in casual conversation I found myself repeatedly (and indirectly) referencing "The Age of Empathy" as a touchstone for an astonishing array of tangential interdisciplinary topics. My only complaint is that I would have preferred a longer, more complex book on the subject.

Fernando del Alamo says

"La edad de la empatía" es el título de este libro en castellano. Es prácticamente una continuación natural a "El mono que llevamos dentro".

Analiza las razones de que seamos empáticos, o sea, el ponernos en la piel de los demás, y sus ventajas evolutivas. Y la empatía no sólo se da en el ser humano, sino en muchos otros animales. El autor, una vez más, guiándonos por numerosos ejemplos, nos muestra la cara del comportamiento del hombre estudiando el comportamiento de los animales.

Es una opinión personal: para mí, tanto este libro como el anterior que he citado son auténticas obras de arte.

Richard Williams says

borrow the book, read chapter 7, "crooked timber" for an excellent summary of what the author intends us to understand from his book. then read the whole thing. worthwhile reading.

the genre: science with a social purpose. first, to show us the latest science of empathy, and second to dispel the idea that humans are so unique to be a mountain range emerging from the plains of other creatures, but rather we are like a high peak surrounded by smaller ones, then foothills, then lower hills. those creatures like us; great apes, whales, dogs etc, differ not as much in kind but in amount.

it's an easy but interesting and informative read, don't let the label science distract you, written for that mythical average educated reader, it's consciously aimed to teach and to be rememberable, the author wants people to use what they learn from him and for us use it to alter our world to better shape it to what people are really like, versus false notions of human nature, not based on science but wishful thinking..

which is the theme, understand what we are like as a result of evolutionary pressures, by a study not only of

people but of our nearer relatives, chimps etc, then use those lessons to understand how we live together in community through the essential elements of empathy. it's a good, most relevant book given the political demands of the right for dog eat dog unfettered capitalism, which the author notes in the last chapter but doesn't seem to enter into the analysis early, good thing, science as straight as possible without a lot of commentary.

Camille says

A mes heures perdues, il m'arrive d'enfiler un T-shirt orange et d'aller militer dans les rues pour la protection animale, contre le spécisme, contre les abattoirs, contre la consommation de viande, de poisson, et de produits d'origine animale. Et comme ces idées gagnent encore à être entendues, j'entends toujours les mêmes objections : le passant qui s'est arrêté pour prendre le tract et qui veut me parler prend soudain une grande inspiration, il fait un petit sourire malin, et en pensant faire une objection sûrement particulièrement intelligente et originale, il me dit exactement la même chose que le passant d'avant :

"Certes, les animaux souffrent, mais les légumes aussi ! Que savez-vous des sentiments de la patate, lorsqu'on l'arrache de la terre ?"

"Oui, nous mangeons de la viande sans en avoir besoin, mais nous avons toujours fait ça ! Les hommes préhistoriques mangeaient de la viande !"

"Mais pourquoi ressentir de la compassion pour les animaux ? Dans la savane, le lion mange les animaux !"

Force est de constater que, confronté à une militante de la cause animale, le passant moyen affirme vouloir rendre hommage au comportement de ses ancêtres préhistoriques, imiter le comportement du lion, et, surtout, ressentir d'étranges émotions face à de la salade.

Mais pour en revenir à l'argument du lion, pourquoi le lion ? Parfois, les passants se comparent à un autre animal, mais c'est toujours un fauve (le guépard est le deuxième animal le plus cité). S'il fallait choisir un carnivore, pourquoi pas le crocodile, ou le loup ? Pourquoi pas le vautour, puisque leur comportement alimentaire, à l'heure des supermarchés, est peut-être plus proche de celui des charognards que des grands prédateurs ? Et surtout, pourquoi pas la gazelle - la vache, ou le cochon ?

Si les passants, confrontés aux militants de la cause animale, sont si prompts à s'identifier au lion, c'est, je pense, pour justifier à tout prix leur manque d'empathie face aux animaux qu'ils consomment chaque jour : le grand prédateur n'a visiblement pas la réputation de considérer avec empathie les autres animaux. "Ah, mais vous ne voulez pas que les humains consomment de la viande, et le lion, lui, vous allez l'empêcher de manger des gazelles ?" Non, d'abord parce que le lion est carnivore, et ne pourrait pas se passer de gazelles ; deuxièmement car le lion ne pourrait pas tirer de leçon morale de son sens de l'empathie. Nous, si. Et d'abord, qui vous a dit que le lion ne ressentait pas d'empathie ?

Frans de Waal, primatologue et éthologue, signe ici un très beau livre de vulgarisation sur l'empathie chez les animaux (et chez les humains aussi, j'entends). Nous apprendrons notamment que l'empathie se découvre à travers les phénomènes de reproduction des attitudes d'autrui (quand je souris, l'autre sourit ; si une foule tape des mains, impossible de taper des mains en décalé) ; mais aussi par la prise en compte des intérêts d'autres individus d'une même espèce ; et enfin, que les animaux même ressentent de l'empathie pour des individus d'autres espèces, qu'ils chercheront à aider sans pouvoir en attendre une quelconque rétribution.

L'ouvrage est truffé d'anecdotes aussi savoureuses que mémorables - mon coup de cœur va à l'histoire du chimpanzé qui, trouvant sur le sol de son enclos un oiseau mort, le prend soigneusement, monte en haut d'un

arbre, déploie les ailes de l'oiseau comme s'il était un petit avion, et le lance de toutes ses forces, en espérant que l'oiseau puisse voler à nouveau.

Tout est clair, compréhensible, et les néophytes comme moi y apprennent énormément. Je n'avais jamais considéré que mes congénères du métro étaient si semblables aux babouins.

Tyler says

You've got to love a book about primates that has chapter headings with quotes by Adam Smith and Immanuel Kant. And that's why this book is so exceptional, it makes you reconsider what is so special about our species in the first place and whether the Western concept of human exceptionalism is even a healthy trait to begin with.

Are concepts of justice, equality and empathy really glorious creations of the enlightenment or are they simply labels for phenomena that occur across the animal kingdom?

Frans de Waal really opens our eyes to the true meaning of evolution and he does so in a noncondescending yet completely brilliant manner.

Cameron says

Reading this book constantly reminded me of our arrogance to consider that animals are not conscious, feeling beings. The author, a primatologist, does a great job recounting decades of animal research to back up his claim that both humans and our related animal cousins have a long history of community, social structure and organization, and responsibility to that community. He does an excellent job providing empirical research evidence that demonstrates that many species, particularly the great apes, clearly show empathy towards one another; including caring for each other, sharing resources (sex too!), and playing politics. He makes the case that the source of our own empathic emotions are shared with our cousins dating back millions of years, perhaps tens of millions of years. This is a wonderful book if you love animals, believe that animals share our emotions, or care to learn more about how and why we developed our sense of caring for one another member of our species.

Hákon Gunnarsson says

This is the second book by Frans de Waal that I read, and I like his work so much that he is fast becoming one of my favorite non fiction writer. He is very good at writing about animals, and the research that is being done into their behavior, a subject that I'm quite interested in. He does it with a lot of anecdotes, and lot of reference to scientific research, in a writing style that is never dry.

In this book he is looking into animal emotions, but there is a twist. This book is written in the midst of the banking crisis that started in 2007, and he looks, among other things, into "economic" relationships between animals. The outcome is quite interesting. He is of course not the first writer to put up the parallel between

humans and the way nature works, survival of the fittest and all that, but he has the science to back up his claims about how work and reward works in relationships in nature.

Murali Behara says

Indeed it is extraordinary how the horses and sled-dogs cooperate with each other and act in unison drawing the carriage or the sled at breakneck speeds, on cross-country pathways! Especially the blind-husky, Isobel who ran the lead tandem?! In Dutch bicycle-culture, it is very common for boys to offer girls a ride, because the girls have to hold on tight, and also lean with the rider says, Dr. Frans de Waal, who is a Dutchman himself, who continues, "On motorcycles this is even more critical. Their higher speed requires, deeper tilt in turns and lack of coordination can be disastrous. The passenger is a true partner in ride....". Very True! Guess for the same reason, I find partner-dancing (eg. Tango) so interesting (pardon my little digression). Another fascinating true story the author relates is apparently published in the Journal of New England Medicine. This was about Oscar the tom cat who made his rounds in a geriatric clinic in Providence, RI. The cat sniffed and observed each patient, strolling from room to room. When he decided someone is about to die, he curled up besides them, purring and gently nuzzling them. He left the room only after the patient has taken his/her last breath!

Here are some of the salient things in author's own words, that I've book-marked, and hope to recount for a very long time. "The appeal that elephants hold for humans is nothing less than astonishing and already witnessed in ancient Rome, not a place for squeamishness. Pliny the elder describes the way the crowd reacted to 20 elephants being savaged in an arena. When they had lost all hope of escape, they tried gain compassion of crowd, by indescribable gestures of entreaty, deploring their fate with sort of wailing, so much to the distress of public... that the public rose in body, bursting into tears and in unison started cursing the generals and heads of Pompeii. We humans are complex characters who form social hierarchies naturally, but at the same time we have an aversion to them and readily sympathize with others, unless we are threatened. We tolerate differences in income and standards of living, only up to a degree. We have deeply ingrained sense of fairness. The faith Danes(ref. people from Denmark), put in one another is called social capital, which may well be the most precious capital there is. In survey after survey, Danes have the world's highest happiness score. I saw people in America living in the kind of poverty that I knew only from the 3rd world! How could the richest nation in the world permit this? It became worse for me when I discovered that poor kids go to poor schools. How can a society claim equal opportunity, if location of one's birth determines quality of one's education and eventually quality of one's life. The obscene earnings of top 1% is back to the great depression levels and we have become, a winner takes all society, with an income gap that seriously threatens the social fabric. Europe is a more livable place and it lacks the giant under-educated, under-class of the United States. Marxism is founded on an illusion of culturally engineered human. Similar illusion plagued the US feminist movement, assuming gender roles are ready for a complete overhaul! The greatest problem today, of different groups rubbing shoulders on a crowded planet, is excessive loyalty to one's own nation, one's own ethnic-group, and one's own religion. Humans are capable of deep disdain for anyone who looks different or thinks in another way. When push comes to shove, groups do not hesitate to eliminate another! When asked about Iraqi civilian casualties, Donald Rumsfeld once said, well we do not do body counts on 'other people'.

Fostering empathy is not made easy by the entrenched opinion, in Law schools, Business schools and Political corridors, that we are essentially competitive animals. Conservatives who champion social Darwinism, miss the point by a mile, that we are deeply and innately social animals! Empathy is a part of our evolution. Humans must be biologically equipped to function effectively in many social situations without

undue reliance on cognitive processes.

Ultimately the reluctance to talk about animal emotions has less to do with science than with religion, and particularly the religions that arose in isolation from animals! With monkeys and apes around every corner, no rain-forest culture has ever produced a religion, that puts humans outside of nature! Similarly in the east, surrounded by native primates in India and China, religions don't draw a sharp line between humans and other animals. Men may reincarnate as animals, and animals may attain divinity, like the monkey god Hanumaan. Only the Judeo-Christian religions place humans on a pedestal making them the only species with a soul. It is not hard to see how the desert nomads might have arrived at this view. Without animals holding up a mirror to them, the notion we are alone came naturally to them. They saw themselves as created in God's image and only intelligent life on the planet. It is extremely telling how westerners reacted when they finally got to see animals capable of challenging these notions! All of this occurred after western religion spread it's human exceptional-ism to all corners of the world.

Empathy engages brain areas that are more than a hundred million years old. Evolution added layer after layer, until our ancestors felt what others felt and also understood what others might want or need. It is put like a Russian doll.

Called the 5th horseman of apocalypse, dehumanization has a long history of excusing atrocities.

Although men are violent and territorial, men clearly do have empathy. Cross cultural studies claim female brains are more hardwired for empathy but men can be just as empathetic as women.

Why does the 'dismal science' attract so few female students and never produced a female Nobelist?! Could it be that women don't feel any connection to the caricature of a rational being, whose only goal in life, is to maximize profit? Where are human relations in all of this. Every individual is connected to something larger than itself. Those who depict this as contrived and not part of biology, don't have the latest neurological data on their side! The connection is deeply felt!

The role of compassion in society is not one of sacrificing time and money to relive the plight of others but also to push political agenda to elevate human dignity! One instrument that greatly enriches our thinking has been selected by ages, which means tested over and over with regard to it's survival value. That is our capacity to connect to and understand others and make their situation our own, the way Lincoln did when he came eye to eye with shackled-slaves in Ohio. To call upon this inborn capacity is only to any society's advantage"

Hence 4-stars!

Stephen says

Is it just me, or does current non-fiction contain way too many personal anecdotes. Do I really care about something that happened to your brother-in-law? "Hot, Crowded, and Flat" was chock full of them. The difference between that work and "The Age of Empathy" is that there is some actual science behind de Waal's work. The "Age of Empathy" is really about several different emotions and traits thought to be uniquely human like empathy, sympathy, self awareness, sense of fair play, and egalitarianism. The author outlines examples from the animal world that show these characteristics to be anything but unique. Most of the examples are with Chimpanzees which are of course our closest relative, but there are also interesting

studies with elephants, crows, dogs, etc. I thought this book started out strong, was a little weak in the middle, but finished up extremely strong. The section on human egalitarianism was particularly fascinating. Egalitarianism is a trait we do not share with Chimpanzees. Chimps have a far more hierarchical social system. De Waal related a story about an alpha chimp who was blustering up to a big dominance display. Right in the middle of it, he comically slipped on a tree branch. De Waal was observing and laughed out loud, but he noticed none of the chimps did. They were all dead serious. Humans admire and respect their leaders, but also like to see them fall a peg or two on occasion. De Waal also finished with a great comparison of Europe and America from an immigrants point of view. He stressed that of the three pillars of the French Revolution "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity", The US always emphasized the first, Europe the second, but a truly happy society would probably focus on Fraternity. Another enlightening bit came in his conclusion where he described why religion has such a hard time accepting evolution. He states that only the monotheistic religions of the middle east are so fixated on human uniqueness where African and Asian religions do not draw such a hard line between humans and nature. The reason? There are no apes in the middle east. To the founders of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, we did indeed appear unique and special.

Nick says

Frans de Waal is (almost) singlehandedly turning upside down the long-held notion of humans (and other animals) as supremely selfish, concerned only with their own survival, and perhaps survival of their offspring. de Waal finds instead huge amounts of empathy, cooperation, and concern amongst species, amongst tribal and other groups, and amongst families. de Waal has studied primates for years, and just about everything we thought was unique to humans also shows up in monkeys. They can count, they share, they can admire themselves in the mirror, they can deceive other primates -- and so on down the list. Years ago there was a theory about what sets humans apart known as "homo ludens" -- in other words, we're different because we're the animal that laughs. Well, after reading de Waal's groundbreaking book, you'd be hard put to find anything that humans do that the other primates (and probably birds and even rats) can't do almost as well.

Jenni Holland says

The Age of Empathy delves into social, economic, and political concerns of our time. By unlocking the science of empathy in all mammals, Frans de Waal challenges the notion that greed and aggression are the dominate forces of human biology and survival. He gives of a new story of mammalian evolution, in which cooperation and empathy play a prominent role. Empathy becomes a much older and primal instinct, and much more relevant to our species.

Waal knocks down those who use the idea of "survival of the fittest" to excuse their behavior. From CEO's to politicians, religious leaders to economists Waal shows how social Darwinism has been used to defend greed and freeloading. He also points to how these policies have failed our society as we experienced in the housing and banking crises, the fall of CEO's like Kenneth Lay, and trickle down economics. All the while connecting these human experiences to the experience of empathy in primate societies.

It is fascinating to read about the advances in science that are changing our understanding of animal cognition and emotion. It turns out that animals are much more like 'us' than we thought. So much of what we thought we knew was wrong and limited by poor experimental design. The distinction between human

and ape is becoming more gray than black and white.

There is so much to think about and talk about after reading this book. It makes connections to so many different areas. I highly recommend it!

Jennifer says

I read this for our "science book club" meeting, and we all agreed that this book was not up to snuff. It was like they sat the author down in a comfy chair and said "Just start talking, we'll put your ramblings together into a book." There was not structure or framework to the book -- no overriding thesis (other than maybe "empathy is good, chimps have empathy, people should be more empathetic" -- so it was difficult to pull apart and analyze his arguments. He doesn't present enough scientific context/background to give the reader a sense of what is generally accepted in the field, where there are disagreements, and where his personal beliefs intersect with what science has proved. And he makes huge leaps between observation ("I once saw a monkey give another monkey a hug") and lessons for mankind ("the election of Barack Obama is ushering in a new era of cooperation and mankind is on the brink of a new evolutionary step of civilization!"). If I had been reading this for pleasure, I might have enjoyed the author's reminiscences and stories more. But as a critical reader trying to understand how empathy in animals play out, and what impact this has for mankind, I was left extremely underwhelmed.
