

Books: The Age of Empathy - Nature's Lessons For a Kinder Society

by Frans de Waal, Published by: Harmony Books



Many people have argued that humans are naturally cooperative. Charles Darwin, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, the Dalai Lama, Russian zoologist and anarchist Peter Kropotkin, neurobiologist James Rilling and psychologist Dacher Keltner, among many others including myself, have all made the case that our animal nature is characterised more by kindness and collaboration than it is by competition and carnage. Now, the prolific primatologist Frans de Waal joins the fray to convince people that we are not such nasty creatures after all.

Human nature is characterised more by cooperation than by competition.

Empathy, de Waal explains, is the social glue that holds communities together, and if humans are empathic animals it is because we have “the backing of a long evolutionary history”. “Bonding... is what makes us happiest,” he writes, and rapidly accumulating evidence from the behavioral and neural sciences supports the claim.

De Waal, drawing from his own research, focuses on non-human primates. He could have made a more compelling case, however, by discussing the broad spectrum of species in which empathy has been observed. For example, scientists are learning a lot about the evolution of human interactive behavior from other mammals whose behavior and group organisation closely resemble that of early hominids and who show high levels of cooperation and empathy. Apes, monkeys, cetaceans, elephants and rodents (rats and mice, at the very least) all exhibit empathy and what we might call natural morality or moral intelligence.

Given all that we know about empathy in animals, why do so many persist in seeing ours as a dog-eat-dog world? De Waal chalks it up to what he calls “macho origin myths”, which insist that “our species has been waging war for as long as it has been around”. But by far the majority of humans have shown empathy and cooperation for as

long as we've been around too. Even if our animal brethren were as violent as some think they are, that wouldn't mean that we are as well, or that we ought to be. Such thinking also suffers from the woolly fallacy that just because things are a certain way, that's the way they should be. Sometimes things are a certain way because things have gone badly wrong.

Discussions of the rare instances of animals being cruel to other members of their species are attention-getters but they are over-inflated and misleadingly presented as confirmation that nature is "red in tooth and claw". The available data have been scant due to small sample sizes and great variability among different communities of animals, but things are changing now that more and better results are pouring in. Primatologist Robert Sussman and colleagues have shown, for instance, that the vast majority of interactions in a wide variety of monkeys are affiliative rather than agonistic or divisive.

As we study more species in situations where they can show us who they really are we'll likely see that caring for each other is more prevalent than many think. There's ample evidence that the "age of empathy" has been with us for a long time but has been overshadowed by the prevalence of the competitive paradigm. Maybe it's a paradigm some cling to as a sort of excuse for a lack of empathy, social skills or intelligence in general. The truth is, human nature is dynamically interactive. We are adept enough to defend ourselves, but (hopefully) wise enough to intuit that unnecessary aggression brings as many dangers to ourselves as it does to others.

Source

unknown –will whoever sent this in please tell us who wrote the review?