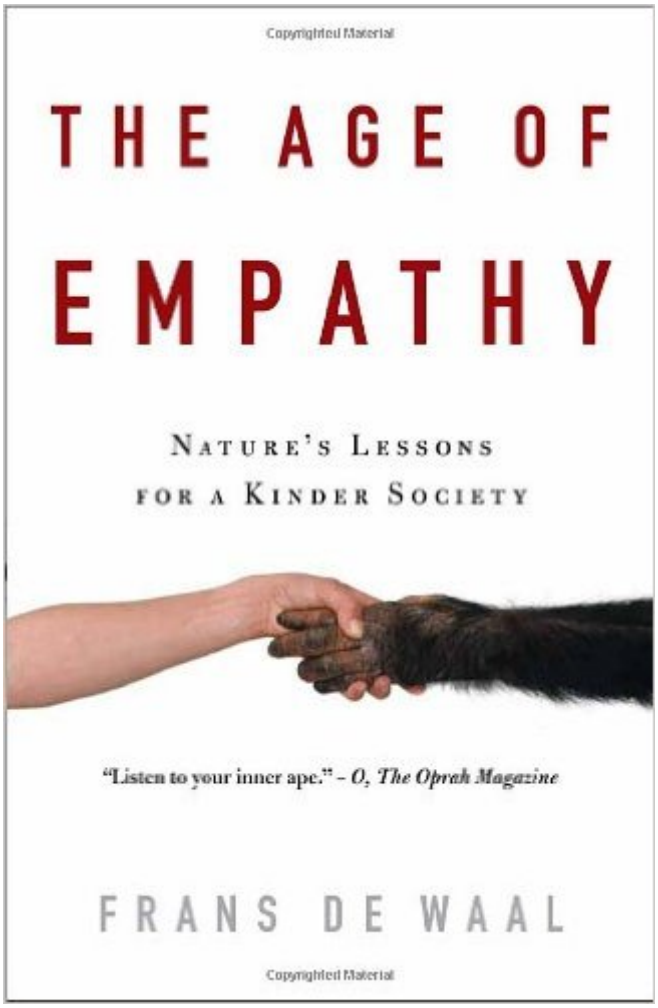
The Age Of Empathy: Nature's Lessons For A Kinder Society



Synopsis

"An important and timely message about the biological roots of human kindness."â ”Desmond Morris, author of The Naked ApeAre 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 animalsâ “and humansâ “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 whichseems 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 perspectiveâ “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.From the Hardcover edition.

Book Information

Paperback: 304 pages

Publisher: Broadway Books; 1 edition (September 7, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0307407772

ISBN-13: 978-0307407771

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.7 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.9 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (43 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #27,819 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #6 inÂ Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Zoology > Mammals #12 inÂ Books > Textbooks > Science & Mathematics >

Biology & Life Sciences > Zoology #51 inÂ Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Anthropology

Customer Reviews

Primatologist Frans de Waal has produced another book full of lively writing and thoughtful analysis, reminding us of our exquisite animal roots. In "The Age of Empathy," De Waal is out to set the record straight: too many people invoke "evolution" to justify treating each other in contemptuous ways. This has got to stop, because this modern version of "Social Darwinism" is a highly selective and distorted version of the kind of animals we humans are, as well as a wildly inaccurate interpretation of way natural selection works.In short, we are NOT condemned by nature to treat each other badly. Rather, there is a much different and much pervasive aspect regarding the kind of animal we humans have evolved to be. We are highly groupish, often peace-loving beings who are well-tuned to look out for each other. Not that we always do this well, but there is plenty of reason to conclude that we are highly social in an empathetic way. In this book, De Waal accomplishes his goals with reference to ample evidence from human history and with meticulous observations and social experiments regarding our primate cousins.Keep this book handy for the next time someone claims that they don't need to care about people who are struggling to make it "because that's the way of nature." This approach to life is a cop-out; it is certainly not justified by Darwin's work.

In this highly entertaining, lovingly written, and amply documented book, de Waal reverses his usual direction of argumentation, using the fact that primates exhibit rudimentary forms of human prosociality to assert that human sociality is fundamentally empathetic and altruistic. Indeed, de Waal suggests that chimpanzees exhibit a mix of hierarchical and egalitarian sensitivities, and empathetic and ruthlessly aggressive sensitivities similar to that of humans. De Waal does not even entertain the Romantic idea that humans are inherently benevolent but corrupted by an evil society, but he returns repeatedly to a critique of the American conservative tendency to view human nature as basically selfish. The bottom line is that de Waal develops a concept of human nature block by block, chapter by chapter, and then uses this concept to build a novel and very attractive political economy for our time.The evidence for de Waal's model of human, monkey, and ape nature is a combination of anecdote (as in other de Waal books) and controlled laboratory experiment. The latter element is of course central, because people have been speculating about human and animal nature for centuries without even approaching a consensus. The major implication of this research for humans, which uses behavioral game theory and experimental economics, is that we now know with almost perfect certainty that humans are not the selfish sociopaths of traditional economics and

sociobiology, but rather are motivated by a complex mix of self-regarding, other-regarding and fundamentally moral objectives. De Waal goes through this evidence enough to make his point, without becoming bogged down in the sort of detail that is of critical importance for experts in the field, but boring for the general reader. What is new in this book is a similar emphasis on controlled laboratory research on non-human primate "nature." His conclusion is that primates, as expected from elementary evolutionary biology, exhibit in rudimentary form, the same mixture of selfish and prosocial behaviors as found in humans.One of the neuroscientific developments that I learned for the first time from this book is the relationship between Von Economo neurons (VEN cells) and what de Waal calls the "co-emergence hypothesis." This hypothesis holds that self-awareness (e.g., recognizing oneself in a mirror) and empathy (recognizing feelings in others) co-emerged in several mammal species, including humans, some apes, dolphins, whales, and elephants. The new fact is that VEN cells, which are long, spindle-like neurons that reach deep into the brain, connecting cortex to the more primitive parts of the brain, have been found in these, and only these, animals!It is popular these days to treat the results of behavioral game theory as providing a fatal critique of economic theory and a shining endorsement of evolutionary biology. This is certainly not the case, and de Waal treatment in this book is balanced and accurate. In fact, the whole methodology of behavioral game theory is based on the economist’s rational actor model, simply dropping the ancient prejudice that rationality implies selfishness. Indeed, it is my experience that economists have no problem embracing the fact that people have altruistic motives, whereas evolutionary biologists just can’t seem to digest the idea that nature, red in tooth and claw, could ever produce a truly moral creature.How natural selection, involving survival of the fittest, could produce morality, has been another major research question of the past two decades, and de Waal ably describes the basics of this research. Primates, including humans, are fundamentally social creatures who have developed behaviors and intentions that are costly to the individual but highly useful to the group. Groups that have many individuals who exhibit such prosocial behaviors simply do better than those that lack them, so they expand over time at the expense of groups composed of highly selfish individuals. There is endless debate among population biologists as to whether this dynamic is based on gene selection, individual selection, or group selection, but the issue is of limited importance, as compared with the fact that human nature, and more generally primate nature, is a complex intermixture of prosociality and selfishness.While the implications of the research on humans is relatively clear and the interpretation given above widely shared (except for biologists who just can’t bring themselves to believe that any critter could really be anything other than completely selfish, and a few other stragglers that have a political bone to pick), the same is not true

for the interpretation of games played by non-humans. There are been extremely prominent primate researchers who have found non-human primates completely devoid of prosociality in the laboratory, while de Waal argues that this finding is due to placing non-human primate subjects in situations that they simply do not comprehend, and in situations that they do understand, they exhibit human prosocial behaviors in rudimentary form. Sometimes de Waal's argument is directly contradictory with well-known results in the literature, and we will just have to wait for the experts to come to agreement. I suspect that we will learn a lot about primate epistemology in the process.This book is full of simple statements that are deeply insightful, and yet are completely incompatible with the received wisdom in various academic disciplines (I should warn the reader that I believe that the extreme parochialism of the behavioral disciplines is the major impediment of our time in understanding social behavior). Here is one of my favorites: "Instead of each individual independently weighing the pros and cons of his or her own actions, we occupy nodes within a tight network that connects all of us in both body and mind." (p. 63) By contrast, imitation is virtually unnoticed as a form of rational behavior in standard decision theory.De Waal's political philosophy flows rather neatly from his analysis of human nature. De Waal is most hostile to the philosophy of material acquisitiveness and hard-nosed distain for the less well off, perfectly exhibited by the famous speech by Gordon Gekko in the movie Wall Street. "The point is, ladies and gentleman," Gekko announces, "that greed -- for lack of a better word -- is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms -- greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge -- has marked the upward surge of mankind. And greed -- you mark my words -- will ... save ... that ... malfunctioning corporation called the USA." De Waal's point is not that material acquisition is not part of human nature, but rather it is only one facet of human nature, and if it appears in hypertrophied form unaccompanied by the empathetic side of human nature, the results for society are likely to be disastrous. Referring to the Gekko sentiment, de Waal says "...this is only half the truth. It misses by a mile the intensely social nature of our species. Empathy is part of our evolution, and not just a recent part, but an innate, age-old capacity." (p. 205)De Waal's political philosophy, at its core, suggests that the twin models of man as acquisitive dominator and empathetic cooperator are both quite accurate, but they must be merged to forge a healthy society. "Both Europe and the United States pay a steep price, albeit different ones," he asserts, "for stressing one fairness ideal at the expense of the other....it is a false choice: it's not as though both fairness ideals couldn't be combined." (p. 198)I only found one statement of de Waal's that I found questionable. "A society based purely on selfish motives and market forces," he says, "may produce wealth, yet it can't produce the unity and mutual trust that

make life worthwhile." (p.221) I doubt very much that a society based purely on selfish motives could produce wealth, or indeed anything other than lives that are poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

What a timely book. I heard Frans De Waal give an interview on NRP's Diane Rehm show discussing his new book and immediately bought and read it. It was thought-provoking and makes you realize the similarities in human and animal behaviors. Cooperation, negotiation, kindness, and empathy are needed more than ever in families, organizations, and in politics. I hope we can learn some important lessons about our species from his extensive primate research. I enjoyed reading about Frans De Waal's work and past publications on the website: [...]

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.

Compassionate, Connected Patient Care That Creates a Competitive Advantage The Devil's Due and Other Stories: The Devil's Due, The Portal, Disfigured, Empathy, and Epitaph (International Thriller Writers Presents: Thriller, Vol. 1) Stand in My Shoes: Kids Learning About Empathy Chocolate Milk, Por Favor: Celebrating Diversity with Empathy The Process of Creating Life: Nature of Order, Book 2: An Essay on the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe (The Nature of Order)(Flexible) Society of Publication Designers: 34th Publication Design Annual (Society of Publication Designers' Publication Design Annual) (Vol 34) National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Trees--W: Western Region (National Audubon Society Field Guides (Paperback)) National Audubon Society Field Guide to Rocks and Minerals: North America (National Audubon Society Field Guides (Paperback)) National Audubon Society Pocket Guide: Familiar Butterflies of North America (National Audubon Society Pocket Guides) National Audubon Society Field Guide to Seashore Creatures: North America (National Audubon Society Field Guides (Hardcover))