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Our Inner Ape: A Leading Primatologist Explains Why We Are Who We Are



Synopsis

Visit the author's Web site at www.ourinnerape.com It's no secret that humans and apes share a host of traits, from the tribal communities we form to our irrepressible curiosity. We have a common ancestor, scientists tell us, so it's natural that we act alike. But not all of these parallels are so appealing: the chimpanzee, for example, can be as vicious and manipulative as any human. Yet there's more to our shared primate heritage than just our violent streak. In *Our Inner Ape*, Frans de Waal, one of the world's great primatologists and a renowned expert on social behavior in apes, presents the provocative idea that our noblest qualities—generosity, kindness, altruism—are as much a part of our nature as are our baser instincts. After all, we share them with another primate: the lesser-known bonobo. As genetically similar to man as the chimpanzee, the bonobo has a temperament and a lifestyle vastly different from those of its genetic cousin. Where chimps are aggressive, territorial, and hierarchical, bonobos are gentle, loving, and erotic (sex for bonobos is as much about pleasure and social bonding as it is about reproduction). While the parallels between chimp brutality and human brutality are easy to see, de Waal suggests that the conciliatory bonobo is just as legitimate a model to study when we explore our primate heritage. He even connects humanity's desire for fairness and its morality with primate behavior, offering a view of society that contrasts markedly with the caricature people have of Darwinian evolution. It's plain that our finest qualities run deeper in our DNA than experts have previously thought. Frans de Waal has spent the last two decades studying our closest primate relations, and his observations of each species in *Our Inner Ape* encompass the spectrum of human behavior. This is an audacious book, an engrossing discourse that proposes thought-provoking and sometimes shocking connections among chimps, bonobos, and those most paradoxical of apes, human beings. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 10 hours and 16 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Tantor Audio

Audible.com Release Date: December 12, 2005

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B000CRSF62

Best Sellers Rank: #44 in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Zoology >

Primate Biology #200 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Anthropology > Physical #1001

in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Anatomy

Customer Reviews

Primate biology, the study of our ape cousins, must at once be the most rewarding and thankless jobs in science. On the one hand, these investigations can tell us more about ourselves than any philosophy or psychology curriculum can hope to impart. We learn of their friendships, conflicts, desires, social manipulations and group politics. The resemblances to humans make compelling reading. On the other hand, the long history of our culture has conditioned us to avoid recognising our evolutionary roots. There are "the animals" and there is "us". With thirty years' experience in the Netherlands and the United States, de Waal wants us to understand how human values derive from primate origins. His careful studies have revealed things unexpected even to himself. His chief aim with this synopsis is to dispense with the many myths that have emerged over the past few years - chimpanzees as "murderers" or "war-makers"; bonobos as over-sexed and gender indifferent, both as "simply wild animals living at the command of "instinct". Diversity and individuality are a major facet of ape societies which, in de Waal's assessment, not only makes them worthy of study, but worthy of sound comparison with our own species. At first glance, de Waal's condensation of ape behaviour into four topical chapters seems over-distillation. The material in those chapters, however, shows the complexity of primate personalities. Chimpanzee society is male-dominated, with young males taking every opportunity to displace the "alpha" group leader. They live in a strongly hierarchical society where the males hunt and dispense meat for sexual and other favours. Female chimpanzees form few alliances, although brief excursions with males other than the alpha occur.

In our explanations of human behavior, there is sometimes a tendency to attribute the brutish and nasty examples to our animal nature, but to claim acts of kindness, altruism and compassion as distinctly human proclivities. This view goes hand in hand with what De Waal calls the veneer theory of civilization -- the idea that morality is a recent acquisition (perhaps aided by religious texts) and that lurking beneath this thin veil of decency is a cauldron of seething, antisocial impulses. Anyone who endorses this Hobbesian view of human nature would do well to consult this book. In "Our Inner Ape", Frans De Waal seeks to ground both our darkest and most sublime tendencies in a

continuous, evolutionary history. He chooses two of our closest primate relatives to prove his point -- the chimpanzee and the bonobo. De Waal assumes absolutely no background knowledge on the part of the reader (in fact, he takes some time to spell out the difference between a monkey and an ape). Sandwiched in between an opening and a concluding chapter, the meat of this book concentrates on the topics of 'Power', 'Sex', 'Violence' and 'Kindness'. De Waal's accounts of the highly intricate social networks formed by the ape species and their complex forms of interaction within those networks are extremely interesting. However, what some might view as the strong point of the book, to me seems like precisely its weakness. I am referring to the book's purely anecdotal tone. Having read it, one comes away less with factual information on the social life of the higher primates than with a somewhat random series of stories. Though these stories are intriguing, there are so many of them that it makes one wonder how much of what has been read will be retained.

Proving that all social science remains cyclical, Frans De Waal offers readers a new trip around in the never ending debate of the biological roots of human culture and behavior. For decades, as any student who sat in on an intro anthropology class will tell you, the reigning comparison stood between Homo sapiens and chimpanzees. Thus these aggressive, territorial, and -- to anthropomorphize a bit -- brutal primates, with their hierarchical and male dominated social structure stood as the explanation for all of humankind's worst impulses. Such analysis fit well into the several millennium old dichotomy between our "animal" (evil) and "human" (good) impulses. Through his fascinating and often amusing analysis of the bonobo, another primate with whom, like chimps, humans share 98.5% of genetics'. Where the chimp is brutal the bonobo is peaceful. Where chimps are territorial and hierarchical, the bonobos share and maintain a female dominate structure. Where chimps jealously guard sexual privileges, bonobos mate, well like animals, sharing partners in all conceivable combinations (De Waal pays this great attention, suggesting that such "loose" sexual relationships prevent aggression). De Waal writes well, and offers an interesting thesis that in fact both sides of human nature may well come from our animal roots. He even presents interesting evidence for empathy among bonobs and more startling still, the elusive notion of consciousness, that an individual can project themselves into an alien form, such as bonobos caring for birds. All of this makes for a fun and thought provoking read. De Waal falls short, however, in not going deep enough. While he demonstrates evidence for the emotional hardness of chimps vs.

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