



Book Review

The Limits of Empathy

de Waal, F. 2009: *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*. Harmony Books, New York. 304 pp. Hardback: \$25.99. ISBN 978-0307407764.

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After reading Frans de Waal's latest book, 'The Age of Empathy', but before starting this review, I re-read my review of de Waal's earlier book, 'Our Inner Ape' (2005), published in this journal [*Ethology* **112** (2006) 310-311]. I rather wish I had not, because I see that almost everything I might say about this book I already said about de Waal's 2005 volume. In that review I mentioned that de Waal has a mellifluous writing style – he still does. I noted that de Waal wants to convince his readers that there is not a single human psychological quality that cannot be noted in our cousin apes and monkeys – he still clearly shows that aim. de Waal still shows a strong preference for the anecdote, anthropomorphism and intuition over the controlled experiment that may produce results that dislodge a scientist's prior expectations. His distaste for behaviorists remains as strong as ever – this time indicting them for inspiring the appalling Romanian orphanages of the Cold War era. His ambivalence towards the United States is still evident. de Waal remains concerned to convince his reader that love, cooperation – indeed the 'empathy' of the newer book's title – are not unique to human beings but a part of our ape heritage.

Many of the same results are discussed again here: the alleged tendency of monkeys to console each other and 'make up' after a conflict; the experiment by de Waal and his students that he believes shows that monkeys are sensitive to unfair treatment; and studies in which animals have been set in front of mirrors that purport to show that individuals of certain species have a sense of self. The passage of 4 yr has not tempted de Waal to add much to his one-sided account of all these findings.

All these points of similarity probably account for why I found so little to interest me in this latest volume. The differences between this book and its predecessor are just matters of emphasis. 2005's 'Our Inner Ape' was an attempt to convince the reader that the bonobo – the ape that has sex every 90 min and never kills its fellows – should be our role model, instead of the war mongering chimpanzee. 2009's 'The Age of Empathy' tells the reader that it is fine to feel empathy and to cooperate with others of our kind: Nature does not make us red in tooth and claw. Even chimpanzees are presented as having concern for their fellow beasts. Hooking on to the defeat of the Republican Party in the United States in November 2008, the recent economic problems, and the election of Democrat Barack Obama to the U.S. presidency, de Waal wants to argue that greed is no longer good, and was never natural. Placing himself in opposition to those who would interpret the Darwinian injunction to survive and multiply as a call to individualism, de Waal concludes that fellow feeling is mankind's natural state. As an example of his style, bridging from the ethological to the current political situation, de Waal draws attention to the alleged fact that the disgraced former CEO of Enron, Jeff Skilling, was, according to de Waal, 'a great fan of Dawkins's *Selfish Gene*' (p. 39).

I presume that the placement of his earlier book, 'Chimpanzee politics' (de Waal, 1982) on the reading list of the U.S. congress by Republican Newt Gingrich is what inspires de Waal to address his comments to capitalists and other right wingers, but really anyone who wanted to resist de Waal's entreaties to empathy would find logical holes in this book big enough to drive an elephant through. Elephants, according to de Waal, are a particularly empathetic species.

de Waal has heard of the naturalistic fallacy – the erroneous belief that the state of nature can determine ethically appropriate courses of action – but he does not let it slow him down. 'The Age of Empathy' is one long naturalistic fallacy: empathy is natural, therefore it is morally right. Of course I am not against empathy, but the claim that bonobos – or

any other ape or monkey – may console one another after conflicts, does not inform my choice of that course of action.

In his too brief consideration of the naturalistic fallacy, de Waal suggests that close consideration of our cousin apes will help us to understand ourselves and our fellow human beings. 'If a zoo plans a new enclosure, it takes into account whether the species to be kept is social or solitary, a climber or a digger, nocturnal or diurnal, and so on. Why should we, in designing human society, act as if we're oblivious to the characteristics of our species?' (p. 30). To which the obvious response is, 'Sure. But why would you pay attention to the characteristics of other species?' Any zoo director who designed an enclosure for one species by studying some other – even closely related species – would not last long in the job. To make what de Waal is suggesting more concrete, consider a hypothetical zoo desirous of an enclosure for *Homo sapiens*. Would it be well advised to base the design of that enclosure on what we know are the requirements of *Pan troglodytes* or *Pan paniscus*? Surely the answer is self-evidently negative: neither the diet, housing, climate nor any other dimension would be appropriate.

de Waal ends with a plea for more empathy. Well, that would be hard to disagree with. If people could just be nicer to each other the world would surely be a better place – as my grandmother was wont to say. But it does not take much thought to realize why human societies uniformly write their laws under the worst assumptions of human nature. This is not some hangover from 19th-century Social Darwinism – as de Waal would have us believe – but a highly adaptive response to the darker side of human nature. The rules of society assume the worst of people, not because the worst is likely, desirable, or even 'natural' (whatever that over-used word may mean), but simply because those are the cases where rules and enforcement are required. The moment we think we live in an 'age of empathy' is the moment we discover why previous generations formed laws that assumed the worst of human nature.

Literature Cited

- de Waal, F. 2007: Chimpanzee politics: Power and sex among apes. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland.