

BOOKS & ARTS

A family resemblance

We are closely related to other apes, but how similar are we really?

Our Inner Ape

by Frans de Waal

Riverhead: 2005. 288 pp. \$25.95

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Robert Sapolsky

Scientists often become agitated when confronted with someone who does not believe in evolution — especially when, as in the United States, such people try to dictate what facts our schoolchildren are taught. Only slightly less distressing is meeting someone who enthusiastically embraces evolution but with enough misconceptions to make Darwin turn in his grave. In this excellent book for the public, Frans de Waal tackles some exasperating misconceptions about the evolution of the social behaviour of apes, particularly humans.

The misconceptions rest on two things: Jane Goodall and the number 98. Goodall has long astonished the world with her discoveries about the behaviour of wild chimpanzees. And it was she who reported the profoundly disturbing fact that chimpanzee social life can include murder, cannibalism and organized inter-group violence, findings widely disseminated by the *National Geographic*. And 98 is approximately the unnervingly high percentage of DNA that humans share with chimps. Combine those two and our fate appears sealed: our closest relative, with whom we are nearly genetically identical, is a murderous thug. There you have it, our human-as-killer-ape destiny.

The antidote to all this is the bonobo. Once known as the pygmy chimp, the bonobo is now recognized to be a separate species, and from taxonomic and genetic standpoints, we are as closely related to it as to the chimpanzee. And the bonobo is very different. Males are not particularly aggressive, and lack the massive musculature typical of species (such as chimps) in which a male's ability to pass on copies of his genes depends heavily on his ability to pummel other males. Moreover, the bonobo social system is female dominated, food is often shared, and there are well-developed means for reconciling social tensions.

And then there is sex. Bonobo sex is the prurient highlight of primatology conferences and it makes parents shield children's eyes when watching nature films. Bonobos have sex in every conceivable (and inconceivable)

Despite appearances, humans have come a long way since we branched off from the other apes.

position, in pairs or otherwise, within gender, between gender, to greet someone, to solve social conflicts, to work off steam after being scared by a predator, to celebrate finding food, to cajole the sharing of it... or just because. As has become the sound bite to contrast the two species, chimps are from Mars and bonobos are from Venus.

De Waal is uniquely qualified to be our guide to the different social worlds of these two relatives, as an immensely accomplished primatologist and an expert on both species. For example, his book *Chimpanzee Politics* (Jonathan Cape, 1982) is a classic analysis of chimp machinations over power, and *Bonobo* (University of California Press, 1997) is one of the few monographs on the species.

Our Inner Ape is organized into chapters analysing the two species' use of power, their sexual and aggressive behaviours, and their capacity for kindness. What's more, the writing is clear and witty.

So, one asks breathlessly, is de Waal's line that we humans are like chimps or bonobos? A lesser scientist with one ideological bent would say this isn't a perfect world and surrender to our unfortunate chimpness. And an ideologue

of a different stripe would debunk the idea of our chimpish nature and search for our inner bonobo. But de Waal raises deeper points.

First, neither chimps nor bonobos are what humans were like in our ancestral past. While we've been busy evolving in the 5 million or so years since the last ancestor we shared with these species, chimps and bonobos have not been frozen museum displays: they are our contemporaneous cousins, not our ancestors.

Second, in every realm of our behaviour and biology, we humans bear some striking similarities, and differences, to each of the species. Studying another species in order to gain an understanding of our own is as much about the differences as the similarities, observing the unique solutions that each species has come up with to solve its own evolutionary, ecological and social challenges.

Finally, the dramatic dichotomy between those fun 'party animal' bonobos and those mean old chimps is somewhat exaggerated. Bonobos still have hierarchies and conflict (why else have reconciliation?); their peaceful kingdom is not built on inherent egalitarianism, but on necessary tolerance, and bonobos have most plausibly developed that frothy

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sexuality as a means of avoiding infanticide. Meanwhile, chimps too are capable of affiliation and altruism; their violence and competition are embedded in an array of social checks and balances, and they even display something resembling empathy.

De Waal covers this with great wisdom and subtlety. I have problems with his views in only one domain. In considering that even bonobos are hierarchical, de Waal suggests that hierarchies are inevitable for social species — “we simply could not live without them” — for a number of reasons. First, if we lacked easy ways to discern rank, “no one would be able to tell who is who”. A response to this is that when rank and merit dissociate, a lack of easy sym-

bols for the former makes it easier to recognize and value the latter. Second, de Waal sees rank as allowing for grander human accomplishments. “This is why the most cooperative human enterprises, such as large corporations and the military, have the best-defined hierarchies.” But this assumes that corporations or armies are truly cooperative enterprises, as opposed to subordinating systems that benefit profiteers (such as shareholders, or leaders who control armies). Finally, de Waal sees an ironic and paradoxical benefit to hierarchy, as it can take an abusive hierarchy to provide the impetus for cooperation from below to overthrow it and establish something fairer. Naturally, one hopes instead for hunter-gatherers

writ large, where justice emerges naturally from bottom-up local interactions, rather than “democracy as born from violence”, to use de Waal’s phrase. But, as John Lennon put it, you may say I’m a dreamer, which is quite possible.

That difference of opinion aside, this is a rarity, a superb scientist producing an excellent book for non-specialists. This should be required reading for the opinionated cousins (or better yet, world leaders) whose ancient encounters with Robert Ardrey or Konrad Lorenz have led them to believe that they understand what kind of ape we are. ■

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Symmetry by numbers

The Equation that Couldn't be Solved: How Mathematical Genius Discovered the Language of Symmetry

by Mario Livio

Simon & Schuster: 2005. 368 pp. \$26.95

István Hargittai

The equation in the title is the quintic equation, the mathematical genius is Évariste Galois (1811–32), and the language of symmetry he discovered is group theory. Symmetry combines both beauty and science, and can easily be seen in the world around us. But before he could use it in science, Galois had to create the necessary mathematical tools. The world was slow to listen, and it took almost a hundred years for the practical value of group theory to be truly appreciated. Galois, meanwhile, was killed in a duel at an early age. In *The Equation that Couldn't be Solved*, Mario Livio follows his brief existence like a sleuth.

Born into a scholarly family in a Paris suburb in Napoleonic France, Galois was educated at home before being sent to a boarding school in Paris that rivalled the English schools of the time for austerity and rigid discipline. He was not a great success at school, but soon found satisfaction in mathematics, which became his sole occupation by the time he was 16. Having failed to gain entrance to a more prestigious college, he continued his studies in a high school.

Galois was still only 17 when he continued work started by the Norwegian mathematician Niels Henrik Abel, showing in general terms whether an equation is solvable by a formula or not. For this he introduced the seminal concept of a group, and created a new branch of algebra now known as Galois theory. His first publication appeared in 1829, but a combination of neglect and egotism prevented senior mathematicians of the day from giving him the exposure he deserved. When the work was finally introduced to the French Academy of Sciences, it was hardly appreciated.

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Duel publication? Évariste Galois scribbled down his notes on group theory on the eve of his death.

Nonetheless, Galois continued his creative work, against all the odds. He failed another entrance examination as people greatly inferior to him could not appreciate his work, and lost his adored father, a Republican who was driven to suicide by his royalist political opponents. Young Galois also had a passion for Republican revolution and served a prison term for his political activities. He fell in love with an undeserving girl and was killed in a duel that was related to this unfortunate entanglement. During the night before the tragedy, Galois hurriedly wrote a profound description of his group theory, remarking in the margin: “I have no time.”

The Equation that Couldn't be Solved covers a remarkable number of different topics, including biographies of scientists and mathematicians. It also covers the Rubik cube and other puzzles; string theory; supersymmetry; the origin of creativity; the relationship between the external symmetry of the human face

and body, and mate selection and sex life; and much more. Livio examines the contributions of others that led up to Galois’ discovery, and gives a panoramic view of the direct, as well as quite remote, applications of group theory.

Very little escapes Livio’s attention, especially in twentieth-century physics. But one omission is the contribution to the story of Eugene Wigner. He applied group theory to quantum mechanics in the 1920s, when most of his contemporaries were yet to value it: Wolfgang Pauli called it “die Gruppenpest” — roughly translated as “that pesky group business”. Wigner was awarded a Nobel Prize in 1963 for this work.

Another omission from the book is that, in discussing crystallography, Livio stops at the classical notions of symmetry and defines crystallography as “the science studying the structures and properties of assemblies made of very large numbers of identical units”. This idea supposes regularity and periodicity, and was largely a result of the tremendous success of X-ray diffraction in the twentieth century. Recently, however, the field has embraced other structures, such as the newly discovered quasicrystals of regular but non-periodic patterns. It was an early suggestion by British crystallographer Alan Mackay that the rules describing ‘crystal’ structures be relaxed — and they have been. They now include structures that fall beyond the 230 space groups, and the new rules do not necessarily form groups.

Overextending the inferences from symmetry can be restrictive. As the historian of mathematics E. T. Bell said: “The cowboys have a way of trussing up a steer or a pugnacious bronco, which fixes the brute so that it can neither move nor think. This is the hog-tie and it is what Euclid did to geometry.”

The book seems a little biased in places when it emphasizes the omnipresence of symmetry, but it nevertheless makes a lively and fascinating read for a broad audience. ■

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