

# Review: The Age of Empathy

Anarcho

April 25, 2012

This is an excellent, if occasionally frustrating, book. Written by leading Primatologist Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy* summarises the research into the evolution of cooperation, social feelings and empathy. If I were to sum it up in a few words it would be: “Kropotkin was right.”

These were subjects close to Kropotkin’s heart and which, as de Waal shows, he has been vindicated. Sadly, the scientific community did not follow Kropotkin’s lead. Instead we got ideology and cultural assumptions passing for science – as expressed by the embarrassment of a nature alleged rooted in individualistic competition having so much cooperation within it. That this was labelled a paradox rather a refutation by many scientists shows the power of unstated and assumed societal assumptions.

Now, a century after *Mutual Aid* was published, we are seeing the outcome of research into how natural selection could produce morality. The book describes this in convincing detail and summarises (to quote de Waal) much of the “exciting new research about the origins of altruism and fairness in both ourselves and other animals.” (5) “Human empathy,” he shows, “has the backing of a long evolutionary history” (x) and has its basis in the cooperation required to survive in a hostile environment. Thus we have inherited cooperative tendencies from our ape ancestors, for “mutualism and reciprocity as the basis of cooperation” places “chimps much closer to humans than to the social insects.” (180)

So the book’s title plays on two themes, namely that now is the time to create more empathy within society *and* that empathy has been evolving within mammals for millions of years: “Empathy is part of our evolution, and not just a recent part, but an innate, age-old capacity.” (205) This evolutionary heritage is reflected today, with research showing that we “know an unfair distribution when we see one, and try to counteract it” (186) and “we still have a psychology that feels most comfortable with these outcomes.” (221) Thus:

“Empathy builds on proximity, similarity, and familiarity, which is entirely logical given that it evolves to promote in-group cooperation. Combined with our interest in social harmony, which requires a fair distribution of resources, empathy put the human species on a path towards small-scale societies that stress equality and solidarity.” (221)

Unsurprisingly, de Waal discusses our evolutionary heritage and it will make encouraging reading for libertarians. “We have,” he argues, “a deeply ingrained sense of fairness, which derives from our long history as egalitarians.” (159) Not only are we “born revolutionaries,” we “emphasise sharing and suppress distinctions of wealth and power” and so “tribal communities

level the hierarchy” by “ridicule, gossip, and disobedience” but also “more drastic measures.” (161) We have a “distinctly subversive streak” (161) which mocks those seeking power over others – and acts to stop them. Thus “empathy binds individuals together and gives each a stake in the welfare of others” (223) and “the true cradle of cooperation is the community.” (182)

Moreover, this cooperative and egalitarian legacy impacts on us today and in spite of all erosive impacts of surviving under capitalism in economic experiments, the majority “is altruistic, cooperative, sensitive to fairness, and orientated towards community goals.” This means that the “[t]raditional economic models don’t consider the human sense of fairness, even though it demonstrably affects economic decisions.” (162) Similarly, rather than being the aggressive animals of popular culture, warfare “conflicts at the deepest level with our humanity.” (220) This can be seen from the amount of propaganda required to get a nation to go to war.

All this confirms anarchist theory. As de Waal suggests, and no anarchist would disagree, the “firmest support for the common good comes from enlightened self-interest: the realisation that we’re all better off if we work together.” (223)

The book also addresses modern evolutionary theory, specifically the much misunderstood notion of genetic “selfishness.” He discusses a meeting with Richard Dawkins, author of *The Selfish Gene*, and notes the common ground between them. He has “no problem calling genes ‘selfish’ so long as it’s understood that this says nothing about the actual motives of humans and animals.” (40) This is Dawkins’ position (see the preface to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *The Selfish Gene* where he acknowledges that some of the language used in the first edition was confused and so misleading). So “selfish” genes do not preclude cooperative and altruistic acts – quite the reverse, as cooperation (as Kropotkin stressed) is how animals (and so their genes) best survive.

Talking of Kropotkin, de Waal explicitly mentions him and *Mutual Aid* (32–3). He insists on calling someone who renounced his title “the Russian prince,” but this can be forgiven as he summarises Kropotkin’s argument that mutual aid benefits those who practice it: “If helping is communal, he argued, all parties stand to gain.” (171–2) This means that cooperation is “a crucial survival skill” and “cooperative groups of animals (or humans) would outperform less cooperative ones.” (33) It boils down to “the choice between the small rewards of individualism and the large rewards of collective action.” (163) Cooperation is in our best interests – as Kropotkin argued.

Sadly, de Waal suggests that Kropotkin “forgot to add” that “cooperation is vulnerable to freeloaders” and suggests that he “corrected himself” by arguing (in *Conquest of Bread*) a “few years after publication” of *Mutual Aid* that the non-cooperative would be expelled from groups. (171–2) However, while *Conquest of Bread* may have been published in English after *Mutual Aid*, it was originally published in French before it. Nor is *Mutual Aid* silent on the need for groups to act on anti-social and non-cooperative behaviour as de Waal suggests (nor did it deny competitive behaviour, another popular myth). Thus we find in that work Kropotkin mentioning how animals penalise uncooperative individuals (for example, “selfish” ants would be “treated as an enemy, or worse”). In this way “natural selection continually must eliminate” anti-social instincts – or, to quote de Waal, Kropotkin recognised that a “measure of reciprocity” (174) is required for mutual aid to work and so there is a need “to penalise those who fall short” (180–1) in order to ensure cooperative behaviour benefits all.

So while it is obvious that de Waal is better acquainted with Kropotkin’s work than most commenters on it, it is clear that he could do with a closer read. If he did, then he would realise that to state that “Mutual aid has become a standard ingredient of modern evolutionary theories,

albeit not exactly in the way Kropotkin formulated it” (33) is incorrect. Kropotkin recognised the need to reward cooperative behaviour and punish those who do not reciprocate in the same way as modern evolutionary theories.

The book is keen to suggest that nature informs our ethical standards, causing some to invoke “naturalistic fallacy” and dismiss the moral relevance of empathy and altruism in non-human animals. What ethical conclusions can be drawn from scientific evidence? After all, if it is a mistake to justify human selfishness on the basis of the alleged competitive aspects of nature (as right-wing Social Darwinism does) then, surely, it is just as bad to advocate altruism because animals also cooperate.

Yet this ignores the fact that our sense of fairness and right-and-wrong, our horror at certain behaviour, are a product of evolution. As de Waal suggests, “[t]rying to set human cooperation apart from the larger natural scheme... hardly qualifies as an evolutionary approach.” (182) Ultimately, if we do not derive “ought” from “is” where *do* we derive it from? A Holy Book? Abstract thought untethered to anything as trivial as evidence? As Kropotkin argued, if “the only lesson Nature gives to man is one of evil” then a thinker “necessarily has to admit the existence of some other, extra-natural, or super-natural influence which inspires man with conceptions of ‘supreme good’” which “nullifies” attempts “at explaining evolution by the action of natural forces only.”

The question, then, is not whether we derive “ought” from “is” but rather how do we justify the “is” we try and derive from nature. Here is when our reason and our evolved sense of empathy and justice come in. We analyse nature, see it as both competitive and cooperative and then, based on our evolved sense of fairness and our evolving societal norms, draw ethical conclusions. We can be horrified by the worse aspects of the natural world precisely because our sense of justice has evolved as part of it.

So this book is handy evidence to refute all those who rationalise their own narrow perspectives (and social position) in terms of “nature.” This is not justified by empirical evidence – nor Darwin’s work. The competitive individualistic evolutionary perspective is highly selective, indeed distorted. We are not condemned “by nature” to treat each other badly, quite the reverse. In showing the evidence for this de Waal is very convincing.

*The Age of Empathy* shows that the modern researcher (unknowingly, usually) is following in Kropotkin’s footsteps. As Kropotkin put it in the posthumously published *Ethics*, “*Mutual Aid-Justice-Morality* are thus the consecutive steps of an ascending series” and that morality “developed later than the others” (and so was “an unstable feeling and the least imperative of the three”). Thus mutual aid came first and ensured “the ground is prepared for the further and the more general development of more refined relations.” This is an important point, both because many confuse mutual aid with altruism and it shows that Kropotkin recognised that ethical behaviour is not fixed in spite of it having an evolutionary basis.

Marxists tend to reject the evidence that our behaviour reflects our evolution as social animals. Instead they subscribe to the idea that “human nature” is a social construct. To quote Marx: “M. Proudhon does not know that the whole of history is nothing but a continual transformation of human nature.” (*The Poverty of Philosophy*) To this day there are some who think that this sentence by Marx nullifies millions of years of evolution! And as de Waal suggests, “Marxism foundered on the illusion of a culturally engineered human. It assumed that we are born as a tabula rasa, a blank slate.” (202) So Marx’s position is pre-Darwinian – and simply wrong. Sadly, it has been parroted by Marxists ever since. The early Marx’s comments on species-character is more fruitful a concept (particular with regards to alienation – for how can you experience alienation if you

don't have something to be alienated *from*?). For those interested in such analysis the work of Erich Fromm is recommended.

The more sophisticated Marxist (like their Christian equivalent) will not read these words literally but rather suggest that different societies will promote different aspects of (our evolved) human nature. Which is true, of course, but not what Marx asserted. As Noam Chomsky (correctly) put it:

“Human nature is not totally fixed, but on any realistic scale evolutionary processes are much too slow to affect it... So within a realistic time frame there is not going to be any change in human nature. But human nature allows many different options and the choice among those options can change, and it has. So there are striking changes, even in our own lifetime, of what we accept as tolerable. Take something like women's rights: if you go back not so many years women were basically regarded as property. That's a sign of the expansion of our moral spheres. So sure, human nature remains the same but a lot of things can change.” (*New Scientist* no. 2856, 19 March 2012)

This echoes Kropotkin, who noted in *Mutual Aid* that “Man is a result of both his inherited instincts and his education.” Looking around, it is obvious that humans can, and do, ignore our evolved sense of empathy and fairness. Some of us have developed whole ideologies (such as economics!) to rationalise doing this (to ease our consciences). Kropotkin recognised this very obvious fact, arguing in an article for the anarchist press that “[w]hile the fundamental features of human characters can only be mediated by a very slow evolution, the relative amount of individualist and mutual aid spirit are among the most changeable features of man. Both being equally products of an anterior development, their relative amounts are seen to change in individuals and even societies with a rapidity which would strike the sociologist if only he paid attention to the subject, and analysed the corresponding facts.” As de Waal suggests: “We may not be able to create a New Man, we're remarkably good at modifying the old one.” (210)

So recognising that ethics have an evolutionary basis is *not* to suggest that ethical positions are unchanging. Far from it – as history shows, different cultures have radically different notions of what is moral (arranged marriages, slavery, wage-labour for example). Moreover, the rationales for these practices have also changed (divine right, religious authority, economic “science” to name just a few). Kropotkin sketched these changing notions in *Ethics*. Human society evolves and changes, reflecting changing economic, class and social relationships, but within limits based upon an evolved sense of ethics – a “human nature” which simply cannot be assumed away.

As Marx's comment was directed at Proudhon, it must be noted that many of his ideas seem to be confirmed by the research de Waal summarises so ably. We seem to have a sense of fairness, justice even, and practice reciprocity, all themes the Frenchman expounded upon (and Marx, perhaps needless to say, mocked). His proclamation of anarchy in *What is Property?* followed an interesting discussion of cooperation in animals and humans. He noted that the “social instinct, in man and beast, exists to a greater or less degree” and to “practise justice is to obey the social instinct; to do an act of justice is to do a social act.” Thus the “social instinct and the moral sense [man] shares with the brutes; and when he thinks to become god-like by a few acts of charity, justice, and devotion, he does not perceive that in so acting he simply obeys an instinct wholly animal in its nature.” Unsurprisingly, Kropotkin discusses Proudhon and his ideas on justice and ethics at some length in *Ethics*.

The frustrating aspects of the book relate to the obvious societal assumptions which creep in. It is somewhat ironic to see a scientist so keen to refute the myths inflicted upon the animal world

so readily accept the myths of modern society – thus the USA is presented as the land of liberty and Europe the land of equality (de Waal’s preference seems to be somewhere in the middle – the North Atlantic not being the best place to live!).

So de Waal does indulge in using metaphors which reflect the society he is within and so he mentions “past exchanges” and “marketplace of services.” (175) This is to be expected, given that scientists are products of the society they live and work. Thus, as Daniel Todes has recounted in *Darwin Without Malthus: The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought*, many Russian scientists recognised the importance of Darwin’s work but also recognised the impact of British society on its stress on individual competition. However, while expected it cannot really be excused.

The problems with this can be seen when de Waal asks the question of whether a “harder worker deserve to make more? This libertarian fairness ideal is quintessentially American” (196–7) Yet *genuine* libertarians (as opposed to the American *propertarians*) know that under capitalism those who work hardest are usually the poorest and that those who “make more” do so because other work for them. As such, *genuine* libertarians acknowledge Proudhon’s analysis that property meant “another shall perform the labour while [the proprietor] receives the product” and so it was “the right to enjoy and dispose of another’s goods, – the fruit of another’s labour.”

So while de Waal wishes to foster empathy, he does not ask whether this requires changing our economic system at its base rather than trying to change its outcomes. Yes, taxing the wealthy to reduce inequality is all fine and well but surely the question should be asked why the rich are richer (or, at least, why they have got so much richer over the last 30-odd years!). The unreflecting assumptions of capitalism can be seen in de Waal but the scientific method of analysis is found in Proudhon (indeed, the French anarchist calls in that work for a “scientific socialism”!).

The quotes from Barak Obama and references to the current economic crisis will also date the book (particularly as the ruling elite unsurprisingly used the crisis caused by neo-liberalism to foster more of that agenda rather than empathy). However, these are minor in comparison to the wealth of information de Waal ably summarises on our cooperative heritage.

And perhaps the notion life is competitive and nasty is simply because of, not in spite of any lack of, our cooperative nature. After all, newspapers report on events outside the norm – thus you get records of fights, not the far more cooperative activity that marks everyday life. Similarly with studies of animals, with the hours of cooperative living being the backdrop to the “exciting” displays of alpha-male combat and, as a result, unmentioned. In human terms, this can be seen from the media which concentrates on the “interesting” stories rather than report the mundane (but far more relevant) cooperative goings-on which dominant everyday life. An extreme example can be seen in the run up to Franco’s coup in Spain when a Conservative newspaper started to publish on its front page all the murders, rapes and so on which were happening. There was no actual increase in such crimes but public perception of them rose – so promoting support for an authoritarian regime to solve this apparent rise in lawlessness. Thus uncooperative is so noticeable precisely because such acts are swamped by cooperative relations and so, like islands in an ocean, stand out.

So de Waal’s work is of interest to anarchists and provide substantial evidence to bolster our arguments on the importance of mutual aid as a factor of evolution. It is refreshing to read a scientist proclaim that we are born egalitarian revolutionaries. Yet while he is willing to challenge the stereotypes and lazy-thinking as regards empathy and cooperation within animals, de Waal

shows no such scientific enquiry as regards today's social system. Still, this is a minor complaint about an excellent book.

*The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*

Frans de Waal

Harmony Books

New York

2009

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Anarcho  
Review: The Age of Empathy  
April 25, 2012

Retrieved on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2021 from [anarchism.pageabode.com](http://anarchism.pageabode.com)

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**