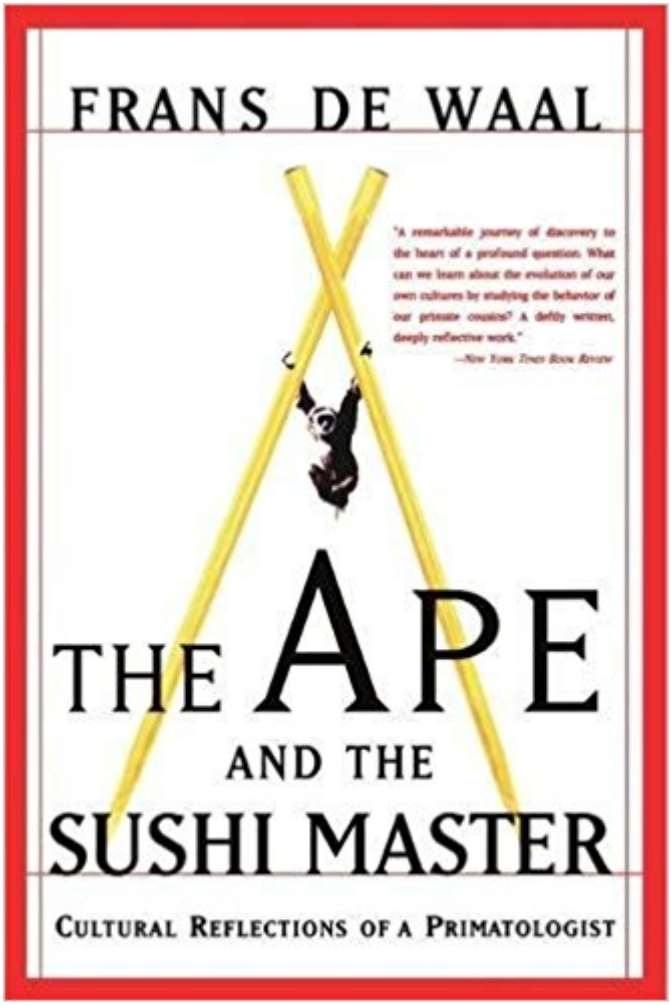
The Ape And The Sushi Master: Cultural Reflections Of A Primatologist



Synopsis

What if apes had their own culture rather than an imposed human version? What if they reacted to situations with behavior learned through observation of their elders (culture) rather than with pure genetically coded instinct (nature)? In answering these questions, eminent primatologist Frans de Waal corrects our arrogant assumption that humans are the only creatures to have made the leap from the natural to the cultural domain.The book's title derives from an analogy de Waal draws between the way behavior is transmitted in ape society and the way sushi-making skills are passed down from sushi master to apprentice. Like the apprentice, young apes watch their group mates at close range, absorbing the methods and lessons of each of their elders' actions. Responses long thought to be instinctive are actually learned behavior, de Waal argues, and constitute ape culture.A delightful mix of intriguing anecdote, rigorous clinical study, adventurous field work, and fascinating speculation, The Ape and the Sushi Master shows that apes are not human caricatures but members of our extended family with their own resourcefulness and dignity.

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Customer Reviews

To watch apes dressed in human clothing and mimicking human manners--an old standby in films and television shows--can make some human viewers uncomfortable, writes the noted primatologist Frans de Waal. Somehow, by doing so, the apes are crossing some line in the sand, a line that speaks to issues of culture, which humans alone are presumed to have. But culture, in de Waal's estimation, does not mean using an oyster fork properly or attending smart gallery openings.

Instead, it "means that knowledge and habits are acquired from others--often, but not always, the older generation." Culture implies communication and social organization, and in this, he notes, humans by no means have a monopoly. A sushi chef learns by acquiring knowledge and habits from more accomplished masters, but so do chimpanzees learn to wash bananas in jungle streams, and so do birds learn to break open mollusks on the rocks below them. Closely examining anthropocentric theories of culture, de Waal counterposes the notion of anthropodenial, "the a priori rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals when in fact they may exist." He takes issue with "selfish gene" theories of behavior, arguing spiritedly that there are better models for explaining why animals--and humans--do what they do. And, against Aristotle, he argues that humans are not the only political animals, if by politics we mean a social process "determining who gets what, when, and how." What animals and humans clearly share, he concludes, are societies in which stability is an impossibility--an observation that may disappoint utopians, but one that helps explain some of the world’s peculiarities. Perhaps no human alive knows more about the great apes than does Frans de Waal. With this book, he ably shows that he knows a great deal about humans, too. Students of biology, culture, and communication will find much food for thought in his pages. --Gregory McNamee --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Though evidence suggests that animals can teach skills to members of their group, appreciate aesthetics and express empathy, Western scientists are often reluctant to interpret such behavior in cultural terms, claims zoologist and ethologist de Waal (Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes and Bonobo: The Forgotten Ape). "Our culture and dominant religion have tied human dignity and self-worth to our separation from nature and distinctness from other animals," he writes, arguing that this dualism prevents us from recognizing how similar human and animal behavior can be. De Waal cites fascinating examples of animals acting in ways typically thought the exclusive purview of humans (apes that enjoy creating paintings or engaging in nonreproductive sexual activity; rescue dogs that become depressed when they find only corpses). Inspired by the work of Japanese primatologist Kinji Imanishi, whose cultural tradition emphasizes interconnectedness among living things, de Waal argues for an end to the West’s anthropocentric bias in science. De Waal prefers a "Darwistotelian" approach, which would seek "to understand humanity in the wider context of nature" and build a concept of human identity "around how we are animals that have taken certain capacities a significant step farther" than have other species. Lucid and engaging, though at times loosely focused, de Waal’s "reflections" will likely capture the attention not only of zoologists and social scientists but of animal-rights advocates as well. Agent, Elizabeth Ziemska.

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The author continues to look at evolution and the overlapping of different species, including ours. He looks at how difficult it is to differentiate between nature and nurture, how it’s not always important to do so, and how too many people switch definitions when defining human and non-human behavior. It’s his usually well written, mass market explanation of evolution and behavior.The book is a bit overlong, the only reason it lost one star.

I love this author. He is so intelligent, experienced and clear. He applies his anthropological experience and knowledge and comes up with insights which could knock your socks off. Anything he writes is worth reading.

great item!

I have bought and read this book. In my opinion, it’s very well-written. It goes into long discussions about the ideas of culture from several points of views. He uses many an example to illustrate his point in order to get the reader to fully understand where he’s coming from. Rather than merely criticize any argument against his point, he illustrates where the point is coming from in order to give their point a chance, then to go on to his point. It was sensitive to the issues concerning the subject, but firm in his point of view. However I did think it could have been shorter. While, it is a very good read, it can be too lengthy in the number of examples he uses. While I understand that he does so in order to make the point hit the reader in the head, he could have been more straightforward, rather than going around the point before saying what his point was. Otherwise, that is my only negative critique of the book. If you’re fine with a long book, and have plenty of spare time to read it, I recomment you read it. Otherwise, this book isn’t for you.

A joke that begins like this is typical of crude and simplistic anthropomorphism and is illustrative of why scientists are so scared of being called anthropomorphic. The consequence of such a label is usually a joke at the their expense: "Have you heard the one about the scientist who walks into a store with a parrot on his shoulder?" Franz De Waal is neither a subscriber to "joke-a-day" nor to such base forms of anthropomorphism. He starts out by mentioning that for most scientists, interest in their field began with a love for nature. Such a closeness to animals "creates the desire to

understand them, and not just a little piece of them, but the whole animal." In such a venture good scientists employ all available tools and consequently "anthropomorphism is not only inevitable, it is a powerful tool."De Waal is convincing, but on this point he need not be overwhelmingly so since most scientists have no problem distinguishing between childish and humorous anthropomorphism, and that which is useful in providing anecdotal observations on animal behavior. De Waal states that in the earliest days of ethology (the naturalistic study of animal behavior) and long before sociobiology argued the point, the very idea of any "continuity between human and animal behavior" was anathema to all. Things have changed and the dividing line between nature/nurture is no longer under attack, (to remain a target something must at least exist and that line is now so blurred as to be unidentifiable). De Waal has his sights set elsewhere and rips "a maximum number of holes in the nature/culture divide." He convincingly shows that not only do animals have a culture, but that it is robust, diversified, and learned through a process of imitation. De Waal shows that in Eastern cultures there is little resistance to the idea of animal culture. He spends some time looking at the work of Japanese primatologist Kinji Imanishi. The Japanese approach is another method of primatology and it gave De Waal the idea for his book's title. The APE AND THE SUSHI MASTER speaks to the similar teaching techniques used by mother apes and Sushi chefs. Apprentice cooks and young apes both learn through years of observation and imitation.Reading this book will give you insights into not only how we view animals and what the nature of culture is, but it also has something to say about how we view ourselves. The book is very well written and is aimed at a general reading audience. De Waal is thoughtful and offers his opinions in a non forceful manner. For a book that deals with such contentious subjects, it's refreshing that there is very little invective. Blind support for "selfish genes" is however justifiably criticized and De Waal shows that altruism and cooperation are equally as likely outcomes of natural selection. It's now time for us to emerge from "anthropodenial" about animal culture and "of being tied to how we are unlike any animal". Instead we are urged to adopt a more humanistic view - and concomitantly, a more humane view of animals - both grounded in science. We may then believe that "human identity [is] built around how we are animals that have taken certain capacities a significant step farther."

I have just finished reading this book, and I am both thrilled and saddened. I am thrilled because someone has had the insight and courage to say that our human characteristics are not all that unique in the world and that culture is not all-or-nothing. I am saddened because it was made painfully clear just how much our own values and beliefs affect what we see...or even what we WILL see. Western society with its insistence that humans are utterly distinct and even "unnatural" and its

refusal to look at certain issues like sexuality means that we are constantly blinding ourselves to the facts. If there was ever a treatise that showed just how much cultural affects perceptions--including the perceptions of what and where is culture!--this is it. I agree that the flow of the book is a little jumpy, going from discussions of personalities like Konrad Lorenz to discussions of ethological observations, but here too we get to see human blinders in action. Too many people looked at Lorenz--and still look at Darwin--through their own political (and "other") agendas and do not judge the work itself and the facts it is based on. Maybe if we were a little LESS personal in our evaluations of the world around us and took it on its own terms, we would understand more and argue less.