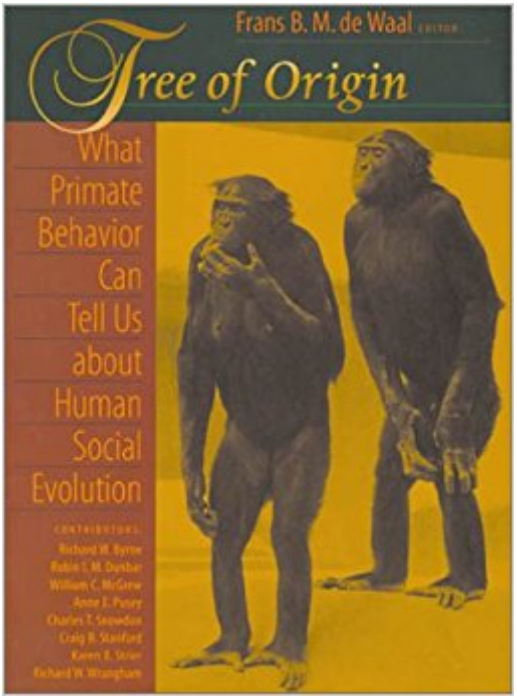
Tree Of Origin: What Primate Behavior Can Tell Us About Human Social Evolution



Synopsis

How did we become the linguistic, cultured, and hugely successful apes that we are? Our closest relatives--the other mentally complex and socially skilled primates--offer tantalizing clues. In Tree of Origin nine of the world’s top primate experts read these clues and compose the most extensive picture to date of what the behavior of monkeys and apes can tell us about our own evolution as a species. It has been nearly fifteen years since a single volume addressed the issue of human evolution from a primate perspective, and in that time we have witnessed explosive growth in research on the subject. Tree of Origin gives us the latest news about bonobos, the "make love not war" apes who behave so dramatically unlike chimpanzees. We learn about the tool traditions and social customs that set each ape community apart. We see how DNA analysis is revolutionizing our understanding of paternity, intergroup migration, and reproductive success. And we confront intriguing discoveries about primate hunting behavior, politics, cognition, diet, and the evolution of language and intelligence that challenge claims of human uniqueness in new and subtle ways. Tree of Origin provides the clearest glimpse yet of the apelike ancestor who left the forest and began the long journey toward modern humanity.

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Customer Reviews

Nine of the world’s leading primatologists come together in this engaging volume to discuss many of the evolutionary forces that have created Homo sapiens. Edited by the eminent de Waal (The Ape and the Sushi Master, Forecasts, Feb. 19) of Emory University, all nine essays find an appropriate

middle ground neither too technical nor too simplistic. Each also summarizes the current state of research into some aspect of primate behavior and what we can learn from it about the evolution of human life and culture. The acquisition, distribution and preparation of food is central to the contributions by Craig Stanford and Richard Wrangham. Stanford argues that collaborative hunting may be responsible for the development of social intelligence, while Wrangham cogently links the discovery of cooking to the creation of the human mating system. Richard Byrne's contribution discusses the evolution of human intelligence by examining patterns of tool use and food manipulation in living primates. Charles Snowdon explores the twin concepts of communication and language by looking broadly across the animal kingdom and wrestling with the question of whether or not there is such a thing as a language instinct. William McGrew does much the same for culture, effectively demonstrating that humans can no longer be considered the sole purveyors of culture. With nine separate essays, it is not surprising that a fair amount of repetition occurs, but the strengths clearly outweigh the shortcomings in this provocative book.

Here, noted primatologist de Waal (Chimpanzee Politics) invited scientists who participated in a 1997 symposium on primate behavior and human social behavior to shed new light on the origins of human evolution. The authors draw on their collective years of research observing nonhuman primates to find comparisons between primates and man in such areas as ecology, sex and reproduction, social organization, culture, cognition, language, and hominization. Since the great apes are the nonhuman primates most closely related to humans genetically, they are the primary subject of the studies in this volume. Dr. Karen Strier broadens the horizon with her study of the muriqui, a South American monkey. While each primatologist competently addresses the subject of human origins, their theories vary and sometimes even clash. The individual pieces are intriguingly interesting, but the whole complex puzzle remains unsolved. The text is supplemented with research notes from each author. For academic and larger science collections. Raymond Hamel, Wisconsin Regional Primate Research Ctr. Lib., Madison

These essays--by some of the best names in the field--cover broadly everything you might want to know about our distant past. I especially enjoyed the works on culture and language, but I encourage anyone who reads this book not to cherry-pick the essays, but instead to read it cover-to-cover including the notes provided for the text, which, contrary to being mere academic

citations, were instead fascinating commentary not to be missed!If I were teaching a class about humans, I would include this as a text, and I am thinking of encouraging my (older) children to read it over the summer as an adjunct to their studies in Biology.

I checked this book out of the local library many weeks ago, having come across it via a desultory shelf scan. I was so engrossed by the book, I kept renewing it, then returned it to the library and bought my own copy.Each chapter got my synapses firing with interesting information about how the evolution of human culture might be inferred from primate behaviors and primate and human physiology. I scribbled numerous notes that started with "I wonder if ... " or "Is it possible that ...", using the data from the authors as jumping-off points.For example, before I read the book, I'd been wondering if it'd be possible to identify and track back as far as possible in time a collection of aphorisms that all cultures shared, such as "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach," to see what might be learned about our cultural evolution - and how closely our "culture" was actually tied to our physiological hard-wiring. Lo and behold, one of the articles in Tree of Origin appears to offer a heart-through-stomach theory for how humans came to pair off as couples.The discussion about the size of our neocortex (neocortices?) and its relationship to the size of social groups we can "manage" expanded another line of thinking on my part about what might really be at the roots of what we call racism and of our propensity toward bloody conflict. It's possible that one core cause is our brains' maximum capacity for social complexity, rather than "just" a learned behavior that one can discard through an intellectual process.The book reminded me of Desmond Morris' books, The Human Ape and The Human Zoo, both of which I also found fascinating.Now that I own this book, I can re-read it and mark it up as I wish!

Excellent, like all his books.

I read this because of some of Steven Pinkers works quote/reference F. de Waal.The chapters are written by various authors, and some of them can be fairly dry (like a research paper) however the material is filled with substance.If you're looking for some information that will reinforce or convince you that lower primates display very similar human traits ie: altruistic or selfish behavior, then this is a fairly good source.

This is an anthology put together by Frans de Waal as the result of a 1997 conference on Human Evolution. De Waal asked that the authors write in a speculative mode about human evolution, and

that they stick to a jargon-free style. The articles here are not original research papers ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â • they are written for a less specialized audience. And, as a non-specialist, I found it very readable and fascinating.The study of hominid evolution is remarkably speculative, even given de WaalÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s direction to the authors. There is of course evidence to draw on. Fossil evidence (fossilized remains of human ancestors, tooth marks or cut marks on fossilized bones of other animals, remains of tools, etc.) can vary from conclusive to suggestive. We never know, when the evidence is scant, whether we are looking at outliers or norms.Evidence drawn from observations of our closest relatives ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â • great apes, especially chimpanzees and bonobos ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â • can be incredibly suggestive. But it is not always easy to distinguish traits and behaviors that are distinctive to those speciesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ own evolutionary track rather than shared with our own.The speculative nature of the study invites, as here, researchers to take up a variety of perspectives from which to offer hypotheses to answer such questions as why human-sized brains evolved, how early bipedal apes or pre-humans survived, what social groupings emerged among australopithecines and others of our ancestors, . . . Researchers look at what these hominids ate, what foods their teeth were optimized for, what their skeletal features can tell us about how fast or far they could travel, etc., all as clues to answering those critical evolutionary questions.One very interesting perspective is that of cooking. When cooking emerged among our ancestors isnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t known, but it appears to be relatively recent, maybe 250,000 years ago (for which we have evidence of earthen ovens in use). Cooking could have changed almost everything. Diets at the time were primarily vegetarian, and, for that matter, meat still comprises a small part of apesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ diets. A diet of raw plants required large jaws, teeth, and a large gut for digestion. Post-Australopithecines, our most direct ancestors, by contrast, have remarkably small guts, teeth, and jaws.A higher ratio of energy taken in from food relative to the energy spent to digest it could have freed energy for other uses ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â • foraging over larger areas, or cognitive activity.Cooking also could have introduced important social changes. Food gathering, along with mating, is a strong component of social life for apes and human ancestors. Cooking would have introduced a new element ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â • a time delay between finding and consuming food. Raw foods would be gathered for cooking, maybe in another place and at a later time. It would need to be protected from theft from other animals, and a more explicit distribution would need to be devised at the cooking site.You can see how this one change ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â • cooking food ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â • could enable or set in motion many other changes, either direct changes in behaviors or more long term opportunities for adaptive, evolutionary changes.And cooking is just one perspective the authors take up. Other discussions address the evolution of

ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“cultureÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• in chimpanzees and other species besides our own, the role of hunting and meat-eating, the effect of group size on intelligence and behavior, and the evolution of brain size.Conclusions are tentative. Conclusions may always have significant uncertainties. Researchers just canÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t directly access enough evidence. We donÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t, for example, have a definitive fossil example of the hypothesized common ancestor to chimpanzees and humans.But understanding where we came from and looking in the mirror at our current close relatives are both instructive about ourselves and just plain entertaining. Having read several of de WaalÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s works, especially the classic Chimpanzee Politics, has given me a new eye for watching and enjoying humans like myself.

I watched this book for many months and waited until the publishers go down on their e-book pricing which they did for a little while but I got so much more than what I was expecting out of this book. I got it mostly for the purpose of understanding humans and why we do some of the things (social aspect) that we do. The book however is a compilation of essays by different experts in biology, primatology, ethology, anthropology, behavioral ecology, and evolutionary psychology. From my understanding, the different chapters of this book were topics presented in a conference coordinated by the editor himself and later were compiled for this book. The range of topics discussed and the depth of knowledge shared by each expert are truly worth its price and the time youÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ll spend reading it. You might find some of the topics are more interesting than others but each one offers rich information that you will not get from reading popular science books or magazines.

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