



MARIAN BRICKNER

# Who Are We?

## FRANS DE WAAL

**W**E ARE BLESSED WITH TWO CLOSE primate relatives to study, and they are as different as night and day. One is a gruff-looking, ambitious character with anger-management issues. The other is an egalitarian proponent of a free-spirited lifestyle. Everyone has heard of the chimpanzee, known to science since the seventeenth century. Its hierarchical and murderous behavior has inspired the common view of humans as “killer apes.” It’s our biological destiny, some scientists say, to grab power by vanquishing others and to wage war into perpetuity. I have witnessed enough bloodshed among chimpanzees to agree that they have a violent streak. But we shouldn’t ignore our other close relative, the bonobo, discovered only last century. Bonobos are a happy-go-lucky bunch with healthy sexual appetites. Peaceful by nature, they belie the notion that ours is a purely bloodthirsty lineage.

To have two close relations with strikingly different societies is extraordinarily instructive. The power-hungry and brutal chimp contrasts with the peace-loving and erotic bonobo—a kind of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Our own nature is an uneasy marriage of the two.

Does the fact that one of our closest relatives kills its neighbors mean that “warfare is in our DNA”? This makes it sound as if we are destined to be a warring people forever. But even ants, which definitely have warlike DNA, are not violent as long as they have plenty of space and food. What would be the point? It’s only when one colony’s interests collide with those of another that such behavior makes sense. War is not an insuppressible urge. It is an option.

Nevertheless, it cannot be coincidental that the only animals in which gangs of males expand their territory by deliberately exterminating neighboring males happen

to be humans and chimpanzees. It's hardly surprising that scientists emphasizing man's violent side have flocked to the chimpanzee as Exhibit A. The parallels are undeniable and disturbing.

[O]ne aspect of human behavior that the chimp cannot illuminate is something we do even more than wage war: maintain peace. Peace is common among human societies, as is the trading of goods, the sharing of river water, and intermarriage. Here chimps have nothing to tell us, since they lack any friendly ties between groups. All they know is varying degrees of hostility. This means that to understand human intergroup relations at a primal level, we need to look beyond the chimpanzee as an ancestral model.

## THOSE HARMONIOUS BONOBOS

Peaceful mingling between bonobo groups was first noted in the 1980s, when different communities came together in Wamba Forest in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and stayed together for an entire week before splitting up again. This may hardly seem spectacular, but the event was as shocking as the violence among former chimpanzee friends in Gombe. It countered the persistent belief that our lineage is naturally violent. I once saw a video of intergroup mingling in which bonobos fiercely chased each other at first, screaming and barking, but without any physical contact. Then, gradually, females of different groups engaged in GG-rubbing and even groomed one another. In the meantime, their offspring played and wrestled with age peers. Even males of opposing camps eventually engaged in brief scrotal rubbing.

At a different bonobo site, in Lomako Forest, similar observations were made. Males of different groups sometimes wildly chased each other through the undergrowth while the females hung in the trees, shouting and screaming. The clashes looked so fierce that field-workers who were watching got goose bumps. But afterward, the bonobos would be unscathed, and intergroup mergers would occur. They would start out tense, but then the apes would settle down and engage in sex and grooming between the two communities. Only the males of different groups failed to have friendly contact.

The overlapping ranges and mingling at the borders of bonobo communities stand in stark contrast to how chimp groups interact. When the mist lifts from the evolutionary pressures that shaped bonobo society, perhaps we will understand how they have managed to escape what many

people consider the worst scourge of humanity: our xenophobia and our tendency to discount the lives of our enemies. Is it because bonobos fight, if they fight at all, not for a fatherland but for a motherland? Males of any species naturally try to monopolize females, but once female bonobos achieve the upper hand, males may have lost control to the extent that females copulate freely with whomever they want, including neighbors. This made male territorial competition obsolete. First, sexual mingling translates into reproduction, which means that neighboring groups may include your relatives: Enemy males may be brothers, fathers, and sons. And second, it makes no sense for males to risk life and limb to get to females who are already happy to have sex with them.

The upshot is that humans share intergroup behavior with both chimps and bonobos. When relations between human societies are bad, they are worse than between chimps, but when they are good, they are better than between bonobos.

And which do we value most: harmony or competitiveness? This is the problem with the human species. Somewhere in all of this resides a true human nature, but it's stretched in so many different directions that it's difficult to say whether we're naturally competitive or naturally community-building. In fact, we are both, but each society reaches its own balance. In America, "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." In Japan, "the nail that stands out gets pounded into the ground."

## PEACEMAKING IN THE WILD

The definition of reconciliation (a friendly reunion between opponents not long after a fight) is straightforward, but the emotions involved are hard to pinpoint. The least that occurs, but this is already truly remarkable, is that negative emotions, such as aggression and fear, are overcome in order to move to a positive interaction, such as a kiss. The bad feelings are reduced or left behind. We experience this transition from hostility to normalization as "forgiveness." Forgiveness is sometimes touted as uniquely human, even uniquely Christian, but it may be a natural tendency for cooperative animals.

We know more about reconciliation in other primates than in our own species. This remains true today. Psychologists tend to focus on abnormal or problematic behavior, such as bullying, so that we know startlingly little about the spontaneous, normal ways in which conflict is reduced or overcome. In defense of this

lamentable situation, one scientist argued to me that human reconciliation is far more complex than in monkeys, influenced as it is by education and culture. In other primates, he said, it's mere instinct.

But the word "instinct" stuck in my mind. I barely know what this means anymore, since purely inborn behavior is impossible to find. Like humans, other primates develop slowly; they have years to be influenced by the environment in which they grow up, including its social fabric. In fact, we know that primates adopt all sorts of behaviors and skills from each other, and therefore groups of the same species may act quite differently. No wonder primatologists increasingly speak of "cultural" variability. Most of this variability concerns tool-use and eating habits, such as chimpanzees cracking nuts with stones or Japanese monkeys washing potatoes in the ocean. But *social* culture is a distinct possibility as well.

This discussion with the psychologists gave me an idea. I put juveniles of two different macaque species together for five months. The typically quarrelsome rhesus monkeys were housed with the far more tolerant and easygoing stumptail monkeys. After a fight, stumptail monkeys often reconcile by holding each others' hips. Surprisingly, the rhesus monkeys were afraid at first. Not only are stumptails slightly larger, the rhesus must have sensed a toughness underneath their gentle temperament. So, with the rhesus clinging in a fearful cluster to the ceiling of the room, the stumptails calmly inspected their new environment. After a couple of minutes, a few rhesus, still in the same uncomfortable position, dared threaten the stumptails with some harsh grunts. If this was a test, they were in for a surprise. Whereas a dominant rhesus monkey would have answered the challenge in no uncertain terms, the stumptails simply ignored it. They didn't even look up. For the rhesus monkeys, this must have been their first experience with dominant companions who felt no need to assert their position.

During the study, the rhesus learned this lesson a thousand times over and also engaged in frequent reconciliations with their gentle oppressors. Physical aggression was highly exceptional and the atmosphere was relaxed. By the end of the five months, the juveniles played together, groomed together, and slept in large mixed huddles. Most important, the rhesus monkeys developed peacemaking skills on a par with those of their more tolerant group mates. At the end of the experiment, after we separated the species, the rhesus

monkeys continued to show three times more friendly reunions and grooming after fights than was typical of their kind. This experiment showed that peacemaking is an acquired social skill rather than an instinct. It's part of social culture. Each group reaches its own balance between competition and cooperation.

## OUR CHOICE

[The nineteenth century English demographer] Thomas Malthus had an incredibly callous political outlook. He believed that any assistance given to the poor negates the natural process according to which these people are supposed to die off. If there was one right that man didn't possess, he said, it was a right to subsistence that he himself could not purchase. Malthus inspired a system of thought, known as Social Darwinism, devoid of compassion. Accordingly, self-interest is society's lifeblood, which translates into progress for the strong at the expense of the weak.

Given the popular use and abuse of evolutionary theory, it's hardly surprising that Darwinism and natural selection have become synonymous with unchecked competition. Darwin himself, however, was anything but a Social Darwinist. On the contrary, he believed there was room for kindness in both human nature and in the natural world. We urgently need this kindness, because the question facing a growing world population is not so much whether or not we can handle crowding, but if we will be fair and just in the distribution of resources. Will we go for all-out competition or will we do the humane thing? Our close relatives can teach us some important lessons here. They show us that compassion is not a recent weakness going against the grain of nature but a formidable power that is as much a part of who and what we are as the competitive tendencies it seeks to overcome. 🌍

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**FRANS DE WAAL, PhD**, biologist and ethologist, is recognized worldwide for his work on the social intelligence of primates. He is the C. H. Candler Professor in the Psychology Department of Emory University and director of the Living Links Center at the Yerkes Primate Center in Atlanta, Georgia.

