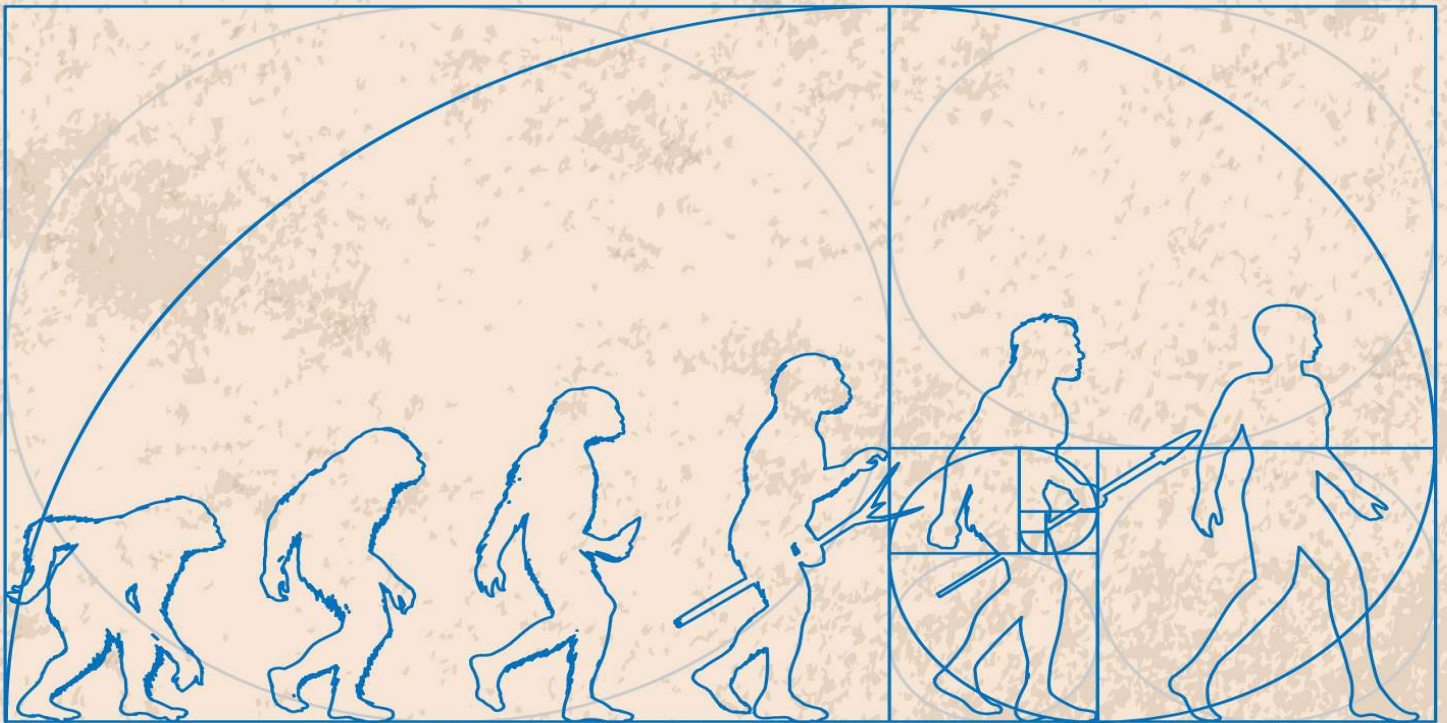


SUMMARY

BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

THE MORAL ANIMAL

BY ROBERT WRIGHT



Summary of The Moral Animal by Robert Wright

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Learn how evolutionary psychology can explain
human behavior.

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Introduction

What makes you who you are as a person? Is it your taste in music or your fashion sense? Is it your experiences, your memories, and the things you've accomplished? All of these things inform your sense of your identity and help you understand who you are. They also help us to differentiate ourselves from other people. But Robert Wright's research indicates that, fundamentally, all human beings are the same thanks to something called evolutionary psychology. Evolutionary psychology can help explain more universal aspects of the human experience, such as why we're attracted to the people we like, why we cheat on our partners, and our relationship with emotions. Over the course of this summary, we'll explore Wright's theories about the evolutionary developments that make us who we are.



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Why Are we So Attracted to Pretty People?

Have you ever noticed how things just seem to work out for pretty people? Maybe you were in class with someone who always got cast in the lead role for the school play, who was the envy and desire of every student, and who appeared to lead a charmed life. And as we watch this behavior, it's easy to assume that human beings are simply shallow creatures who favor beautiful people. But have you ever wondered why? Have you ever considered that beauty might be a trait that is beneficial for survival? The author observes that beauty is actually more practical-- and profitable-- that you know. In this chapter, we're going to take a look at this concept and learn why we are so attracted to pretty people. For starters, we can explain this by examining some of our basic human instincts. We know, for example, that humans are drawn to pursue food, shelter, and connections with others. But what you might not know is that these impulses are guided by the chemicals in our brains. Our four "happy chemicals"-- oxytocin, serotonin, dopamine, and endorphin-- each serve different functions when it comes to helping us survive.

Dopamine, the feel-good hormone, is released every time we do something that promotes our survival, whether that's finding food or engaging in a pleasurable activity. This is to motivate us to do it again. So, for example, when our early ancestors found food, they received a surge of dopamine to encourage them to keep finding food and stay alive. Similarly, oxytocin is released when we establish our place in the social pecking order and forge positive relationships with others. And the same is true with the relationship between mother and child.

For example, when a mother holds her newborn baby, her brain releases a spurt of oxytocin which encourages her to protect and nurture the small, fragile creature in her arms. So, that's how our biology influences our relationships, but how does that intersect with beauty? The author argues that our physical appearance connects with those hormones, encouraging our parents to care for us because we're cute. For example, because babies

are small and pink-cheeked and chubby, they radiate a sense of purity and innocence that motivates adults to protect them. And although we might have evolved to the heights of modern-day society, we're still in touch with our primitive survival instincts even if we don't recognize it. We know that babies can't be left on their own "in the wild," per se, so our desire to help our species survive kicks in.

The author observes that this has been observed in the animal kingdom as well. In fact, Austrian zoologist Konrad Lorenz discovered that there are certain universal features among mammals which translate as "cute" and motivate adults to care for babies. For example, his studies concluded that features such as a large head, a small face, big, round eyes, small ears, a short snout, chubby cheeks, soft skin, playful behavior, and a funny walk are endearing to us. It's why we're obsessed with puppies, kittens, and human babies. It's what activates a mother dog or cat's protective instincts in the same way that a human woman's maternal instincts are triggered. And a 2013 study conducted by the Dutch publication Behavioural Processes confirmed that people feel more empathy towards babies and puppies than they do towards adult members of either species! This therefore proves that physical attraction aids our survival by motivating adults to care for babies.

However, beauty has another role in the animal kingdom as well: it preserves a species by helping animals find mates. This is especially noticeable in birds because they stand out due to their bright plumage. The vibrant red coloring of male cardinals, for example, is what makes them attractive to females. And studies show that males who have brighter feathers, longer tails, and more intricately decorated tails have a better shot at finding love. Unsurprisingly, this indicates that cardinals who stand out by virtue of being "more attractive" are more compelling to prospective mates. And we already know that the same is true of humans. Undoubtedly, we've all watched as the attractive kids in high-school were repeatedly asked out on dates while their less glamorous counterparts felt ignored and looked over.

But this behavior has also been affirmed by studies which examine marriage rates of girls who attempt to marry immediately after leaving high-school.

When girls pursue marriage in favor of pursuing a career or education, with their life's qualifications reduced only to their marriageable potential, the deck is overwhelmingly stacked in favor of those who are physically attractive. In fact, pretty girls who marry young-- and without jobs or education-- often wind up marrying men with substantial incomes and education! However, the author observes that the frequent recurrence of this behavior indicates more than superficial attraction. If we think about the standard evolutionary premise "survival of the fittest," we can understand more about our attraction to pretty partners.

Whether we're aware of it or not, human beings are still driven by our primal instincts to reproduce and further our species. So, when we're trolling for a prospective mate, we're subconsciously assessing them for indicators of their health, strength, and ability to produce viable offspring. In short, we want to ensure that they are fit specimens of our species who are capable of producing children that will survive. So, when we see people who are physically attractive and who take care of themselves, we infer that they are indeed fit mates who are likely to produce healthy offspring. So, even though it's highly unlikely that you're thinking about that while you're out on a date, this just goes to show how heavily beauty influences our decision making when it comes to choosing a mate.



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Infidelity is Pretty Common in the Animal Kingdom

Being unfaithful to your partner is pretty universally regarded as a terrible thing to do. In fact, it's considered so heinous that many religions openly condemn it. The Ten Commandments, for example, even reiterates it twice by saying, "Thou shalt not commit adultery" and "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife." By and large, modern society also reflects this belief; national statistics show that in the United Kingdom, 70% of women and 63% of men believe that cheating is "always wrong." Similarly, in the US, 84% of people-- both men and women-- believe that extramarital affairs are "morally unacceptable." And because of this, we tend to accept that infidelity is universally bad without probing the question more deeply.

But have you ever wondered what motivates people to cheat on their partners? Have you ever wondered whether husbands or wives are more likely to be unfaithful? Although we probably haven't given a lot of thought to our unconscious biases on this topic, the reality is that we all have one. For example, as a heterosexual woman, this topic made me realize that I'm often inclined to assume that a male partner would be more likely to be unfaithful. This assumption corresponds with my previous negative experiences with male partners and with representation in the media. For example, many films and television shows portray male partners as having wandering eyes and groping hands, as being easily tempted by youthful flesh and alluring cleavage. Many women like myself watch these portrayals, reflect on their own experiences and think, "Yeah, I could see it."

But in fact, the author's research indicates that women are more likely to be unfaithful to their partners! And-- believe it or not-- access to material resources is often the motive. Although this might sound shallow or sexist, the author observes that evolutionary psychology provides factual data which proves that superficiality and sexism have little to do with. Rather, he argues that female members of all species have a strong desire to protect themselves and their offspring, and this often requires them to pursue the most advantageous resources and romantic partners. For example, scientist Frans

de Waal's study of bonobo monkeys revealed that every female bonobo is fighting for survival because resources are often so scarce as to prevent each mother from getting enough food for herself and her baby.

For this reason, females are heavily invested in procreating with males whose genetics will create the strongest offspring and thus, those who are most likely to survive. That means that females are very eager to have sex with the alpha male in exchange for access to resources. For example, when males distribute food from their hunts, a female is likely to be very reluctant to sleep with the hunters unless she gets a sizable portion of the food. As a result, female bonobos frequently mate with males who are best equipped to share the resources they need, even if that requires them to be unfaithful to their mate. And, as we saw in the previous chapter's analysis of attraction, female bonobos-- just like humans-- are also inclined to mate with multiple partners who are likely to give their children the best genetic advantage. So, although that's not to say that infidelity is morally acceptable-- or even a good idea-- evolutionary psychology can offer a glimpse of some hidden, primal motivations that drive us to cheat on our partners!



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We Aren't Quite as Altruistic as We Think We Are

Altruism is a word we often hear in connection with selflessness and kindness. And, as a result, we assume that altruism is always a good thing. In fact, the popular connotations of this word might lead us to define altruism as “doing something kind for someone else out of the goodness of your own.” In practice, you might think of altruism as something like giving your sister the last chicken leg when you really want it for yourself. You might associate altruism with donating money to a charity at Christmas or giving up your seat on the train to someone who needs it more than you do. And all of these are certainly kind things to do! So, is it possible that altruism can ever be problematic?

The author affirms that it actually is! That's because altruism has the capacity to distort our worldview and cause us to make decisions that truly are not in our best interest or that of others. And part of that problem stems from peer pressure. Because we commonly associate altruistic people as being morally “good,” we may perform altruistic deeds to elevate our social status or encourage other people to like us. For example, let's say a guy is interested in a woman who volunteers at a homeless shelter and is known for her charitable acts. You can easily infer that kindness and generosity is important to his love interest.

So, if he wants to make a good impression on her, the man in this hypothetical scenario might volunteer at the same homeless shelter where she regularly donates her time. Even if he has never cared about the plight of the homeless or felt the inclination to help others, he might go through the motions now with the intent of casually bumping into her and making her like him. In this case, even though he is doing something kind, he's doing it for the wrong reasons. This example illustrates the author's theory that our relationship with altruism is heavily influenced by peer pressure and other people's opinions. So, even if you haven't misrepresented yourself and your concern for charitable causes just to get a date, we've all probably done something similar. Maybe you felt guilty as you walked past a Salvation Army

bell-ringer at Christmas and donated some pocket change because you didn't want them to think you were unsympathetic. Maybe you did something kind because all your friends were doing it.

That's not to say that genuinely kind people don't exist or that no one ever truly behaves in a selfless manner. In fact, to the contrary, many people do help others with purely kind and altruistic desires. But these examples do prove that human beings are not quite as inherently altruistic as we think we are. In many cases, we simply act out of a desire to conform to others' behavior or to acquire resources like social capital. The author affirms that these motivations can be traced back to the primitive tribal communities of early man. In these communities, conformity was essential to the survival of the group. When everyone lived and operated as a united group, it ensured access to resources such as food, water, and shelter, and those survival instincts are ingrained in us today.



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Final Summary

The question of “nature versus nurture” is frequently debated in the scientific community. We want to know what defines us as people and what makes us who we are. But even though a variety of environmental factors can shape and impact our choices, evolutionary psychology argues that we are irrevocably impacted by our primal instincts. Although we might like to think that modern man has evolved beyond these primitive traits, the author’s research affirms that most aspects of human behavior can be traced back to early man and the traits that evolved to help us survive.



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