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My all-time favorite author is primatologist Frans de Waal. Born and educated in Holland and cutting his teeth at Arnhem Zoo in the Netherlands, he emigrated to the U.S. more than forty years ago, albeit retaining ties with Arnhem. He has published a string of books that have been translated into more than a dozen languages, along with peer-reviewed articles too numerous to mention.

De Waal is about my age. I imagine, in their lifetimes his parents would have suffered Hitlerism when the Nazi army overran their county, brutalized its inhabitants and deported its Jews, including young Anne Frank, to points of no return, that is to say, deathcamps (along with Catholic nuns who gave refuge to Jewish women in their convent). Not surprisingly, de Waal's Dutch mentor retained an ambivalent alliance with German colleagues who once endorsed Nazi eugenics programs.

Since I myself emigrated from Europe, namely Germany, I deem it important to remember that Max Planck, the quantum scientist of world fame, lost his son to Nazi execution when the young man participated in a failed assassination attempt against the Führer. The loss unalterably maimed the aged researcher's life.

De Waal's observation about media violence in everyday American life, from the daily news to sitcoms, drama series, comedies, and motion pictures, strikes a chord with me. He is certain, the unrelenting exposure to violence in the media makes for desensitization. I would second that.

"I love *Saturday Night Life* for its inside commentary on peculiarly American phenomena such as cheerleaders, televangelists, and celebrity lawyers," wrote de Waal in one of his earlier books. "But *Saturday Night Life* is incomplete without at least one sketch in which someone's car explodes or head gets blown off. Characters like Hans and Franz appeal to me for their names alone (and, yes, I do have a brother named Hans), but when their free weights are so heavy that their arms get torn off, I'm baffled. The spouting blood get a big laugh from the audience, but I fail to see the humor."

Equally baffled was he when, soon after accepting a professorship at Emory University and attendant directorship of the Living Links Center of the Yerkes National Primate Research Center in Atlanta, he read a news item about a young mother arrested for nursing her baby in a Georgia mall. What gives, he wondered. How can shoppers get so upset, they call the police over a task decreed by nature to ensure the health and emotional well-being of babies?

A recurrent theme in de Waal is the human (and animal) tendency toward group identification, xenophobia, and lethal conflicts. "Like chimpanzees, people are strongly territorial and value the lives of those outside their group less than those within," he observes; worse than that, "Human warfare is systematic and cold-blooded, making it an almost new phenomenon."

Displacement of aggression or scapegoating is a variation on the theme of xenophobia. De Waal explains that the term “scapegoat” derives from the Old Testament, where it refers to two goats used in a ceremony on the Day of Atonement. One was sacrificed while the other, the “escape goat,” received all the iniquities and transgressions of the people on its head before being banished into the wilderness. Along similar lines, observes de Waal, Jesus is described in John 2:29 as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”

Today, scapegoating refers to “inappropriate demonization, vilification, accusation, and persecution,” writes de Waal. He points to the Holocaust as “humanity’s most horrific scapegoating.”

Empathy is the one weapon in the human repertoire able to rid us of the curse of xenophobia, writes the author. He cites an incident from 2004 Israel, when Justice Minister Yosef Lapid objected to the Israeli army’s demolishing thousands of Palestinian homes in a zone along the Egyptian border. De Waal quotes Lapid: “When I saw a picture on TV of an old woman on all fours in the ruins of her home looking under some floor tiles for her medicine, I did think, ‘What would I say if it were my grandmother?’” Lapid’s grandmother was a Holocaust victim, comments de Waal.

When Lapid deemed an aged Palestinian woman a proxy relative, he cut through the fog of our tendency to label stranger humans as enemies. His stance did not sit well with his compatriots, notes the author. “Even if, within our communities, we are largely cooperative, we become almost a different animal in our treatment of strangers.”

We routinely dehumanize our enemies, de Waal writes in connection with the American officers’ stance at Abu Ghraib. He introduces his views of the notorious prison practices via the well-known Stanford “prison game” in which students were divided into “guards” and “prisoners.” They were supposed to live together in the basement for two weeks, but the experiment had to be called off after six days because the “guards” had become increasingly arrogant, abusive, and cruel, causing the “prisoners” to revolt. The Stanford experiment was recalled when it was learned, American officers tortured detainees in Bagdad’s Abu Ghraib prison. “Some in the U.S. media tried to downplay these events as ‘pranks,’ but dozens of prisoners actually died in the process,” writes de Waal.

Janis Karpinski, the general responsible for the military police, said she’d been ordered to treat the prisoners “like dogs,” reports de Waal. Indeed, one of the pictures to come out of Abu Ghraib showed a female officer dragging a naked prisoner across the floor with a leash around his neck. Again, de Waal points to similarities with Hitler’s creation of an out-group. “Depicted as less than human, the out-group enhances the solidarity and self-worth of the in-group.”

Here is a thumbnail sketch of some de Waal books.

Different: Gender Through the Eyes of a Primatologist. To what degree are gender roles and experiences shaped by biology versus culture? Although there appear clear differences in the innate preferences of each sex, what are these innate differences, and how do we know they are driven by biology? Teasing out the influence of nature versus nurture is more complex than

people suppose. Naturally, de Waal compares human behavior with that of our closest evolutionary cousins, chimpanzees and bonobos. He notes that the latest understanding of primate behavior shows a more prominent role for females than what male authors of the past have been willing to concede. Our concept of our culture as male-dominated seems largely a social construct. While it's true that chimpanzee hierarchy is male-dominated, that's no reason for using it as a template for human behavior, since we are as closely related to bonobos who are female-dominant, peaceful, and sexually liberal.

Let's not use biology to justify our political or moral failings or engage in self-congratulatory misogyny. We can, and should, override our biological tendencies or preferences when those tendencies create unfair disadvantages for certain segments of society, writes de Waal. We are not prisoners to our biology.

In *Mama's Last Hug: Animal Emotions and What They Tell Us About Ourselves*, de Waal returns to his favorite female chimp at the Arnhem colony, "Mama." He begins by clarifying the difference between "emotion" and "feeling." People tend to use these terms interchangeably, but emotions drive behavior and can be observed, whereas feelings, the internal state that accompanies emotions, can only be inferred. Recounting the behaviors observed in our fellow primates and other species, de Waal argues that humans are not all that different from animals. Similarities abound from laughter and grief to fair play and revenge, even to premeditated murder. Elsewhere he has documented his observations with regard to cognitive capacities; here, he extends the comparison to affective behavior.

Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are? This book gives the perspective on animal intelligence, which helps us appreciate the intelligence and emotions experienced by animals. Defined as the ability to solve problems, intelligence is not a yes-or-no proposition; it occurs on a spectrum, writes de Waal. Sometimes animals are better than humans at a task that humans have defined as measuring intelligence. Corvids, the group of birds that includes crows, are so smart that some observers have referred to them as flying apes. In order to know how smart an animal is, the experimenter must be smart enough to design the appropriate test.

A follow-up column will go into *Our Inner Ape*, a book that delves into what our inner lives have inherited, so to speak, from chimps and bonobos.