

The Moral Animal: Summary & Review

By Lucio Buffalmano / 30 minutes of reading

The Moral Animal is an [evolutionary psychology book](#) that explains human psychology and human behavior in light of our evolution.

Robert Wright opened my eyes when I first encountered this book many years ago.

Contents

[Bullet Summary](#)

[Full Summary](#)

[PART I: SEX ROMANCE & LOVE](#)

[Chapter 1: Darwin Comes of Age](#)

[Chapter 2: Male and Females](#)

[Chapter 3: Men and Women](#)

[Chapter 4: The Marriage Market](#)

[Chapter 5: Darwin's Marriage](#)

[Chapter 6: The Darwin Plan for Marital Bliss](#)

[PART TWO: SOCIAL CEMENT](#)

[Chapter 7: Family](#)

[Chapter 8: Darwin and the Savages](#)

[Chapter 9: Friends](#)

[Chapter 10: Darwin's Conscience](#)

[PART THREE: SOCIAL STRIFE](#)

[Chapter 11: Darwin's Delay](#)

[Chapter 12: Social Status](#)

[Chapter 13: Deception and Self Deception](#)

[Chapter 14: Darwin's Triumph](#)

[PART FOUR: MORAL OF THE STORY](#)

[Chapter 15: Darwinian \(and Freudian\) Cynicism](#)

Chapter 16: Evolutionary Ethics

Chapter 17: Blaming the Victim

Chapter 18: Darwin Gets Religion

CONS

Review

Bullet Summary

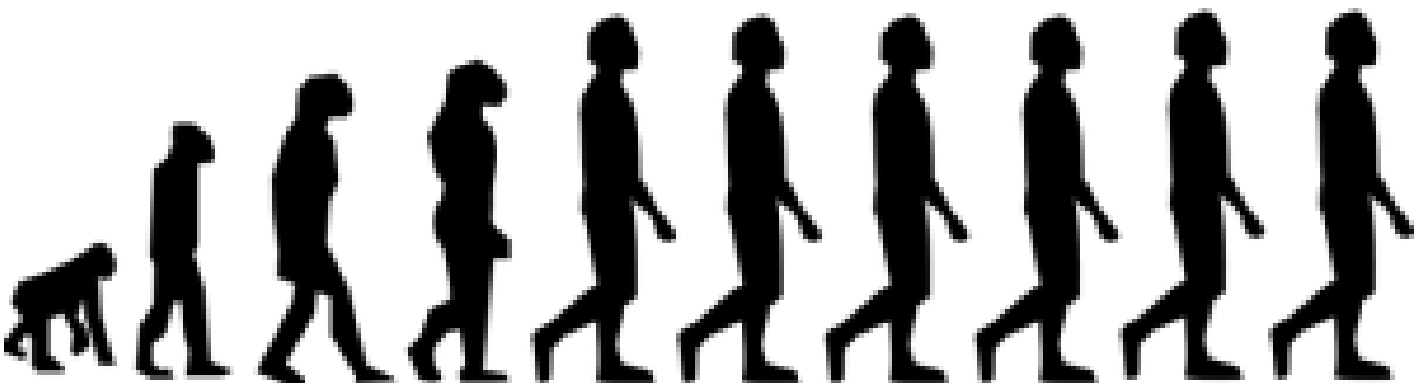
- Human males are high in MPI (=men invest in children, albeit not as much as women)
- We are naturally altruist, albeit often in selective, self-serving fashion
- We deceive, self-deceive and use morals as a tool to further our goals

Full Summary

Robert Wright says that Darwinism, in the shape of what he calls a vague ideology of “social Darwinism”, has fallen prey to racists, fascists and the worst form of capitalist ideologies.

The author also prefaces the book drawing a line among the similarities in seemingly different cultures. Why do all people worry about social status, feel guilt (in the same predictably circumstances) or gossip (about the same things).

Modern Darwinians, even when they focus on differences, they don't tend to see them as genetic differences but tend to see cultures as the product of a common human nature responding to different environmental and cultural circumstances.



PART I: SEX ROMANCE & LOVE

Chapter 1: Darwin Comes of Age

Robert Wright begins making light fun of the popular claim that Darwin was no special in any way and just a “normal boy” as he grew up.

He says those claims are suspicious as normal people accomplishing great feats always make for good reading ([Mastery by Robert Greene](#) also slightly uses Darwin as an example of an average man achieving greatness).

The author though doesn't question whether Darwin was or not bright or smart, but he questions whether his theory of natural selection was that smart.

Indeed, he says, the theory is rather simple.

The Natural Selection Theory

All that the natural selection theory says is this:

*If in a specie there's a variation among hereditary traits, some of those traits will prove more conducive to the survival and reproduction than others.
And those traits will likely become more widespread*

And the result is that the species aggregate pool of hereditary traits changes.

Madonna Whore Dichotomy

This is important to understand dating.

The Madonna-Whore Dichotomy says that men view women as belonging to two different groups: the ones you want to marry and love (Madonnas) and the ones you want to have sex with and quickly discard (whores).

The author says today there's a tendency to reject and laugh at these aspects of Victorian morality, but to completely discard them is to overestimate the advancements of our own morality.

Even educated and liberal men who wouldn't openly talk about "sluts" often end up acting accordingly to the Madonna-Whore Dichotomy.

At the end of the day, the author says, the Madonna Whore Dichotomy and the sexual double standard have roots in human nature and mental mechanisms we all use to evaluate each other.



The Madonna-Whore Dichotomy is based on the idea that if women do differ in terms of likelihood of cheating and sleeping around, then **it makes sense for men to separate the two groups.**

And spread their genes sleeping with whores and marrying the Madonna who will never cheat on them (and trick them to raise children who are not his).

Also read:

- [The Madonna-Whore Complex](#)

Chapter 2: Male and Females

The idea that men and women are identical in nature has less and less proponents.

Sex and the attitudes towards sex is one such example.

Male sexual appetite, for example, seems to be more constant than a woman's sexual appetite.

Darwin himself had noticed that the men being the ones with insatiable sexual appetite always chasing for sex and the woman being coy seemed to be a constant in the animal kingdom.

The author says that what creates the imbalance is the fact that men can reproduce hundreds of times a year while can't reproduce more often than once a year.

For a woman hence it makes sense to stop pursuing sex once she's impregnated while for a man that time never comes.

Since a woman can reproduce less often and has to invest heavily in one single reproduction, it makes sense for her to be very selective when it comes to quality.

Women indeed are more about quality than quantity.

Advertising Fitness

Since unusually fit males tend to reproduce unusually fit offsprings, men tend to advertise their fitness to women.

There's a bit of arms race because males have an interest in appearing better than they are and women have an interest in being able to spot false advertising.



Rape

Robert Wright goes into the very thorny subject of rape.

He says that women “choose” men even when they don’t consciously want. Resisting rape ends up being such a choosing device because women will be able to resist weaker men but not stronger men.

Chapter 3: Men and Women

Robert Wright says that human men and women are naturally born to form bonds with one another.

In every culture marriage, whether monogamous or polygamous is the norm.

Human fathers everywhere feel love for their children, which makes the human males high in MPI.

Male Parental Investment

MPI stands for Male Paternal Investment.

It’s a measure of how much male in a certain specie invest in their offspring. Investing means sticking around, protecting, providing food and teaching.

In humans men are relatively high in MPI, albeit not nearly as high as women.

Robert Wright says one plausible explanation why men started investing more and more has to do with us walking upright.

Walking upright means females have narrower hips and human babies are born very early.

Infants tend to be very vulnerable for long periods of time and severely limit the mother’s ability to gather food.

Men helping the offspring grow allowed more children to reach adulthood and have offspring on their own, thus spreading the high MPI trait.

High MPI = Gold Diggers

The title is purely mine :).

What high MPI means is that suddenly women are not just interested with male fitness, but since he will stick around to help, they are also interested in his resources to help grow the offspring.

Women care more about men about the financial prospects of their mates.

However, Robert Wright says, since our ancestors were not able to hoard riches as it happens today, women might be more attracted to social status, which translated into power.

It meant the ability of getting more food after a big kill.

Also in today's societies anyway status, wealth and power often go hand in hand and makes a very attractive package for females.

Ambition and industry are also very appreciated characteristics as they raise the odds that status, power and wealth will come in the (near) future.

My Note:

this is more true for younger men though. Older ones are better off with some wealth.

Affection and Tokens of Affection

Women in high MPI species care very much that their partners will stick around after sex and conception.

That's one of the reasons why "token of affections" such as flower and gifts are particularly appreciated by women because they serve as the sign of the willingness of the male to invest.

It makes sense for women to care about affection because, albeit men are high in MPI, **it can make genetic sense for a man to impregnate a woman and not care for the kid.**

The kid could survive anyway and the mother could still be able to attract resources from some other men who will take care about the kid -whether or not he knows that's not his baby-.

In a low MPI species impregnating and moving on is fair because the female could not get any investment anyway.

It is an exploitative technique among species high in MPI such as ours because the woman COULD get resources from men.

But a man running away after having impregnated her makes it much more difficult for her to obtain those resources.

Affection Arms Race: Love Duping

Another arms race then can happen with men faking devotion and long term investment and women having to filter through the fake devotion.

So there's a possible tendency for men to fake and inflate their willingness to commit.

However blatant lying in our ancestors' environments could be dangerous as it would ruin a man's reputation or lead to vengeance from the woman's family.

Robert Wright says that natural selection might have developed love to induce men to *believe* they will stick around longer than they actually will.

The Modern [Casanovas](#)

Robert Wright says that the lifestyle of some men to have sex and drop women without investing is not a real sexual strategy in our ancestor environment because it simply wasn't possible back then.

But that's what happens when you put men with their tendency of having multiple sexual partners into anonymous cities filled with potential sexual partners and contraceptive technology.



Also read:

- [The psychology of womanizers](#)

Female Rivalries

Robert Wright explains how female in low MPIs species have no rivalries because men can simply impregnate them all and move along -and he'll happily oblige-.

But in species high in MPIs men and their resources can become a scarce resource.

Albeit competition is not as high as among men for women, scarce resourceful men still lead women to rival with one another to catch the best men out there.

Selectively Selective

In high MPI species both men and women want partners who are “above average”.

However, since for men a mixed strategy of high MPI and “impregnate and run” can make sense, they have a double standard.

Men tend to be selectively selective indeed: they are very selective for women with whom they want to stick around and much much laxer with women they just want to have sex with.

Female Beauty VS Male Beauty

As women have reasons to care about resources, men have reasons to care about the ability of women to produce offspring, which is highly related to age.

That’s why probably men care more about physical attractiveness than women do. Men also tend to be attracted to traits such as large eyes and small nose, which are both related to age.

Threats to Genes: Fidelity and Emotional Attachment

What threatens the future of one’s own genes is different from females than it is in males.

Infidelity is very dangerous for males in high MPIs because they might end up investing heavily in offspring which are not his own.

On the other hand, for a woman, it’s dangerous if a man not just sleeps with another woman, but gets emotionally attached to that woman.

Why?

Because that could mean he might divert resources away from her and her children to the new woman and her children.

Indeed men to be much more jealous and careful about sexual fidelity and women tend to be more concerned about emotional attachments.

It's still painful for women to be sexually cheated, but Robert Wright says that result is often a self improvement campaign: losing weight, better clothes etc.

Men instead can often have troubles staying in a relationship after sexual infidelity.

Why Would a Woman Cheat

If a woman cheating would enrage her partner and threaten a break up, why would she do it?

Robert Wright says there are many possible answers.

- Resource extraction
- Seeds of confusion
- Best of both worlds

For example, she might be able to extract resources from several men by carrying sexual favors.

Also multiple sexual partner mean that more men could believe being the father of a child -or at least having a chance to be- and could invest in them, even in case of the death of the woman's partner, which in some cases could have had dire consequences.

Some speculate that women in the human species hide their ovulation periods as a way to help her seed confusion.

A man would not be able to know for sure when she's ovulating and he would not be able to guard her 24/7, thus allowing her to seed confusion and get the best of both worlds.

Women indeed are more likely to cheat during their ovulation period, suggesting they are after the genes.

There's also evidence women do cheat, with different statistics showing how a relatively high number of children are fathered not by their biological fathers.

Most interesting is the “best of both worlds” theory. Robert Wright says that a woman in a high MPI species seeks two things: great genes and investment.

Those could come from the same man, but could also not.

So she could find a man who is willing to invest in her and stay beside her while she gets the good genes from a more promiscuous, more brainy or more brawny man.

Also read:

- [Why do people cheat](#)
- [What are emotional affairs and how they happen](#)
- [How to structure a cheat-free relationship](#)
- [How to find a loyal partner](#)

Testicles and Promiscuity

Testes size compare to body weight can shed some light on the promiscuity level of female within a species.

Bigger tests produces more sperm and pay off when women sleep around, because it gives males a higher chance of being the father of the children.

Testes' size then become a record of the female's sexual escapees during the ages. Human fall between chimpanzees -very promiscuous- and gorillas -more stable-.

The quantity of semen a man produces depends not only on the last time he had sex, but also depends heavily on how long her female mate has been out of sight.

Also read:

- [Sex at Dawn](#)

Cuckoldry Arms Race: The Madonna Whore Dichotomy

Another arms race then exists between men and women when it comes to infidelity.

A man would be well served in spotting infidelity and a woman would be well served in leading him to believe she's only faithful to him.

And this is where the Madonna Whore Dichotomy makes sense. If women differ in level of promiscuity, it makes sense for a man to be able to identify which women are more likely to cheat.

So a man could think that if a woman shows too much sexual eagerness early on, sleep with her but don't keep her because she's not trustworthy.

If on the other hand she's slow and coy, she makes for a good wife because she's not likely to stray and cheat (and let him raise another man's kid).

The speed at which a woman sleeps with a man then can become a big indicator a man uses in deciding whether to stick with her or not.

And women sexily dressed are more attractive as short term mates than long term ones.

And as much as that could pain some feminists or liberal women, Robert Wright says that the Madonna-Whore Dichotomy is common in every culture.



Also read:

- [Should she let him wait for sex?](#)
- [How to delay sex](#)

Madonna-Whore Pay Offs

The Madonna-Whore Dichotomy is a continuum of course.

But some theories say some women will pursue a strategy of “sexy son strategy”, such as they will mate with sexy or brainy or particularly attractive men and risk to lose that parental investment compared to if they had been more Madonna-ish.

But they will gain with the likelihood the children will be like the father and also eventually sexually successful in spreading their genes.

Robert Wright says these theories are interesting, but they don't have to be "cast in stone".

The brain is more malleable and the strategies pay off better when they can be abandoned.

Frequency Dependent Selection

Theoretically two opposite traits will not be kept for long because if one is more conducive to proliferation, it should, with time, take over to the whole population.

So why are there still behavior and appearances that some women adopt to seem more Madonnas or more Whores?

It's because of frequency dependent selection.

Frequency dependent selection says that one strategy will make sense against another strategy as long as there's an equilibrium.

Robert Wright uses the example of a fish, but to stay with the Madonna Whore Dichotomy, if all women were whores, the strategy would not pay off anymore. If all were Madonnas, it wouldn't pay off either.

To keep existing and make genetic sense, they both need each other.

My Note:

this is often, indeed, a strategy.

Most women, including many of the ones more open about their sexuality, tend to hide their sexual fantasies and drives to cheat. But all women, be madonnas or whores, are at the end of they very similar to each other.

That's why you're very well served usually by letting women know you "understand them" and you know there's nothing wrong with their fantasies and that you will not "punish" them by labeling them whores are most men do. See how to do it a bit in my text flirting guide.

Adapting Mating Strategies

Pretty girls tend to marry up while women who have lots of sex early on tend not to marry.

Robert Wright says that it's possible that by getting early feedback about their beauty and ability to secure a resourceful mate might influence women's strategies.

The prettier one might go for a more Madonna-ish strategy while the less pretty ones might realize they can't be choosy and go for a wider multitude of men.

Women might also adjust depending on how likely the male mates around are to stick around and invest, and they will change their strategy depending on the circumstances.

So women with too many men around or men who are not willing or not able to commit, might pursue a more whore-ish, sexually aggressive mating strategy, only to shift again if the situation around changes.

This why women in poorer areas tend to be unwed mothers more often: there's a scarcity of men willing or able to invest.

Similarly for boys, high self-esteem and good looks are correlated to a higher sexual partner count. A "stud" will go for a shorter-term sexual strategy without providing investment.

Men with lower self-esteem and lesser looks might instead go for a provider strategy, promising and delivering on future investment and support.

And women, when they don't expect the relationship to last, place higher importance on looks, suggesting that they are trading off the investment for good genes.

Also a study showed how rapists tend to lack confidence in themselves in both sexual and non sexual areas, suggesting they resort to rape when they can't see themselves able to find a willing mate.

Edit: not true

David Buss summarizes the latest evidence in "When Men Behave Badly" says that, overall, the theory of "mate deprivation hypothesis" is likely false.

Chapter 4: The Marriage Market

Robert Wright says that the breakup costs after the marriage has been consumed tend to be heavier on the woman's side.

It's easier for the man to find a younger woman than for the woman to find a man.

The man's dissatisfaction with the marriage is indeed the leading cause of divorce.

In this chapter Robert Wright makes the case that polygamy is better for women.

It's easy to discount polygamy for more attractive women who can get a good man all for themselves, but the author says polygamy is simply better at distributing wealth and giving more women a shot at securing resources.

It would make for a more dangerous society though as single men left without a mate would more easily drift off towards crime.

Monogamy is best for men, because it gives them a chance with women whom would otherwise move up the social scale becoming the women of wealthier men.

My Note:

Robert Wright oversimplifies it here.

Monogamy is best for average men.

But top high-quality men who can get many women are better off with polygamy of course.

Also see "Dating Power Dynamics".

Our current monogamy is not monogamy anymore though, Wright says, but it's serial monogamy. Serial monogamy, though, is basically a polygamy because few men monopolize long stretches of the best reproductive years of women.

Chapter 5: Darwin's Marriage

Robert Wright talks here about Darwin's life and his marriage.

He says it's strange that Darwin, as a rich and high status man, would marry an older woman.

But he says that the rich+high status = young and beautiful is a bit of a crude equation. Intelligence, compatibility and the selection of a wife also based as her abilities as a future mother, also have weight.

He says that as it could be expected of Victorian England, Darwin pushed towards and early marriage while she was more willing to put it off.

After the marriage she was blissful.

But the author says it's not equally obvious Darwin would be as well after consummation finally happened.

Chapter 6: The Darwin Plan for Marital Bliss

Robert Wright says that life long devotion is not natural. Not for women and even less so for men, so it requires an act of will.

Some great help in keeping Darwin's marriage strong were:

- Far from the city and young women distractions
- Many children
- No pictures back then

The invention of photos and the proliferation of pictures and videos of young women can make men feel like the environment is more abundant in women than it actually is, and push them into a shorter term, no investment strategy.

Robert Wright says that males' sexual fantasies tend to be more visual while women's fantasies often entail tender touching and similar indicators of future investment.

My Note:

well, this doesn't necessarily mean that women don't have rougher fantasies as well.

Divorce is Good for Men

Robert Wright says feminists welcomed divorce as a great conquest, but that divorce is "better" for men than for women.

Men are more likely to be able to find a younger woman, especially if they're well off, but a woman in her 40's, especially if with children, will be hard pressed in finding a new man.

PART TWO: SOCIAL CEMENT

Chapter 7: Family

Robert Wright says the only thing natural selection cares about is the survival of the specie and the passing on of our genes.

If we suffer in the process, or if we die, doesn't matter.

Altruism -and even death to save a kin- makes sense because our kin share part of our genes.

If we look at different species, we see that the bigger the share of genes they share from common descent, the higher the altruism.

Since brothers don't share 100% of their genes, there's always a sort of war of resources going on.

Parents as well can easily display preferences by giving more resources to those offspring that better seem able to reproduce.

Family Standing and Offspring Preferences

Poor families have a preference for pretty females compared to handsome males because they are more likely to marry up, and hence secure more resources for her

offspring.

Poor families can prefer females in any case because it's easier for them to reproduce, while a malnourished male will hardly produce any offspring.

In wealthier families, all things being equal, it's the men who have more status because they can produce scores of offspring.

Robert Wright says this sounds all too Machiavellian to be true, but for a Darwinian, [Machiavellian](#) actually adds credibility.

And if that weren't enough, the daughter provides some chilling proofs for this all.

Feelings, not Logic: Why You're Not Consciously Aware

Robert Wright says we are not aware of any of these tendencies going on.

Why not?

Because natural selection provided us feelings to guide us through, not rationality.

We just feel closer to the daughter if we're in a poor family and we have no idea why. Even brothers of poorer families tend to worry more about their sisters than their other brothers, the author says, and of course they have no clue as to why.

Chapter 8: Darwin and the Savages

In chapter 8 of *The Moral Animal* Robert Wright talks about groups and the differences among cultures.

He says that the rules can change from culture to culture, but adhering to them and the feelings of disobeying them are innate.

Group selection theories all have a common problem: it's hard to see how a group trait could ever exist without first existing at an individual level.

Chapter 9: Friends

Robert Wright here tackles the important question of altruism.

How can altruism make sense?

He says it's because human relationships are a Non Zero Sumness.

Non Zero Sumness

Imagine for example you have just finished your dinner and you're almost totally full.

But your neighbor is starving. That last dish will not do you as much as good to you as it will do to your neighbor.

If you ate it, it would help you, from 0 to 10, 2. But if you give it to your neighbor, it will help him 9 out of 10. Now your neighbor is majorly indebted to you, so that if in the future you need something, chances are you can count on him.

Because of the Non-Zero Sumness property, both parties can benefit from altruism.

Corollaries of Helping

One corollary is that we will be better off helping people in desperate situations.

And that's of why we feel worst when we see someone in very poor situations: so that it will be more likely we will help them and we will be able to cash in on bigger IOUs.

The second corollary is that we are not really helping out to help out, but we are mostly interested in *looking* like we are helping, which is equally effective and costs us no resources.

Tit For Tat

Robert Wright discusses a test with a software where different parties were programmed with different strategies.

The most successful was Tit For Tat, which would give the first time, then remember what the other did, and react on the next time -give if the other gave, defect if the other had defected-.

In the long run, the [selectively collaborative approach](#) won out.

To read more on exchange theories in human behavior, read [The Social Exchange Theory](#).

How did Altruism Start?

Robert Wright says it's hard to see how any altruist behavior could emerge in the tough environment we developed for most of our time.

He says a good theory is that it started as kin altruism and then spread with people who started being selectively altruistic with other selective altruists -such as altruist with other altruists and not altruists with those who never gave back-.

As the software Tit for Tat showed, that's a mutually beneficial strategy that with time won over.

My Note:

Tit for tat developed over time to include other strategies that even better explain human behavior.

For more, check out ["The Origins of Virtue"](#).

Indignation and Fights

Robert Wright also talks about indignation and fight.

He says how come some people would risk getting into a fight when they discover a small wrongdoing or act of cheating.

Partially it's because lots of cheating over a lifetime add up, so it could be worth the risk of "stopping" it right there and then with a major escalation.

However, another reason is because of the message it sends: that you are not to be trifled with without consequences.

That's why, ironically, many homicides happen in the presence of witnesses: because,

from an evolutionary perspective, it's better taking the risk of a fight with people watching.

My Note:

indeed if you care about social power, it's most important you answer to affront when there are people around, as we have seen in the case of an Alpha Male Handshake.

Guilt and Knowledge

We are more likely to feel guilty if we can get caught.

So that we can ideally come clean before we get caught. We are also more likely to feel guilty if we get caught, not if we get away with it.

Collective Behaviors

A neat way of punishing bad people and promoting good ones is to spread word about their deeds.

This is the reason for grievances: spreading words of someone who cheated us will ruin his reputation.

As much as we can have an interest to punish who wronged us, we can also have a tendency to simply attack our enemies to diminish their public standing while we cover up our wrongdoing and try to look morally superior.

Chapter 10: Darwin's Conscience

Robert Wright says we all want to be seen as doing what others say is good.

What others say is good changes all the times though, and that's why conscience is so malleable.

Moral guidance is a misnomer, then.

Our parents actually guide us towards a moral compass which makes sense for the

environment we are in, teaching us when to cheat, lie and when we should look like whatever society is rewarding at our time.

The author says we have a machinery for an helpful Tit For Tat, but we also have a machinery for [more cynical](#) and egoistic behavior.

The problem with that?

In a more and more anonymous society with more and more fleeting encounters the cynical machinery might be more and more rewarding.

PART THREE: SOCIAL STRIFE

Chapter 11: Darwin's Delay

This chapter of The Moral Animal is mostly about Darwin's life.

Chapter 12: Social Status

Robert Wright says that in most groups a pecking order arises from an initial one of chaos.

The pecking order is advantageous for most individuals in the group.

For example, if chicken A beats chicken B most of the times, it makes no sense for chicken B to continually go against chicken A and he's better served by deferring and obeying the pecking order.

No Inborn Social Status

Robert Wright says that there's no inborn gene for leader or alpha status.

The serotonin equips the winner and the leader once he got there or when he's ready to fight for the position, he wasn't born with it (to read more on serotonin, read [Leaders Eat Last](#)).

People with low self esteem are more likely to cheat and people low in serotonin are also more likely to commit impulsive crimes, suggesting that cheating is an evolutionary

response to being relegated to the bottom of the pile.

My Note:

Watch out not to over-generalize here.

As Baumeister explains in “Evil”, it’s people with high self-esteem who commit violence.

Lust for Power

Since alpha male status warrants access to most females and the lowest statuses often preclude female access, it’s a natural male tendency being lustful for power.

Social Status in Primates

Social status in humans and primates is less rigid and obvious than in chicken.

It changes more often and it’s more dependent on a web of friends and support than on pure physical strength.

After fights primates, as well as humans, often go through a ritual of reconciliation.

Beginning a reconciliation can be not easy because it carry costs. It can easily be read as an act of submission, and as a loss of social status.

That’s why many human males sometimes don’t like asking for guidance, even in trivial things such as asking for directions as that would mean to admit the “superiority” of another man, albeit in a very circumstantial situation.

The array of activities and profession that can give status in human cultures is wide and entails many, many different types of skills and knowledge.

Chapter 13: Deception and Self Deception

Robert Wright says people present themselves in what’s in their genetic interest to look like.

The author says we are not the only dishonest specie, but we’re probably the most dishonest. If nothing else, because we do the most talking.

My Note:

talking is indeed the easiest to “fake”. To better spot how to read people, learn some body language, for example with Joe Navarro and [The Definitive Book of Body Language](#).

The author says in small groups like could have been our ancestor hunter gatherers societies, it made genetic sense to downplay the abilities of others, especially those of the same age and sex as ours which represented the biggest threat to our mating options.

The funny thing is that since the best way to deceive others is to actually believe the lie, we often tend to self deceive ourselves first (read [Predictably Irrational](#) for more info on the irrationality of our brain).

For example, we tend to believe other’s success is because of luck and we tend to believe our success is purely because of talent and skills.

Give Credit to Non-Competitors

Interestingly enough, Darwin gave plenty of credits to smaller researchers who could never take his crown or share stage with him.

But doesn’t mention people who actually influenced him the most. And even writes disparagingly of the man who might have given him the biggest contribution towards the theory of natural selection.

It’s because those people who influenced him the most where bigger guns and more at risk of making him look less smart, less independent and less revolutionary.

Self Deprecation

Why does self deprecation exist at all when self-advertising is so ingrained within us?

Well, to begin with, Robert Wright says humility gives us more credibility when we will eventually later on brag or boast.

In other instances, it can be beneficial for example when we want to step aside in a challenge and show deference to a superior. That's how low self esteem can also sometimes be helpful in avoiding fights.

Also I found very enlightening when Wright says it's especially useful for women at times to show deference to a man or to make him feel better when, say, he comes back all deflated from work and she provides with her self deprecating attitude a paragon with which he can regain some confidence.

Also read:

- [Vulnerability is not power](#)

The Strategy of Conflict

Robert Wright quotes Thomas Shelling for some psychology on bargaining and the game of chicken.

Shelling says the trick is to be the first to convince the other party of your rigideness so that he will be the first to consent.

My Note:

there's some element of truth here, but it's equally easy to piss off the other party and make the deal fall through.

Cialdini in his seminal book Influence explains how the most successful deals happen when people give concessions, because a concession begets a concession.

Brain is a Machine to Convince The World – and the Owner

Robert Wright says that the brain is a machine to convince the world that the owner of that brain is in the right.

And often the best way to [manipulate others](#) is through self-manipulation first.

Chapter 14: Darwin's Triumph

Robert Wright says how people were willing to defend the validity of blatantly wrong statements when the people around did the same.

Similarly, people quickly changed their opinion depending on who the audience was.

Robert Wright also tells us how another scientist, Wallace, had theorized something very similar to the natural theory of evolution.

Had he sent the paper to a journal or to anyone else but Darwin, he could have probably been remembered today as the first man to theorize the theory of natural evolution.

But he sent it to Darwin instead..

PART FOUR: MORAL OF THE STORY

This part goes into morals a bit deeper.

Albeit it's certainly important, especially when talking about such a thorny subject as evolution and human nature, I find it less applicable and I invite you to [get the book](#) for the full story on morals.

Chapter 15: Darwinian (and Freudian) Cynicism

Robert Wright says that, albeit most think Freud "relegated" human rationality to a thin slice of our brain functioning, the Darwinian theory is actually much more upsetting from that point of view.

There isn't a "rational" part in our brain as the rational and the subconscious are both parts of the same drive.

And we are not interested in reality or understanding but only in surviving and passing our genes on.

Chapter 16: Evolutionary Ethics

In chapter 16 of The Moral Animal Robert Wright talks about Darwin's ethics and moral point of views and expands on those with his own theories.

The author says we are prone to be indignant to groups of people whose interest conflict with the interests of the group we belong to. Unluckily, we also tend to be very tolerant of high status people and very intolerant of low status people.

In a nutshell, morality was designed by natural evolution to be employed selfishly. However, we can distance ourselves from our tendencies long enough to see them and recognize them, says Wright.

Chapter 17: Blaming the Victim

If we are simply reacting to our environment and obeying inner drives ingrained in us by millions of years of evolution... Then we should call free will into question.

And we gotta wonder: can we ever be made “guilty” of our actions, if there’s no real free will?

Well, the question never really touch the “punishment”, which should be there at least to prevent anyone to do further harm.

However, it should take into account why we do what we did so that the punishment can more easily lead the guilty back into a productive role into society.

Righteously, the author says, the truth becomes what we say is the truth.

So if we say that sleeping around is natural, then we condone that behavior and likely will see it increasing.

David Eagleman also talks well about this topic on his book on the limitation of human mind, which I invite you to check out here: [Incognito by David Eagleman](#).

Chapter 18: Darwin Gets Religion

Robert Wright talks about Darwin’s religion in the last chapter of The Moral Animal.

CONS

- **Not Always 100% Scientific**

At times it feels the author is talking as if everything was scientific, but he doesn't always back it up with studies.

Almost everything he says just makes a lot of sense, but maybe he could have been a bit more specific about what's been "proven" and what's a bit more speculative.

- **Evolutionary Psychology Often a "bro science"**

This has actually nothing to do with The Moral Animal, but evolutionary psychology lost much credit as everyone today uses evolutionary psychology to back whatever BS they got in mind.

Nassim Taleb makes fun of evolutionary psychology in [Antifragile](#), when he says that evolutionary psychologists love a good narrative while he prefers evidence.

Review

I consider “The Moral Animal” the N.1 mandatory reading to understand human nature.

I agree with most everything in “The Moral Animal” and even with the fact we are an “own interest maximizing machine”.

However, I disagree with the message of supreme selfishness the book seem to purport at times.

If you’re unsure about it, I invite you to read [Man’s Search for Meaning](#). There Viktor Frankl says that man is that species that built the gas chambers, but also that species that walked upright in them and gave his last piece of bread to another human being.

That being said, if you are not familiar with evolutionary psychology, do yourself a favor and get this book.

There's no understanding men, women, and humans without understanding the basic tenets of evolutionary psychology.

[Get the Book on Amazon](#)

About The Author

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The author holds a master's degree from La Sapienza, department of communication and sociological research, and is a member of the American Psychology Association (APA). He studies psychology, persuasion, social & dating strategies, and anything related to people and [power dynamics](#). Lucio's approach combines science, first-hand experience & critical analysis. He believes that you can only teach social strategies if the three [go together](#). You can learn it all in one fell swoop with [Power University](#).