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BOOK REVIEW

The triumph of the friendly: A review of Brian Hare and Vanessa Woods, survival of the friendliest

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Brian Hare and Vanessa Woods have three main stories to tell. Each of them is captivating, and everyone should know them. In a way, they are the same story.

The first story involves humanity's best friend: dogs. According to a conventional account, human beings long ago adopted wolf puppies, befriended them, and eventually transformed them into dogs. Hare and Woods offer a radically different account. "We did not domesticate dogs. The friendliest wolves domesticated themselves." As they explain, relatively friendly wolves were brave enough, and calm enough, to approach human camps, scavenging for food. Because the friendlier wolves stayed in the same general location, they bred together. After several generations, they became more friendly still, and their physical appearance began to change. Human beings started to like them. The docile wolves, or protodogs, developed social skills; they could read our gestures. They became useful guards and hunting partners—and also companions. This is a tale of self-domestication.

In support of that tale, Hare and Woods invoke the remarkable experiments of Dmitri Belyaev, a visionary Soviet geneticist who surmised that in order for animals to coexist with humans, they could not be fearful; if they were, they would be too aggressive. In Belyaev's view, the physical features of dogs—including floppy ears, multiple colors, two menstrual cycles annually (female wolves have only one)—were all a byproduct of docility. Belyaev tested this hypothesis with foxes. He had access to a large population, and he identified the tamest among them, arranging for them to breed with each other, and for their offspring to breed with each other, and so on.

After a number of generations, the foxes' physical appearances started to change. Just as Belyaev expected, they developed floppy ears. Their fur showed white patches. But the most dramatic changes involved their personalities. To be sure,

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they were not dogs. But they were pretty close. Over the years, some of Belyaev's foxes have ended up as pets, living with people as we live with our dogs. Those domesticated foxes sit on command. They fetch balls. They go on walks. They cuddle. The Russian Fox Domestication Experiment, as it is sometimes called, continues to this day. Hare and Woods urge that Belyaev showed how domestication works—and that his experiments strongly support the view that dogs are a product of self-domestication.

The second story involves humanity's lost cousins: bonobos. For a period, scientists considered bonobos to be small chimpanzees. Although they share a common ancestor, they are a different species, with very different characteristics. Both male and female bonobos are playful, kind, and gentle (and they have a lot of sex). There are no alpha males. As Hare and Woods put it, females are "aggressive toward males who start acting like chimpanzees." Like dogs, bonobos domesticated themselves; unlike dogs, they did not do so by interacting with human beings. Drawing on the foundational work of Wrangham (2019), Hare and Woods urge that the best explanation is that bonobos lived in an area south of the Congo River, with predictable and relatively plentiful food resources. Unlike chimpanzees, bonobos did not have to compete with gorillas for food, and because food was available, they had far less need to compete with each other. This too is a tale of self-domestication.

The third tale involves humanity. About a hundred thousand years ago, Homo Erectus would have been the best bet for the ultimate survivor among the multiple human species. They controlled fire, with which they cooked and warmed themselves. They were the first human species to use advanced stone tools. They even invented a hand ax from raw materials. They had been around for 1.8 million years and so outlasted many other human species. But if you flashed forward 25,000 years, you would have seen a very different world, and if you were then asked to pick humanity's future, you switched your bet to the Neanderthals. Sure, Homo Erectus was still around, but that species had stagnated. As tall as Homo Sapiens but stronger and with equally sized brains, the Neanderthals triumphed during the Ice Age. They made paintings and had advanced tools. They wore jewelry. They were accomplished hunters, using a long, heavy spear.

Here is where the third tale takes a dramatic turn. Flash forward another 25,000 years, and Homo Sapiens is starting to outstrip all other human species. We invented advanced weapons, such as spear throwers, blades for cutting, and boned harpoons. Our new technologies far surpassed what the Neanderthals had. We left Africa and journeyed across Europe. We became accomplished sailors. We also learned to live in permanent camps, accommodating hundreds of people. The camps contained different areas for sleeping, butchering, and cooking. We developed fire pits to cook with and early ovens; we learned how to store food. Our paintings were quite advanced—far more so than those of the Neanderthals. We developed traditions and a culture.

Why did this happen? What made us so special? Hare and Woods urge that the answer lies in "a kind of cognitive superpower: a particular type of friendliness called cooperative communication." In their account, Homo Sapiens is the self-domesticated human species—and the friendliest. More than other humans, we are able to work with one another, and we are perfectly able to communicate with

strangers. Crucially, we also have access to the minds of others; we can read their signals. We depend on eye contact. These abilities are "the gateway to a sophisticated social and cultural world." The central reason that we flourished, and that other human species did not, is that we "excel at a particular kind of collaboration."

Those, then, are the three tales. Dogs, bonobos, and Homo Sapiens are all a product of self-domestication. That process was accompanied by physical changes, including smaller sizes, smaller brains (but not less intelligence), smaller snouts, and feminization of male faces (and hence less dramatic differences between males and females). But the defining characteristic of domestication is a decrease in physical aggression and fear, and hence an increase in docility and friendliness. In the case of Homo Sapiens, Hare and Woods are sharply critical of the idea of "survival of the fittest," which, they think, suggests that the capacity to fight and compete is the key to evolutionary success. In their view, friendliness is far more important, because it leads to cooperation.

At the same time, Hare and Woods emphasize that our unique capacities come with a dark side. They call it "dehumanization"; it might also be called "tribalism." Because of self-domestication, dogs and bonobos are friendlier, but they "have also evolved new forms of aggression toward those who threaten their families." Hare and Woods speculate that the increases in aggression are a product of changes in the oxytocin system, which help a mother bond with a newborn but also feed a kind of rage that she feels when her baby is at risk. Similarly, Homo Sapiens, shaped by self-domestication, became simultaneously more able to connect with each other and more willing to mount violent defenses against outsiders. "We can become highly xenophobic when responding to a stranger from a rival group." Our affection and even love for members of our own group, so important to cooperation, is accompanied by aggression toward and fear of people whose identity is different. Hare and Woods point to alarming evidence that people will often say, in surveys, that they consider members of rival groups to be less than fully human; after the 2014 Gaza war, for example, both Palestinians and Israelis said exactly that. With respect to dehumanization, genocide is the extreme case.

In these circumstances, Hare and Woods are enthusiastic about the idea of constitutional democracy, which they see as a way of coming to terms with both the opportunities and the challenges of human self-domestication. They quote James Madison as a kind of evolutionary psychologist: "So strong is this propensity of mankind, to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions, and excite their most violent conflicts." In their view, the American constitutional system—a republic, not a democracy—was "meant to keep our darker side in check." They applaud the system of checks and balances, and the effort to combine self-rule with safeguards against "the most violent conflicts."

With these points in mind, Hare and Woods address contemporary problems. They emphasize that dehumanization is now rampant; that tribal divisions have become unusually intense; and that those divisions are putting real pressures on democratic governments. Drawing on the work of Gordon Allport, they urge that the best or perhaps only solution lies in taking his "contact hypothesis" very seriously. On the basis of an assortment of studies, Allport urged that if the goal is to break

down social divisions—or at least those produced by various kinds of prejudice—interpersonal contact is the preferred route.

In education, employment, and politics, Hare and Woods contend that it is urgent to find ways to break down barriers to such contact, and to do so across racial, religious, ideological, and other lines. As they put it, "beneficial contact can be as simple as a casual conversation, a work partnership, or a mixed classroom." They emphasize the importance of groups that are at once large, cooperative, and diverse. To that end, they call for creative use of architecture to create "places where people from different backgrounds, perspectives, and lived experiences can freely mix and exchange ideas."

It is possible to take Hare and Woods as having written two connected books. The first is an extraordinarily engaging account of self-domestication, with particular reference to dogs, bonobos, and Homo Sapiens. In terms of the underlying research, Hare himself has done much of the foundational work here, and he and Woods have a real flair for communicating the essential findings and the sheer excitement of scientific discovery. The central message is at once convincing and hopeful: What makes our species unique is the capacity for cooperative communication. At the most fundamental level, our capacity to survive and to flourish comes not from the ability to destroy our enemies (though that is important), but from our ability to trust one another, to make friends, and to play and work together.

The second book engages contemporary political and economic challenges, with particular reference to the problem of dehumanization. Hare and Woods make it plausible to think that an underlying propensity of Homo Sapiens—to divide the world into insiders and outsiders—is causing a great deal of contemporary turmoil. But the underlying mechanisms are numerous, and evolutionary explanations are hardly sufficient. In the United States, for example, party antagonisms are much greater now than they were forty years ago (Sunstein 2015); Homo Sapiens has not changed much in that time. When racial, ethnic, and religious divisions intensify, it is often because of cascade effects, as informational and reputational signals spread from one person to another, creating antagonisms, hatred, and even violence that did not exist a decade or a year before (Bikhchandani et al. 1998; Kuran 1998; Sunstein 2002). To their credit, Hare and Woods are keenly aware of the importance of social psychology. The only point is that the well-springs of dehumanization and tribalism include an assortment of psychological and economic mechanisms, potentially producing multiple equilibria (Kuran 1998). Small shocks can lead the same nation, and the same species, in radically different directions.

Hare and Woods are right to draw attention to the potential benefits of contact, but recent work raises serious questions about the contact hypothesis (Paluck et al. 2019). For ethnic and racial prejudice in particular, the beneficial effects of contact seem to be weak, and it is unclear if and when they are long-lasting. The largest effects involve people with disabilities (ibid.). In addition, the empirical findings generally involve young people, and we do not know much about the effects of contact on people over 25 years of age. With respect to racial and ethnic prejudice for adults—a primary concern for Hare and Woods—we also know very little.

But let us not quibble. This is a superb book, dense with information in a friendly package. In a relatively short time, Hare and Woods (along with Wrangham and

others) have transformed our understandings of some fundamental issues, above all by drawing attention to the multiple consequences of domestication, and the overriding importance of self-domestication. Homo Sapiens triumphed because of our capacity to cooperate with one another. In a challenging time, that is an inspiring message—and it suggests, in the strongest possible terms, that this is a capacity to cultivate.

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