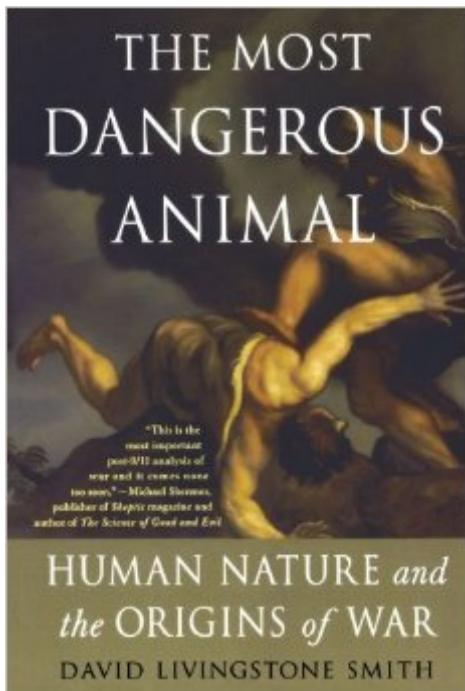


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The Most Dangerous Animal: Human Nature And The Origins Of War



Synopsis

Almost 200 million human beings, mostly civilians, have died in wars over the last century, and there is no end of slaughter in sight. The Most Dangerous Animal asks what it is about human nature that makes it possible for human beings to regularly slaughter their own kind. It tells the story of why all human beings have the potential to be hideously cruel and destructive to one another. Why are we our own worst enemy? The book shows us that war has been with us---in one form or another---since prehistoric times, and looking at the behavior of our close relatives, the chimpanzees, it argues that a penchant for group violence has been bred into us over millions of years of biological evolution. The Most Dangerous Animal takes the reader on a journey through evolution, history, anthropology, and psychology, showing how and why the human mind has a dual nature: on the one hand, we are ferocious, dangerous animals who regularly commit terrible atrocities against our own kind, on the other, we have a deep aversion to killing, a horror of taking human life. Meticulously researched and far-reaching in scope and with examples taken from ancient and modern history, The Most Dangerous Animal delivers a sobering lesson for an increasingly dangerous world.

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Customer Reviews

Once upon a time we were little australopithecine animals living in mortal fear of the great carnivores as we tried to steal bones from their kills, sleeping at night in trees where great snakes and huge eagles treated us as prey. Then some time later we grew larger and smarter and begin to

ward off the carnivores with sticks and stones and group cohesion. And then there came the day when we became the most feared predator of them all. This little history, according to the lengthy and perceptive analysis in this most engaging book, sheds important light on why we wage wars and kill with such ferocity. "The Most Dangerous Animal" is us. We have guns and walls and locks to protect us not from lions and tigers but from each other. But to gain the right ferocity and the sheer bloodlust needed to defeat our human enemies, we had to turn them into beast and vermin and other non human creatures because, simultaneously with our ability to kill, we had a mental module that urged us not to kill our kind. Therein lies, according to Professor Smith, who is both a philosopher and a psychologist, the terrible dialectic that is the human mind as warrior. For the tribe to survive it had to be able to stir its young men to a killing rage like chimpanzees tearing a strange chimp to bits with their bare hands. But at the same time, this violent ferocity must not be turned upon family, friends and other members of the tribe. And so these two assortments of mental neurons (mental modules) exist simultaneously in the human brain, and depending on circumstances lead us to brotherhood or to genocide. The question that confronts us today is will we always have war?

Perhaps due to so-called consciousness, our species seems to be the only one affected by vanity. We like to imagine not only that we are in control of our fate, that we "dominate" nature, but also that we are superior to all other animals due to our "morality". No other organism seems particularly concerned with distinguishing between "good" and "bad" (whereas we can fill whole libraries with boring treatises debating this most pressing issue). Ironically, humans are also the ONLY species on this planet that practices war: planning, meticulously preparing, and finally killing hundreds to millions of members of our own kind. If everything goes well, the "victorious" side then gets to compose poems, make blockbuster movies and erect monuments in honour of the "heroic" soldiers who so bravely slaughtered away the "enemy" in the name of God, freedom or democracy. The obvious fact that humans are the greatest killers (and are quite innovative at it, too!) seems nevertheless to cause some discomfort. Invariably we are told that wars are "senseless", "evil", or even "inhuman". Yes, and we would all like to end all wars forever, and live in global brotherhood (at least once we get rid of the "enemies of freedom"). Unfortunately such idyllic fantasies do not impress Mother Nature. And for better or for worse, it's Nature's (or more specifically Evolution's) game we are playing here. Smith's 'The Most Dangerous Animal' proposes a rather cheerless approach to the issue of war: instead of endlessly moralizing about it, he leads the reader on a tour through our evolutionary past, to show how our capacity and necessity to fight wars developed via

natural selection, and is therefore deeply ingrained in our minds.

I want to avoid being too negative here since this is the best book on the incredibly important issue of humanity and war that is available today, in my opinion having read at least 85% of them. I have a paper very much along the lines of this book which both myself and the author regret his having found only after he finished writing it. What complaints I have are not that I disagree with the contents generally but more a frustration with the little errors which are inevitable when covering this much ground and with the lost chance to go further than he does. In general philosophers tend to do poorly when they turn their hands to evolutionary psychology, but he mostly pulls it off. However, there are notable weaknesses. He does not know enough about evolutionary biology to avoid believing, and repeating, some dumb and illogical ideas heard elsewhere and he does not manage to present speculative notions in a scientific manner, carefully framed. Instead we get statements presented as fact which one can dismiss with a few minutes thought. These will leave his work vulnerable to attack by all of those with far weaker and more illogical, and more ideological, ideas about humanity and war, unfortunately. A few examples then. When discussing chimpanzees and bonobos, their peaceful cousins, he states that "A lot hangs on whether the trunk from which the two branches grew was chimpanzee-like or bonobo-like....if the prehistoric ape that gave rise to the human and chimpanzee-bonobo lines was more like the sensual, affable bonobo than the violent, patriarchal chimpanzee, this might indicate that the heart of human nature is more gentle than truculent." There is no logic to this assertion.

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