



The Ape That Understood the Universe: How the Mind and Culture Evolve

Steve Stewart-Williams

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Steve Stewart-Williams, associate professor of psychology at the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, wants to help readers get an outside perspective on humanity to realize just how strange some aspects of evolution are. To that end, in his second book, *The Ape That Understood the Universe*, he imagines a “hypothetical, hyperintelligent alien” from the planet Betelgeuse III visiting Earth and making an anthropological study. Tongue-in-cheek excerpts from the alien’s journal relate how confused he is about human reproduction, sexual roles, violence, and more.

It’s a delightful setup that leads into a lucid primer on evolutionary biology. “We’re living anachronisms,” Stewart-Williams insists: in certain ways we are fit for a world that no longer exists. For instance, because we’re built to take advantage of once-scarce nutrients, we gravitate toward salt, sugar, and carbohydrates and gain weight quickly—thus the obesity epidemic. The characteristics of human males and females are not as stark as the sexual dimorphism seen in other species but are still distinct. Are these the result of evolution or culture?

The work of Charles Darwin is, not surprisingly, the most frequent point of reference here. Notions of selective breeding, altruism, and kin selection are discussed at a level of detail that may well make the middle section of the book (and the appendices) too dense for lay readers. However, the final chapter, “The Cultural Animal,” successfully expounds Richard Dawkins’s idea of humans as “vehicles for memes,” with chain letters as a metaphor for how viruses spread.

Whatever the oddities of our evolutionary route, we are now in an unprecedented situation: “the nonhuman world is largely at our mercy.” Stewart-Williams persuasively argues that the power to change our surroundings and doom other species makes us “the strangest animal in the world.”

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