

*Mama's Last Hug: Animal Emotions and What They Tell Us about Ourselves*, by Frans de Waal (2018, W.W. Norton & Company)

Mama was a chimpanzee, who, on her deathbed, rose to hug a man she hadn't seen for several years. He had cared for her, and had come to say goodbye when he heard she was ill. A keeper caught the scene on his smartphone and it went viral on the internet: perhaps you saw it. Man and chimpanzee loved one another: de Waal's point is that other animals have the same emotions we do. By "emotions" he means physical changes in the brain/body that result in observable actions. He differentiates them from "feelings," which are the conscious states that may accompany the emotions, but he thinks many species of animals have those too. Feelings may be subject to cultural determinants but emotions are our biological inheritance as hominids, as vertebrates, and even as animals of any kind.

The book considers empathy and sympathy, disgust, shame, guilt, politics, murder, warfare, emotional intelligence, sense of fairness, and free will, as well as smiles and laughter. Clearly, not all of these are what we would call emotions; instead, they are series of actions that involve thinking and planning while starting from various emotional states. De Waal says that emotions "give meaning to everything." He sees animal emotions "not as a topic to contemplate by itself but as capable of shedding light on our very existence, our goals and dreams, and our highly structured societies."

At first blush, some of this sounds far-fetched, but de Waal's examples, based on observations of animals in zoos and in the wild, and on ethologists' experiments with primates, dolphins, crows, rats, and other creatures, are carefully crafted, delightful to read, and quite convincing. Discussing dominance and the role of alpha males and females among chimpanzees and bonobos, de Waal analyses Donald Trump's behavior in his debates with Hillary Clinton—really funny—and explains that we tend to misunderstand the way animal alphas remain in power, which is by ending fights among subordinates, protecting the vulnerable, and maintaining peace. In this connection, he recounts the actions of an alpha male bonobo who warned the keepers cleaning his group's moat not to turn the water back on, because young bonobos had jumped into the dry moat, couldn't get out, and would drown (bonobos can't swim). This alpha's empathy with the youngsters, his understanding of cause and effect, of where the keepers were going when they went away to turn on the water, of the need to warn them at all costs, are truly thought-provoking.

De Waal writes, "the rejection of similarity between humans and other animals...stands in the way of a frank assessment of who we are as a species." I finished reading the book with a better understanding of our similarities to our fellow animals and with a strengthened awareness of basic biological functions that run through so many of our cultural achievements. De Waal writes well, and I think you would find the book as enjoyable and illuminating as I did.

