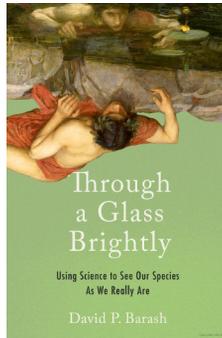


OTHER

Through a Glass Brightly: Using Science to See Our Species as We Really Are

By David B. Barash. 2018. Oxford University Press. 208 pages, 30.95 CAD, Cloth.

David Barash uses quirky humour, a sprawling compendium of references—from the Bible, to classical writers, to poets and academics new and old, to SpongeBob Squarepants (seriously!)—and succinct recaps of scientific research to put the boots to 15 paradigms that many of us take as pretty much self-evident. An evolutionary



biologist, professor emeritus of psychology, and prolific author, Barash writes knowledgeably and comfortably on such topics as the meaning of life, whether we have unique and separate selves, parent/child conflict, monogamy, the nature of truth, and war and peace. His explorations and explanations of science, especially biology, provide the basis for his iconoclastic approach to the ‘common knowledge’ positions on these topics. As iconoclasts go, he’s very good.

Divided into two sections, the book builds on several of his previous publications, as he notes in nearly every chapter. Each section begins with a prelude, and it’s worth repeating their lengthy titles to get the gist of the sections and hence the book. Part I, “The Allure of Human Centrality, or, How We Persistently Try to Deny Our Place in the Natural World – And Fail”, brings up to the present the long and ongoing debate, dating back centuries, over the superiority of *Homo sapiens* compared to any other species and the notion that the universe revolves around us. The latter view was held in the Ptolemaic world, and its debunking by Copernicus and Galileo took a few centuries to catch on. Similarly, the notion that we are the centre of our psychological universe, with nature—seen as ‘outside’ ourselves—being there for our use and disposal, more than lingers. We can see it in everything from the ‘yuck’ response to bugs and spiders to climate change denial/inaction that helps maintain the status quo. Thus, the first order of business in this section is a critical examination of this big-picture myth of human centrality. Barash explores our modocentrism through (among other things) the concept of a ‘reverse’ world map, then moves on to the question of how we determine the meaning of life in the face of biological purposelessness. He demolishes any self-satisfaction humans may find in the notion that our body plan is well-designed, rejects the notion that human consciousness is necessary for the universe to exist, and notes that, despite our tough talk, many organisms are much tougher than we are. Want to compete with extremophiles, anyone?

More radically, he boldly favours—which is different from advocating!—the cloning of humans and chimpanzees, if only to demonstrate our connectedness to everything, thereby refuting the common belief that only human life is important. The concept of connectedness is used to expose the illusion that self exists independently of everything else. Rather, we are all symbionts, as demonstrated by our bacteria-filled microbiomes.

In Part II, Barash provides “New Ways of Understanding Human Nature”. He makes the argument here that human behaviour itself “is altogether natural... woven from the same biological cloth as other living things” (p. 85). The point here is neither the reduction of humans to the level of animals, nor the elevation of animals to the level of humans, but to get rid of the level itself so that we can see our inter-relatedness to all living beings. This shift in thinking, so hard for many to accept, becomes more acceptable if it’s seen as “lateral”, not “downwards”.

The chapters in Part II explore aspects of this, putting under the lens, to provide only several examples, our beliefs in our capacity for thoughtfulness, the inevitability of a generation gap, our ability to distinguish truth and falsity, the problem of morality, and evolutionary theory. Other commonly held views receive this close scrutiny: humans are monogamous, altruism proves our higher nature, humans are natural born killers, and we have free will so are truly ‘captains of our fate’. In each instance, Barash seeks to explode the old paradigms, replacing them with science-based concepts that serve us better in our understanding of ourselves and the natural world. Perhaps the most sobering is explored in Chapter 16, “The Paradox of Power”. Here, Barash asserts that our cultural capacity to develop weapons outpaces our biological, evolutionary capacity to develop restraints in using them: “We are, via cultural evolution, in over our biological heads” (p. 186).

Each of the myriad topics Barash tackles in this short book could be addressed in books of their own—and often have been, as noted above, in other books of his. Here he is summarizing, it seems to me, a life’s work of thinking, researching, and synthesizing. As such, the book is an excellent introduction to topics that are worthy of the reader’s further exploration. While Barash’s tone often disguises the serious purpose behind the book, that purpose is clearly laid out in his concluding remarks: to help us see ourselves as we really are. In other words, his purpose is to provide fresh paradigms that enhance our understanding of human behaviour and, through that, our sense of responsibility for the quality of our lives, and the world we live in.

The two introductory preludes set up each section; chapters therein are short, with brief references cited in endnotes after each chapter. The book is indexed but does not have a bibliography. Other writers have written bigger books on these topics. But for a solid, acces-

sible, thoughtful introduction, this is an excellent place to start, recommended reading for anyone interested in these questions.

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