

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-42504-9 — The Ape that Understood the Universe: How the Mind and  
Culture Evolve  
Steve Stewart-Williams  
Frontmatter  
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## The Ape that Understood the Universe

*The Ape that Understood the Universe* is the story of the strangest animal in the world: the human animal. It opens with a question: How would an alien scientist view our species? What would it make of our sex differences, our sexual behavior, our child-rearing patterns, our moral codes, our religions, our languages, and science? The book tackles these issues by drawing on ideas from two major schools of thought: evolutionary psychology and cultural evolutionary theory. The guiding assumption is that humans are animals, and that like all animals, we evolved to pass on our genes. At some point, however, we also evolved the capacity for culture – and from that moment, culture began evolving in its own right. This transformed us from a mere ape into an ape capable of reshaping the planet, traveling to other worlds, and understanding the vast universe of which we're but a tiny, fleeting fragment.

Steve Stewart-Williams is an associate professor of psychology at the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus. His research and writing revolve around the idea that theories from evolutionary biology can shed light on the human mind and behavior, focusing especially on sex differences and altruism. He also has a long-standing interest in the philosophical implications of evolutionary theory. His first book, *Darwin, God and the Meaning of Life*, was published in 2010 by Cambridge University Press.

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## Advance Praise for *The Ape that Understood the Universe*

In *The Ape that Understood the Universe*, evolutionary psychologist Steve Stewart-Williams provides a masterful account of how the mind and culture evolve. Stewart-Williams is an exceptionally good writer, a witty and learned guide through challenging but exciting terrain that includes psychology, biology, anthropology, philosophy, and animal behavior. *The Ape that Understood the Universe* is a rare accomplishment: equal parts intellectual exhilaration and beautifully crafted narrative. Read this book for its literary grace, and learn along the way why you are an ape that can understand the universe.

—Todd Shackelford, *Oakland University*

A great introduction to human nature – whether you’re a member of our species or an alien scientist puzzled by this planet’s dominant life form. Stewart-Williams shows how genes and memes entwine to explain our deepest concerns and our highest aspirations. This fun, easy-going, science-savvy book will make you smarter about your emotions, your relationships, and your society.

—Geoffrey Miller, *author of The Mating Mind, Spent, and Mate*

This is a highly imaginative (and solidly informed) book about the nature of human nature – who we really are. Stewart-Williams has a firm grip on the latest data in evolutionary psychology and cultural evolution, all elegantly woven into a fine narrative packed with provocative (and astute) ideas. It’s an insightful, accurate and refreshingly amusing read.

—Helen Fisher, *author of Anatomy of Love and Why Him? Why Her?*

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An eloquent and elegant exploration of human nature in the light of evolution, illuminating many modern social and political dilemmas.

—*Matt Ridley, author of The Red Queen and Nature via Nurture*

If you hate the idea of selfish genes, this book should change your mind. With vivid examples and fascinating evidence, Stewart-Williams provides a powerful challenge to the “culture is all” lobby. The best update of the gene’s-eye view I have seen for a long time. This book will turn your view of human nature inside out and upside down.

—*Susan Blackmore, author of The Meme Machine and Consciousness: An Introduction*

In *The Ape that Understood the Universe*, Steve Stewart-Williams takes the reader from first principles to a deep understanding of the evolutionary and cultural underpinnings of human behaviour. Not only has Stewart-Williams produced a work of deep understanding, he has also produced one which is a real page turner. A twenty-first century successor to *The Selfish Gene*.

—*Lance Workman, co-author of Evolutionary Psychology: An Introduction*

Although there are many books covering evolutionary approaches to the human mind and behaviour, this is one of the best, in terms of its choice of topics, insightful coverage, knowledge of the subject-matter, and quality of writing. I enthusiastically recommend it both to those familiar with the area and to newcomers.

—*John Archer, University of Central Lancashire*

This is a fantastically comprehensive, clear, and highly entertaining sweep of every important facet of evolutionary psychology. It does something other books do not do: It presents the opposing arguments to various evolutionary theories and then objectively lays out the evidence for why they don’t hold up. If you want to debate the evolution deniers, this is the book for you. I loved this book and highly recommend it to anyone who wants to understand evolutionary psychology or understand it far better.

—*Amy Alkon, science-based syndicated columnist and author of Unf\*ckology: A Field Guide to Living with Guts and Confidence*

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The premise of Steve Stewart-Williams' magnificent contribution to the scientific study of human nature – an anthropologist from an alien planet visits Earth and tries to make sense of this bipedal ape called *Homo sapiens* – is one of those perspective-shifting thought experiments that results in readers gaining hitherto unknown insights into our peculiar species, and buries once and for all the fatuous blank slate model of humanity that discounts our deep connectedness to all other animals. A compelling read – I learned something new on every page.

—*Michael Shermer, publisher of Skeptic magazine, monthly columnist for Scientific American, and author of Heavens on Earth: The Scientific Search for the Afterlife, Immortality, and Utopia*

This book is nothing short of brilliant, unpacking both the profound and the ridiculous in our emerging picture of human nature and cultural evolution. We won't really be the ape that understood the universe until we understand ourselves, and Steve Stewart-Williams has drawn us an irreplaceable roadmap.

—*Baba Brinkman, Science Rapper*

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*For Jane, Darwin, and India*

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