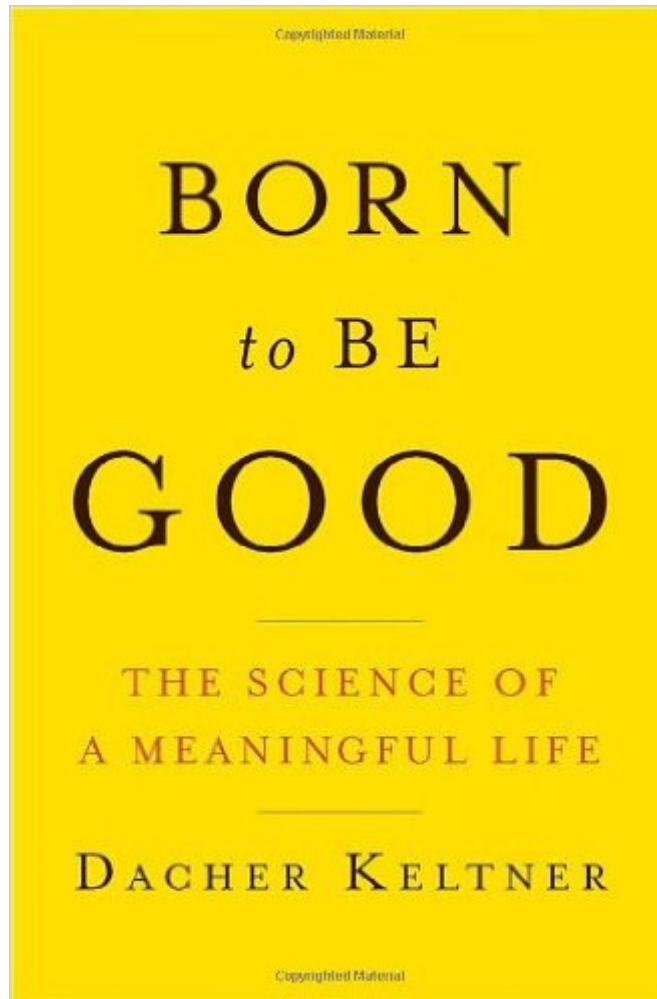


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Born To Be Good: The Science Of A Meaningful Life



Synopsis

A new examination of the surprising origins of human goodness. In *Born to Be Good*, Dacher Keltner demonstrates that humans are not hardwired to lead lives that are "nasty, brutish, and short"—we are in fact born to be good. He investigates an old mystery of human evolution: why have we evolved positive emotions like gratitude, amusement, awe, and compassion that promote ethical action and are the fabric of cooperative societies? By combining stories of scientific discovery, personal narrative, and Eastern philosophy, Keltner illustrates his discussions with more than fifty photographs of human emotions. *Born to Be Good* is a profound study of how emotion is the key to living the good life and how the path to happiness goes through human emotions that connect people to one another. 60 photographs

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Customer Reviews

Born to Be Good is something less than the subtitle (The Science of a Meaningful Life) suggests. More accurately, it covers the science of certain selected emotions and, more narrowly still, primarily the research of certain psychologists, bolstered by a bit of neuroscience. Most specifically, it focuses in large part (although not exclusively) on the work of Paul Ekman (the author's mentor) and the research of Keltner himself (along with his students). Ekman was a pioneer in developing a technique to match facial expressions to associated emotions. He found that several basic emotions -- such as anger, disgust, fear, sadness, surprise, and happiness -- register in the same facial muscle actions across cultures. Keltner has carried on in this tradition. Following

Jonathan Haidt and others, Keltner's larger thesis is that evolution has honed moral intuitions into embodied emotions that abet the development of morality and communal cooperation. For instance, one can easily see the social benefits of compassion, and the research shows it to correlate to activity in the vagus nerve, a bodily system which developed deep in our mammalian past. So far, so good. However, Keltner stretches the point to claim that we have evolved a set of emotions that enable us to live a meaningful life, and that, "The key to happiness is to let these emotions arise, to see them fully in oneself and others, and to train the eye and mind in that practice." He proposes what he calls a "jen ratio" to reflect the balance between the "good and uplifting" and the "bad and cynical."

Time and time again, studies have shown that what makes us happy is the quality of our romantic bonds, the health of our families, the time we spend with good friends, and the connection we feel to communities. The Dalai Lama said, "If you want to be happy, practice compassion; if you want others to be happy, practice compassion." "Born to be Good" by Dacher Keltner, who is professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, postulates that our capacity for good is programmed into our brains and bodies. Keltner has developed what he calls "jen" science. The Confucian concept of "jen" refers to a complex mixture of kindness, humanity, and respect that transpires between people. Keltner's "jen" science is the study of facial expressions, patterns of touch, and tones of voice. He uses neuroscience, evolution, psychology, and Eastern thought to explain how we evolved to be good. And this is the third book I've read recently that deals with Paul Ekman's Facial Action Coding System (FACS). It was discussed in Malcolm Gladwell's "Blink" and "Social Intelligence" by Daniel Goleman. FACS is a method of identifying, frame by frame, facial muscle movement to detect emotional expression during social interaction. Apparently we express emotions in millisecond bursts of facial muscle movement which conveys much more than language can with its inherent limits. Ekman also proved that facial expression is cross-cultural - all humans express the same emotions using the same facial muscle movements. In chapters devoted to "pro-social" emotional displays such as smile, laughter, tease, compassion, and awe, Keltner shines new light on the exact meaning of certain emotional displays.

Darwin's theory of evolution says that through a process called "natural selection" those that cannot adapt to the environment eventually become extinct. Fossils around the globe confirm this. In light of this theory, one might think that the strong will always survive and overpower the weak out of existence. Genes by their nature, therefore, are selfish because all they want to do is

propagate. Since we are all made from genes, some believe that we, too, as a species are selfish by nature. As the book states, our every action is designed to maximize wealth. We help others expecting we would in turn receive help someday. We would satisfy the "pleasure centers" of our brains through sex, drug, money, self-interest, or any other means anytime we could. "Thou shalt not kill" implies that murder is in our blood and therefore the need for such a commandment in the first place. In the greater scheme of an evolutionary wilderness, acts of kindness toward others are simply aberrations or misfires in the brain. The book disagrees. Darwin himself observed that sympathetic communities are more likely to produce healthier offspring than cruel ones. Human history shows that compassion always pulls through in times of war. And new studies of our body's physiology show that caretaking emotions are wired within our nervous systems. As a species, we evolved at some point to walk on two feet. In doing so, the female's birth canal narrowed. Our babies therefore have to be born small in order to pass through the smaller opening. In comparison to other animals whose newborns can walk upright the moment they're born, our babies need a long time of nursing -- at least eighteen months and continually at that all throughout the day -- before they can survive on their own.

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