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‘Blueprint’ Review: Bending Toward Goodness

Though humans can be cruel and self-serving at times, we’ve also been blessed with a penchant for love, cooperation and friendship.



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By David P. Barash

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In L. Frank Baum’s book “The Marvelous Land of Oz”—second in the Oz series—we meet H.M. Woggle-Bug, T.E. (that is, Thoroughly Educated). This marvelous creature, who had listened to years of lectures while hiding in an auditorium, was eventually caught and projected onto a large screen (hence H.M.: Highly Magnified), at which point he walked off and into the “real” world. Nicholas A. Christakis, M.D., is one of our most distinguished Woggle-Bugs, a physician and sociologist, director of the Human Nature Lab at Yale University, where he is Sterling Professor of Social and Natural Science, Internal Medicine and Biomedical Engineering.

In other words, the guy knows what’s he’s talking about, and in his new book, “Blueprint,” what he’s talking about is human nature. The basic theme is straightforward, summed up in the author’s adaptation of one of Martin Luther King Jr.’s well-known statements: “The arc of our evolutionary history is long. But it bends toward goodness.”

Human nature is biologically defined, Dr. Christakis asserts, but this doesn’t mean that we are, as some would have it, inherently violent and incorrigibly evil. Our nature is more beneficent. To be sure, like many other animals, we can be brutal, self-serving and cruel. But through evolution we also developed a “social suite” of behaviors and inclinations—a penchant not only for love but for cooperation, friendship, commitment and learning.

Key to his optimistic take is our species’ capacity for social tolerance and—even more so—our innate desire for enthusiastic affiliation: “Natural selection has equipped us with the capacity and desire to join groups, and to do so in particular ways. For instance, we can surrender our own individuality and feel so aligned with a collective that we do things that would seem against our personal interests or that would otherwise shock us.”

“Blueprint” draws evidence of these extraordinary capabilities from some highly original sources, including “natural experiments” featuring unintentional communities formed by events such as shipwrecks. Some catastrophes, in the age of sail, had ghastly outcomes

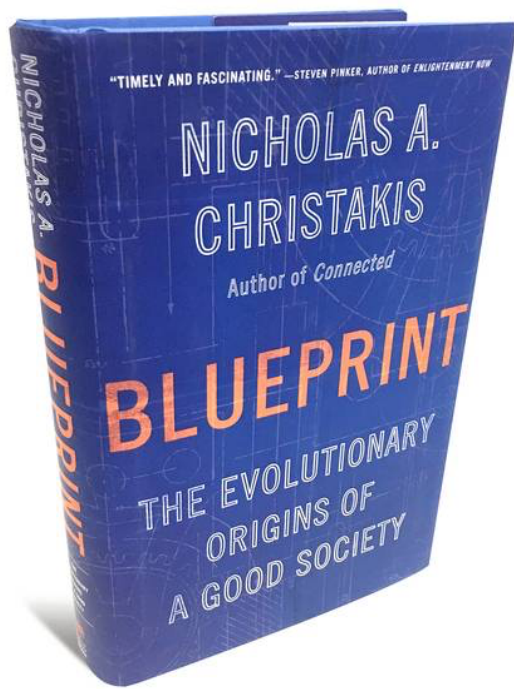


PHOTO: WSJ

BLUEPRINT

By Nicholas A. Christakis

Little, Brown Spark, 520 pages, \$30

(cannibalism, murder) but the author suggests this was nearly always because of dysfunctional leadership. Other impromptu communities were strikingly successful. In 1864, after a group of prospectors and seal-hunters aboard the Sydney-based schooner Grafton foundered in the Auckland Islands, all five castaways survived for a full 19 months. In 1871, HMS *Megaera*, carrying raw recruits from South Africa to Australia, shipwrecked in the Indian Ocean; of the 289 persons aboard, none was lost during their ordeal of three months. “The shipwrecked crews,” he writes, “were able to fulfill their needs for food, shelter and safety precisely because they first attended to their needs for friendship, cooperation and learning.”

As he surveys the historical record, Dr. Christakis also reviews examples from would-be utopian communities such as the 19th-century Brook Farm in Massachusetts (not-so-successful) and *kibbutzim* in Israel (generally more successful), along with the overwhelmingly positive outcomes of such intentional communities as Antarctic research stations.

Dr. Christakis also covers more conventional scientific ground regarding kin selection and the biology of nepotism; reciprocity in animals and people; behavioral genetics; and the complex interaction between genes and culture. We get an upbeat account of the natural history of love and of mating patterns, not just among humans but also among animals, including elephants and dolphins. Pair-bonding and positive, pro-social attachments take pride of place in his account of human behavior, with especially good treatments of the similar functions that loving one’s mate and loving one’s offspring perform for, say, prairie voles and people.

“Blueprint” also presents a noteworthy concept inspired by an idea of Richard Dawkins. We all know that genes are responsible for creating bodies (“phenotypes”); Mr. Dawkins has suggested we also see them as responsible for “extended phenotypes,” such as beaver dams and spider webs. Just so, Dr. Christakis suggests, the human genome influences the production of social systems, nearly all of which must be pro-social and at least minimally nourishing at several levels if they are to persist. The bottom line, as this deeply encouraging book argues, is that these are part of our species’s “extended phenotype: “We each carry within us an

evolutionary blueprint for making a good society.”

This argument has been made before, but not to my knowledge with such cross-disciplinary verve or impassioned urgency. “When we can see ourselves as *all* being part of the same group,” the author writes, it “means that, in the extreme, we can see that we are all human beings. We can efface the tribalism of small groups and find a kindness for large groups.” I admire Dr. Christakis’s optimism, but would nonetheless feel better if there were more current real-life indications of people overcoming their narrow tribalism. Still, Dr. Christakis’s view is consistent with an evolutionary perspective in which cross-cultural universals, resulting from a shared biological substructure, can provide the basis for a shared morality. Whatever its faults, this approach offers a much-needed corrective to the fashionable cynicism that revels in a self-conscious “hard-headed realism” about human nature.

As Albert Camus said, “There are more things to admire in men than to despise,” and “Blueprint” is an encouraging, detailed and persuasive antidote to misanthropy. One need not be a genuine Woggle-Bug to write a brilliant book, but Dr. Christakis is, and he has.

Mr. Barash is professor of psychology emeritus at the University of Washington. He is the author, most recently, of “Through a Glass Brightly” and the co-author, with Judith Eve Lipton, of “Strength Through Peace.”

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