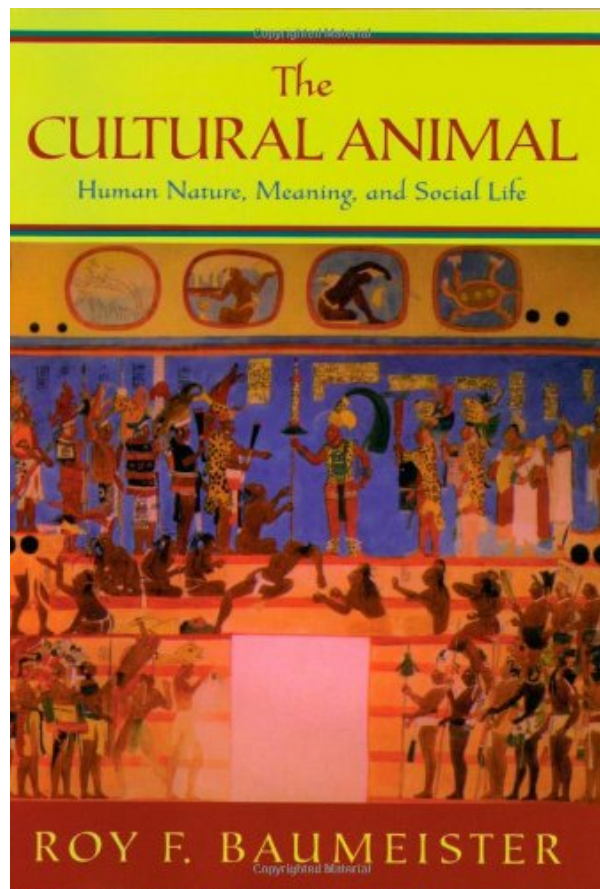
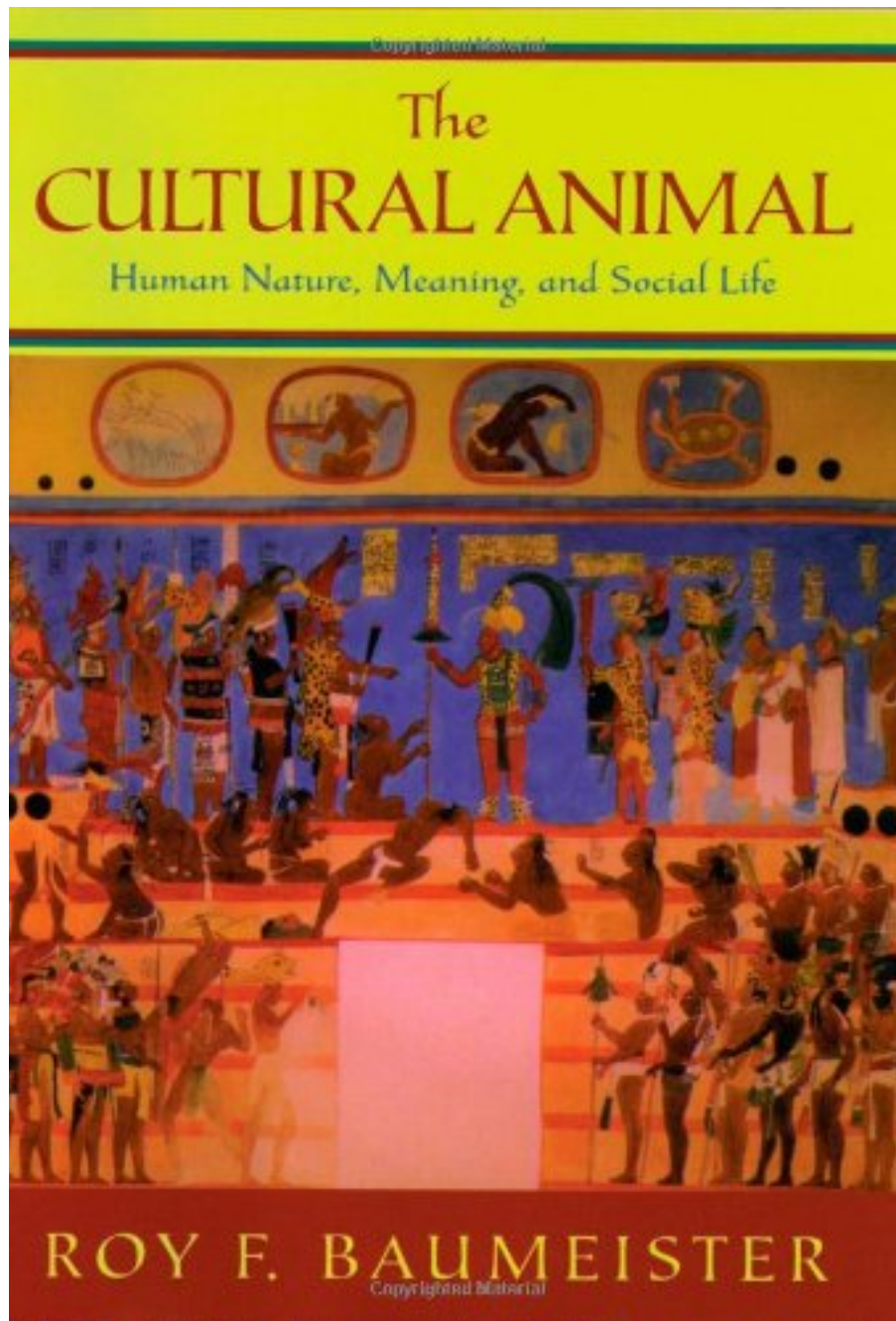


**THE CULTURAL ANIMAL: HUMAN
NATURE, MEANING, AND SOCIAL LIFE BY
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Review

"A remarkably well-written book. Anyone interested in psychology and philosophy would find this book fascinating. It is thorough, very well informed, and clearly presented."--Diaglouge

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THE CULTURAL ANIMAL: HUMAN NATURE, MEANING, AND SOCIAL LIFE BY ROY F. BAUMEISTER PDF

What makes us human? Why do people think, feel and act as they do? What is the essence of human nature? What is the basic relationship between the individual and society? These questions have fascinated both great thinkers and ordinary humans for centuries. Now, at last, there is a solid basis for answering them, in the form of accumulated efforts and studies by thousands of psychology researchers. We no longer have to rely on navel-gazing and speculation to understand why people are the way they are - we can instead turn to solid, objective findings. This book, by an eminent social psychologist at the peak of his career, not only summarizes what we know about people - it also offers a coherent, easy-to-understand, though radical, explanation. Turning conventional wisdom on its head, the author argues that culture shaped human evolution. Contrary to theories that depict the individual's relation to society as one of victimization, endless malleability, or just a square peg in a round hole, he proposes that the individual human being is designed by nature to be part of society. Moreover, he argues that we need to briefly set aside the endless study of cultural differences to look at what most cultures have in common - because that holds the key to human nature. Culture is in our genes, although cultural differences may not be. This core theme is further developed by a powerful tour through the main dimension of human psychology. What do people want? How do people think? How do emotions operate? How do people behave? And how do they interact with each other? The answers are often surprising, and along the way the author explains how human desire, thought, feeling, and action are connected.

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The First Chapter is the Book

By Herbert Gintis

Baumeister writes that his "initial project was to provide a summary and overview of human nature, based on current lab findings in social psychology." After a year of hard work, he finished a draft of the book, and realized that it had no central theme, but rather was a compendium of scattered observations and partial, unintegrated, insights. Of course this is not surprising because the field of social psychology is just that---a bunch of unintegrated insights drawn together by insufferable pseudo-generalizations. Then, says Baumeister, "one day, sitting by a rooftop pool...I began to think that the giant mass of information really did seem to be ready for integrative explanation. The human psyche...was designed for something very specific. Inner processes serve interpersonal functions. What goes on inside the person is there to facilitate the types of relationships we have." (p. viii) He goes on to say "Nature built us for culture. The human psyche is thus designed by natural selection to enable us to belong to a culture."

Baumeister was chagrined to discover that this synthesizing theme would require a whole year of rewriting, "which involved a growing struggle with my own impatience," he writes. A whole year? A year is a very short time to deal with such a big theme, especially since the idea itself is quite foreign to traditional social psychology. Unfortunately, Baumeister's impatience shows. Except for the first chapter, the book is filled with vapid and off-hand observations well known to all and hardly reflecting "current lab findings" in any serious way. Here is a typical, randomly chosen quote from the chapter *How People Act and React*: "In terms of money, rationality means doing what is best for the self in the long run." (p.326) This of course is just false. It is rational to give to charity, to contribute to the struggle for democracy, civil liberties, and racial equality, to vote, and to reject positive offers in an ultimatum game. Baumeister continues: "Economic incentives do generally have a significant impact on human behavior. Economists often take this as a sign that people are generally rational." The mind boggles at the banal superficiality of this statement, at its lack of references, and its ignorance of truly key considerations in the question of human rationality. He goes on to say "It would be an overstatement to say that people are always rational, but it is hard to dispute that basic economic rationality does succeed as a general principle for explaining and prediction (and controlling) a great deal of human behavior." The book is full of such superficial and unsupported pseudo-reasoning.

Baumeister's first chapter, by contrast, is a gentle, insightful, and nicely written introduction to the theory of cultural evolution and gene-culture coevolution, although the author appears not to have read some of the important contributions to the field (where are E. O. Wilson, Marcus Feldman, Luca Cavalli-Sforza, Robin Dunbar, and William Durham, among others). Similarly, Baumeister does not refer to the extremely important literature on niche construction, of which gene-culture coevolution is a special case (see the works of John Odling-Smee, Kevin Laland, and Marcus Feldman). Finally, Baumeister's careful discussion of the meaning of 'culture' does not recognize that human culture is a form of epistatic cross-generational

transmission, and hence that culture is information the same way that genes are information. For a short introduction to this way of thinking (the only correct way of thinking, in my humble estimation) see my paper "Gene-culture Coevolution and the Nature of Human Sociality", *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* 366 (2011):878-888.

As a result of his not having read the relevant literature, Baumeister does not have a secure handle on the application of gene-culture coevolution to the nature of human sociality, which probably accounts for the superficiality of the remainder of the book.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

A Compendium of Human Cultural Activity, from How We Learn and What Motivates Us to How We Interact in Social Groups!

By Kevin Currie-Knight

This is one book that is REALLY difficult to summarize in an amazon review. It is basically a compendium of a lot of things we know about humans - from what motivates us to how we learn to how we interact with each other. But there is a common theme, and it is a good one. Where most scientists look at human nature as what comes first and culture as what comes next, social psychologist Baumeister suggests that culture is actually part of human nature - that human nature is 'hardwired' for culture. Unlike other species who are, at best, social animals, we are truly cultural animals. We not only cooperate with each other, but have elaborate social rules with which we interact with each other. And while these social rules vary between cultures, the variations can often be understood as expressions of our very common human nature, a human nature that in some sense needs culture.

Taking off from this foundation, Baumeister explores everything from what motivates us (with fascinating talk about the ways humans exploit extrinsic incentives to get a great many things done), to how we learn (and the ways we've devised to consciously pass information between people) to how we interact (how most cultural rules are ways to harness the positives of human nature and disincend the negatives).

I've been an admirer of Baumeister for some time, having read his books, *Willpower* and *Is there Anything Good About Men?* Not only is *Cultural Animal* a very clear and engaging text, but it is quite encyclopedic in its scope dealing with how humans operate - reviewing research on everything to how humans construct mental maps of the world to how we go out of our way to create social networks that enhance our well-being. I have to suppose that, of all the books I've read, this one may have the most highlighted passages of them all.

[One word of warning: the kindle edition is a facsimile of the paperback edition, basically a scan of it. That means no ability to highlight, change text size, or annotate.]

6 of 12 people found the following review helpful.

Very interesting reading

By PST

Firmly based on Darwin's Evolutionary Theory, the author attempts to explain what makes humans unique cultural animals. Rather than focussing on the differences between cultures, he points out, how cultural animals (man being the only such species) are different from social animals (e.g. wolves, horses..). His explanation is, that this must have offered an evolutionary advantage to the animal, so so it evolved over time

He draws from a huge pile of information from experiments done by countless psychologists over many decades, and manages to offer logical explanations of their results.

There is much information in this book about results on human behaviour, which are interesting in their own right - even if the reader is not interested in how / why they evolved.

I can highly recommend this book to anybody, who is interested in how humans "operate", and even more so to people, who (like me) want to know the evolutionary background of human traits.

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