

Of Mice and Men

Giancarlo Livraghi – December 2011

The title is obviously copied from one of John Steinbeck's best novels (1937). But this is about a totally different subject. An article in *Science* magazine on December 9, 2011 *Empathy and Pro-Social Behavior in Rats* reported the results of an experiment by three Chicago University neurobiologists, Inbal Ben-Ami Bartal, Jean Decety and Peggy Mason.

sciencemag.org/content/334/6061/1427

This was also reported in

uchospitals.edu/news/2011/20111208-empathy.html

sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1364661311002786

scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=jailbreak-rat

psychologytoday.com/blog/animal-emotions/201112/empathic-rats-and-ravishing-ravens



"Rats in love" © Psychology Today

There is no reason to underestimate the relevance of this experiment. But the basic fact is that it's a confirmation rather than a new discovery.

It has been thoroughly demonstrated that cooperation, social responsibility and "empathy" are basically necessary for the survival of humankind. As well as other species – such as primates, more extensively mammals (also some other "genus", as in the case of birds). And of course there are relevant examples of cooperation and mutual understanding between different species.

Once again, it's surprising that anyone is surprised. The abundance of scientific and cultural proof hasn't, so far, been able to overcome the absurd persistence of stupid and dangerous prejudice. This is why I am not ashamed of my obstinacy in repeating *ad nauseam* a too often ignored basic concept.

Quite simply, it isn't true that humanity is necessarily evil or "sinful" and that to make us less barbaric we need to be disciplined by self-appointed "superior authorities". For centuries an millennia, this aggressively organized falsity has been the tool of repressive oligarchies and power cliques – often more corrupt on their inside than their victimized subjects. And, in too many environments and to a hideously large extent, it is still practiced.

In spite of some tragically obvious evidence, it isn't true that cultural, economic, ethnic, racial conflicts are rooted in human nature and the only way to get rid of them is to prohibit, punish, repress by law and force. There are, unfortunately, situations where they are driven by ignorance and fear – and therefore enforcement by authorities may be necessary. But these are “short term” needs. Ineffective if they don't, over time, find the essential values of agreement, mutual understanding, “empathy” – without which no culture can be called “human”, nor can exist without risking self destruction.

On the vital importance of social values since the origins of humanity see *The Evolution of Evolution* (2006) gandalf.it/stupid/darwin.htm

Modern anthropology is helping us to date those roots two hundred thousand years back, if we limit the definition of “human” to our closest ancestors. Or a million, maybe two, when we find similarities in more ancient “homo”. It's even more interesting with studies that expand the evolutionary pattern to primates (this is to say, 85 million years – or probably more) and, with further findings, to mammals (200 million). And there are good reasons to believe that the advancement of research may be able to trace the roots further back (as well as sideways) in the evolution of life.

There are some relevant comments by Jeffrey S. Mogil (McGill University, Montreal) in his article *The surprising empathic abilities of rodents* published in *ScienceDirect* on December 27, 2011. The fact is that these results aren't really “surprising”, because they fit well with other existing research. And this makes them even more interesting.

«*Empathy, sympathy and pro-social behavior*» – Jeffrey Mogil explains – «*are thought by many to be human-specific abilities, requiring theory of mind, moral judgment and cultural learning. The possibility of any of these social phenomena existing in species other than higher primates (and perhaps dolphins and elephants) was considered very unlikely until very recently*».

We are still in the early stages of scientifically analyzing the implications of the Bartal-Decety-Mason experiment, that anyhow, Jeffrey Mogil observes, «*has provided the first robust paradigm study of pro-social behavior in rats*».

But cultural prejudice stands in the way. «*Indeed these experiments are so straightforward one might ask why it took until the 21st century to uncover these abilities in lower mammalian species. I suspect the answer involves fear of committing the scientific “sin” of anthropomorphism. Anthropodenial is, however, an equally grave sin*».

The human implications are clearly defined also by Marc Bekoff in his article *Empathic Rats and Ravishing Ravens* published in *Psychology Today* on December 8, 2011. This is how it begins. «*Anyone who's kept up with the latest and greatest about the cognitive, emotional and moral lives of nonhuman animals knows that many non-primate animals are showing intellectual and emotional capacities that rival those of the great apes*».

«Over the past few years» – Marc Bekoff explains – «we’ve learned much about the moral lives of animals. Detailed studies have shown that mice and chickens display empathy and now we know rats do too».

«Much research is showing that human and nonhuman animals are inherently compassionate and emphatic and that it’s really easy to expand our compassion footprint». In this context, Marc Bekoff reports a comment by Peggy Mason. «When we act without empathy we are acting against our biological inheritance. If humans would listen and act on their biological inheritance more often, we’d be better off».

Marc Bekoff also observes that biological findings *«caution against our tooting our “we’re so special” horn too loudly or proudly».*

If we change the perspective from biology to history, the interesting fact is that for a very long time, in several stages of human development, there wasn’t such a strong perception of our species being so different from all other living creatures. It wasn’t a matter of “anthropomorphism”, but of learning, understanding differences and similarities, ways of being friendly or hostile.

It took many millennia for the de facto perception that we were gaining power over the environment to turn into the delusion of being different from all “animals” – and “created superior” to life as a whole. Only five hundred years ago we had to face the fact that our planet isn’t the center of the universe (less than 100 years ago, that the entire solar system is a tiny detail in one of several billion galaxies). And 150 years ago that we are not “divinely created” superior beings, but a fruit of evolution like all other forms of life.

Though all living people today were born when ancient astronomical and biological “views of the world” had lost all meaning, some parts of human culture are still finding it difficult to adjust. One of the dismaying results is that prejudice and arrogance are still standing in the way of accepting the crucial fact that empathy and “pro-social behavior” are an essential part of human nature – and even more deeply rooted in evolution.

Empathy

One of the things that I am learning by reasoning about these behavior studies is that for many years I was wrong in never using the word “empathy”.

The concept is in lots of things that I have written, but not the word. I wonder why – maybe I felt that it could be too “technical”, a scientific definition in psychology. Anyhow, now I understand that it’s worth using, because it defines an important value (instinctive as well as intentional) deeply rooted in human culture.

It also goes beyond species distinction, because there are possible, in fact verified, mutually “emphatic”, relationships with other animals – or, more broadly, living beings. (This isn’t just “symbiosis”, but awareness and active sharing of emotional feeling and deliberate behavior).

Empathy isn’t only pleasant, relaxing, enjoyable and enlightening. It’s also very useful. It can avoid, reduce or resolve conflicts, generate fertile grounds for effective understanding and cooperation.

This doesn’t imply abolishing antipathy. Of course it’s stupid when (as often happens) it’s generated by ignorance, misunderstanding or prejudice. But there are situations in which an unsympathetic feeling is justified (or, anyhow, unavoidable). Without getting into arguments, useless or excessive conflicts, it makes sense to stay as far as possible from people, environments and behaviors that make us uncomfortable – or we don’t like.

But there can be empathy values where and when we least expect them. Without hoping for too much or too often, it is always pleasant (sometimes very useful) to discover maybe small, but encouraging, “hidden treasures”.

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On the dark side, lack of empathy is a serious disease. People suffering from very dangerous, and enormously harmful, behavior pathologies are defined by neuropsychologists as *«not violent criminals, but psychopaths who have a condition that prevents them from feeling normal human empathy»*.

This syndrome is specifically identified with the malfunctioning of power systems and corporate management – especially financial gambling causing the worldwide “economic crisis”. (See *Is it a mental disease?* Pages 8-9 at the end of *Once upon a time there was the market* gandalf.it/stupid/market.pdf).

It’s reported in an Italian newspaper that also Jean Decety, author of the “empathy in rats” experiment, is well aware of the human implications – and he is particularly fond of a statement by Barack Obama on August 11, 2006, two and a half years before he became president of the United States.

«There’s a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit – the ability to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes; to see the world through the eyes of those who are different from us – the child who’s hungry, the steelworker who’s been laid-off, the family who lost the entire life they built together when the storm came to town. When you think like this – when you choose to broaden your ambit of concern and empathize with the plight of others, whether they are close friends or distant strangers – it becomes harder not to act; harder not to help».

Five years later, while Barack Obama is getting ready for a new election campaign, those wise words sound as a dire warning for power systems that seem to have lost their minds on a worldwide scale.

There is an urgent need to place human, social needs where they belong: over and above any economic or financial consideration. I have been writing about this for years, but it's never repeated often enough. Far too much, uncontrolled power is in the hands of a demented clique of psychopaths, pathologically deprived of empathy.

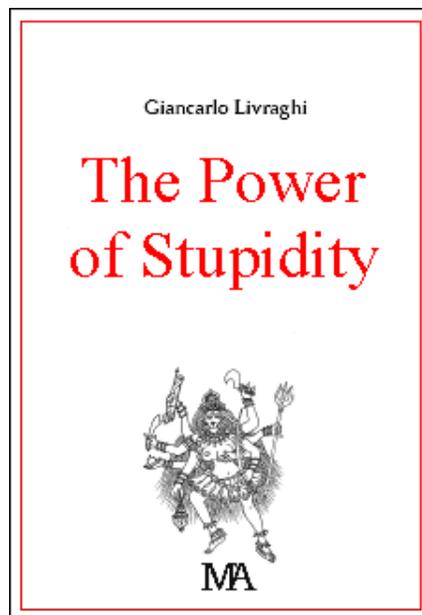
Of course it happens that such destructive mutations occur in the complexities of evolution. But humanity's immune system seems to be awkwardly paralyzed by nonsensical, potentially suicidal, acquiescence.

We are facing one of the most dramatic effects of the power of stupidity – and the stupidity of power. On a wider scale than ever before in history.

It would be interesting if, at least in an experimental simulation, the ruling maniacs were replaced by rats, carefully chosen by the Chicago University as the best in emphatic behavior. Or if the world-dominating psychopaths were locked up in a lunatic asylum to study their dementia and try to develop a therapy. But the immediate practical need is to recover the empathy values that are necessary for the survival of humankind.

The warning, that was so clear in the words of a future president before the “crisis” exploded to today's magnitude, should now be a strict commitment for all governments, rulers and power systems worldwide. And a basic criterion for citizens to choose who deserves their trust.

Or do we want to hand over to rats the task of managing this planet?



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