SOFTWARE & TECH

Desmond Morris The Human Animal

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Understanding Ourselves: An Introduction to Desmond Morris and The Human Animal

Why do we behave the way we do? Why do we fall in love, form complex societies, create art, and wage war? For decades, these questions have been the domain of philosophers and psychologists. However, a groundbreaking perspective emerged in the 1990s that reframed our understanding of human behaviour by looking at us not as separate from nature, but as a distinct species within it. This was the powerful premise of **Desmond Morris The Human Animal**, a landmark BBC television series and accompanying book that invited us to take off our cultural lenses and see ourselves for what we truly are: a fascinating, complex, and often contradictory primate.

Desmond Morris, a British zoologist, ethologist, and surrealist painter, has spent a lifetime observing animal behaviour. Before turning his gaze onto our own species, he was a pioneer in the study of animal communication, most famously for his work with chimpanzees. His earlier bestseller, *The Naked Ape* (1967), had already shocked and captivated the world by applying a zoologist's cold, analytical eye to human courtship, parenting, and social structures. **Desmond Morris The Human Animal** was, in many ways, the definitive culmination of this life's work—a sweeping, visually stunning, and deeply insightful exploration of the biological and evolutionary roots of everything we do.

This article delves into the core themes of Morris's masterwork, exploring how his unique perspective as a zoologist helps us decode the hidden signals of our daily lives. We will examine the raw animal beneath the polished surface of civilization, uncovering the primal drives that still dictate our deepest impulses.

The Zoologist in the City: Morris's Unique Perspective

What made **Desmond Morris The Human Animal** so revolutionary was its methodology. Morris approached the human species as if he were a visiting alien biologist, or an anthropologist studying a strange new tribe. He stripped away the assumptions of culture and asked a simple, powerful question: What are the biological and evolutionary functions of this behaviour?

This approach is a cornerstone of **human ethology**. Instead of asking "Why is this ritual important to our society?" Morris asked, "What survival advantage did this ritual provide our ancestors on the African savanna?" This shift in perspective allows us to see the animal within. He argues that we are not just humans who occasionally act like animals; rather, we are animals who have learned to act like humans. The core of our being, our emotions, our fears, and our desires, are deeply rooted in a 200-million-year-old mammalian heritage.

From Signal to Symbol: The Evolution of Communication

A central theme of the series is communication. Morris meticulously broke down the language of the human body. From the raised eyebrow of greeting to the subtle tilt of the head showing submission or interest, he catalogued over 100 distinct facial expressions and gestures that are common across all human cultures. He argued that these are not learned behaviours but are part of our biological hardware, inherited from our primate ancestors.

In **Desmond Morris The Human Animal**, the concept of a "behavioral echo" is vital. Morris shows how our modern actions are often echoes of ancient survival strategies. For example:

- The Grooming Continuation: When we pat a friend on the back, give a colleague a firm handshake, or hug a loved one, we are engaging in a modified form of primate grooming. This behaviour releases endorphins, builds trust, and reinforces social bonds.
- The Threat Display: The way a man puffs out his chest during an argument, the way we widen our eyes and bare our teeth in anger—these are direct descendants of the threat displays seen in chimpanzees and gorillas. Our suits and ties have replaced fur and fangs, but the underlying message of dominance is the same.
- The Territorial Impulse: Morris explored why we fence our gardens, display photographs in our homes, and claim "our" seat in the office. This is a sophisticated version of territorial marking, a primal instinct to create a safe, controlled space for ourselves and our kin.

By breaking down these actions, Morris democratised the study of ourselves. He made it clear that you didn't need a couch or a degree to understand human behaviour; you simply needed to watch, like a naturalist in the wild.

The Body as a Biography: Decoding the Human Form

One of the most visually compelling parts of **Desmond Morris The Human Animal** is his analysis of the human body itself. Our body is not just a vessel for the mind; it is a living museum of our evolutionary journey. Morris took great delight in pointing out the little "flaws" and unusual features that make us unique.

The Naked Ape and Its Adornments

We call ourselves "the naked ape," but as Morris pointed out, we are not truly naked. We have hair on our heads, in our armpits, and in our pubic regions. He argued that our relative hairlessness is a specialised adaptation that evolved in conjunction with our unique cooling system. When our ancestors left the forests for the hot savanna, a naked, sweaty body was more efficient at cooling down than a furry one. This fact is central to the **human animal** concept — our biology directly shaped our history.

However, because we lost our fur, we invented clothing. But clothing is not just for warmth. Morris argued that fashion is a form of body language. We use clothes to:

1. Signal Status: A business suit, a designer handbag, or a tribal headdress all serve to broadcast our rank in the social hierarchy.
2. Attract Mates: Clothing accentuates or conceals specific body parts to send signals of sexual availability or maturity.
3. Express Identity: From punk rockers to corporate bankers, fashion is a uniform that signals group belonging.

He saw makeup, tattoos, and piercings as modern versions of ancient body painting and scarification—ways to enhance the signals our bodies are already sending. The blush on a cheek artificially mimics the flush of sexual excitement; the red lipstick mimics the engorged lips of an aroused female. In this light, the cosmetics counter is simply a toolkit for amplifying our primal signals.

The Hands That Made Us

Morris had a particular fascination with the hand. He called it our "primary tool." The precision grip of the human hand, unique among primates, allowed us to create tools, paint masterpieces, and write symphonies. But he also focused on the hand as a communication device. The 50 different hand gestures he catalogued in the book are not random. They are a sophisticated language of intention, emotion, and instruction. From the "OK" sign (which has surprisingly aggressive origins in some cultures) to the open palm of peace, our hands are constantly talking, often without our conscious awareness.

The Primate in the Boardroom and the Bedroom

Desmond Morris The Human Animal is perhaps most famous for its unflinching look at human sexuality and social structure. Morris argued that our entire society is built upon the foundation of pair-bonding, an unusual strategy for a primate. Unlike our closest relatives, the chimpanzees and gorillas who live in multi-male or harem structures, humans evolved to form long-term, stable bonds between a male and a female.

The Hidden Courtship Rituals

Morris proposed a 12- or 13-step sequence of human courtship, from the initial "eye-gaze" to the final act of physical intimacy. He saw these steps as a way to slowly and carefully lower the barriers of fear and distrust that exist between two strangers. Each stage—from the smile, to the touch, to the embrace—is a test of compatibility and a gradual escalation of intimacy. He showed how this ancient sequence is still played out in modern dating, even if it is compressed or obscured by social norms.

He also explored the darker side of this dynamic. The jealousy, the possessiveness, and the potential for violence within relationships are all part of the same biological drive to secure a mate and ensure the survival of one's offspring. By framing these powerful emotions as part of our biological inheritance, Morris helped explain why love is not just a romantic ideal but a powerful, often chaotic, biological imperative.

Power, Politics, and the Alpha Male

The book and series also drew direct parallels between primate troop politics and human office politics. Morris showed how the "alpha male" dynamic is alive and well in our boardrooms and parliaments. The strategy of forming alliances, the subtle gestures of submission to a superior, the "grooming" of your boss by laughing at their jokes—these are all echoes of our chimp-like past.

He argued that the tribal instinct is one of the most powerful forces in human history. We are biologically designed to live in small, tight-knit groups of about 150 people (often called **Dunbar's number**, a concept related to the social brain hypothesis which Morris strongly supported). Our modern cities, nations, and global corporations force us into far larger groups than our brains evolved to handle. This mismatch, Morris suggested, is the root of much of our modern stress, loneliness, and conflict. We are constantly trying to create "tribes" within the mass—through sports teams, political parties, or corporate culture—to satisfy this deep-seated need for belonging.

The Child: The Wild Animal We Tame

One of the most poignant sections of **Desmond Morris The Human Animal** deals with childhood. Morris viewed a human baby as the most helpless and dependent offspring in the animal kingdom. This helplessness is the price we pay for our large brains. A baby's skull must be small enough to pass through the birth canal, so much of our brain growth happens outside the womb. This creates an incredibly long period of dependency.

Morris argued that the parent-child relationship is the foundation of all human society. The bond formed through feeding, holding, and eye-contact is the template for all future love and trust. He compared the "baby schema" (the big eyes, small nose, and round face that we find so irresistibly cute) to a biological trigger that releases nurturing behaviour in adults. This is not a sentimental notion; it is a survival mechanism. Without that powerful, instinctive pull to care for the helpless infant, our species would have died out long ago.

He also explored the transition from child to adult, highlighting the importance of play. Play is not just fun; it is the way young mammals learn the skills they will need as adults. For humans, this means learning social rules, negotiating conflicts, and practicing adult roles through games and imagination. The rough-and-tumble play of boys, for example, is practice for the competitive, hierarchical world of adult men.

The Modern World: A Stone Age Mind in a Space Age Environment

The ultimate conclusion of **Desmond Morris The Human Animal** is both reassuring and unsettling. We are not modern creatures trapped in an ancient body; we are ancient creatures living in a modern world. Our minds, our emotions, and our instincts were forged in a very different environment. The world of supermarkets, skyscrapers, and the internet is a very new invention, and our biological programming is still catching up.

This "mismatch theory" explains many of our modern woes. Our craving for sugar and fat, once a vital survival instinct for finding rare, high-energy foods, now leads to obesity and diabetes. Our fight-or-flight response, essential for escaping predators on the savanna, now triggers heart attacks and anxiety in response to a rude email from our boss.

However, Morris was not a pessimist. He was a humanist who celebrated our species' incredible adaptability. He encouraged us to use our self-awareness—the very trait that makes us a unique animal—to understand our primal drives and manage them. By understanding the **human animal**, we can better design our cities, our relationships, and our lives to be less at odds with our true nature.

Conclusion: The Legacy of The Human Animal

More than two decades after its release, **Desmond Morris The Human Animal** remains a vital and refreshingly clear-headed look at who we are. In an age of increasing social complexity and digital abstraction, Morris's core message is more relevant than ever: we ignore our biology at our peril. We cannot understand our politics, our art, our love, or our hatred without first understanding the primate that lives within us all.

Morris's ultimate gift was his ability to make us look at the most mundane human

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