

Human Nature and Suffering



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This volume explores the implications of humans as evolved social animals. Gilbert suggests that evolution has given rise to a varied set of social competencies which form the basis of our personal knowledge and understanding. These competencies are classified as: a) Care eliciting b) Care giving c) Co-operating and d) Competing. Each of these are seen as core schemata, or archetypal potentials around which knowledge is built, and from which, our propensity for suffering flows. For example our predisposition to think of ourselves as superior or inferior to others comes from innate competencies which evolve from dominance and social ranking. Gilbert shows how primitive competencies become modified by experience and what happens when this modification is unsatisfactory, for example leading to preoccupations with fantasy and behaviour which is dominance and power focused. Throughout the text Gilbert shows how two psychological systems (derived from ethological and experimental work), labelled the defense and safety system dominate the unfolding and integration of human mental life. In the last chapter these varied themes are brought together to indicate how the social construction of self arises from the organization of knowledge encoded within the four competencies. Gilbert highlights how cultural factors may modify and activate many of our more primitive competencies leading not only to pathology proneness but also to behaviours that are collectively survival threatening.

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