



The Empathic Civilization: The Race To Global Consciousness In A World In Crisis

Jeremy Rifkin

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In this sweeping new interpretation of the history of civilization, bestselling author Jeremy Rifkin looks at the evolution of empathy and the profound ways that it has shaped our development—and is likely to determine our fate as a species. Today we face unparalleled challenges in an energy-intensive and interconnected world that will demand an unprecedented level of mutual understanding among diverse peoples and nations. Do we have the capacity and collective will to come together in a way that will enable us to cope with the great challenges of our time? In this remarkable book Jeremy Rifkin tells the dramatic story of the extension of human empathy from the rise of the first great theological civilizations, to the ideological age that dominated the 18th and 19th centuries, the psychological era that characterized much of the 20th century and the emerging dramaturgical period of the 21st century. The result is a new social tapestry—The Empathic Civilization—woven from a wide range of fields. Rifkin argues that at the very core of the human story is the paradoxical relationship between empathy and entropy. At various times in history new energy regimes have converged with new communication revolutions, creating ever more complex societies that heightened empathic sensitivity and expanded human consciousness. But these increasingly complicated milieus require extensive energy use and speed us toward resource depletion. The irony is that our growing empathic awareness has been made possible by an ever-greater consumption of the Earth's resources, resulting in a dramatic deterioration of the health of the planet. If we are to avert a catastrophic destruction of the Earth's ecosystems, the collapse of the global economy and the possible extinction of the human race, we will need to change human consciousness itself—and in less than a generation. Rifkin challenges us to address what may be the most important question facing humanity today: Can we achieve global empathy in time to avoid the collapse of civilization and save the planet? One of the most popular social thinkers of our time, Jeremy Rifkin is the bestselling author of *The European Dream*, *The Hydrogen Economy*, *The End of Work*, *The Biotech Century*, and *The Age of Access*. He is the president of the Foundation on Economic Trends in Washington, D.C.

The Empathic Civilization: The Race To Global Consciousness In A World In Crisis **Details**

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MiLi says

Jeremy Rifkin es un investigador que se dedica a analizar el impacto de los cambios científicos y tecnológicos en la sociedad. Para hacerlo en este libro, toma elementos de la historia, de la psicología, la filosofía y otras disciplinas que ayudan a explicar algunas influencias clave para la cultura de la humanidad.

Tiene un estilo extraño, que va de ser muy ameno a tedioso en cuestión de párrafos, pero más allá de eso, presenta conceptos interesantes, que se prestan para el debate, la discusión y para seguir investigando.

Es un libro para curiosos, y sumamente NECESARIO para todo aquel que busque comprender mejor el mundo y la vida en sociedad.

Aspen Junge says

Part biology, part psychology, part history, and all philosophy, this is a book that deserves to be read slowly and digested, not raced through. Rifkin takes as his thesis an idea that has been pushed by practically every new-age guru for the last 100 years (in fact, I wonder if Aleistar Crowley and Ayn Rand weren't a backlash against that); that humanity is entering a new social paradigm based not on self-interest and material gain, but on empathy and sharing. Just in time, too, as the fuels that have powered our previous 300 year Enlightenment-based paradigm are about to A) run out, and B) cause drastic climate effects.

He begins by discussing mirror neurons, which allow one person to "feel" what another is feeling, then delves into the advancement of psychology since Freud. He posits that human psychology is developed by human civilization; when your culture is based on a medieval hierarchy, you don't necessarily have the same developed sense of individuality that a 21st century person does; and without individuality, there is only a limited capacity for empathy. Empathy is what enables us to feel the same way towards people we haven't met yet s though they were our immediate family, thus drawing our global population into a human family.

There is a sense of urgency, however; the old paradigm of materialism being central to well-being still holds sway among the rich and powerful (and why not?), and the earth can't absorb much more carbon. (By the way, we hit peak oil per capita in 1979; a function of declining oil reserves and an exploding population.)

Zach S. says

OK, this book completely changed my outlook on life. Cliche, I know! Everyone must have that book that does that to them, this is mine. The most important lesson of this book is also cliché, but universally and eternally profound: "We are all in this together". This book is an admittedly lengthy treatise and the importance of that concept, and how we need to band together to face the major problems (think energy and climate) that now confront us.

Leonard Gaya says

It took me a couple of months to go through this book (some 600 pages with rather tight reasoning threads all the way through). But in the end, I find this to be a truly remarkable work, worth every minute of my time. In a nutshell, it's a game changer for the whole of the human species. Okay, so let me try to summarize this:

Hard fact #1

The whole of our civilization at this time (with a few exceptions) relies on fossil fuel (oil, coal, gas) for about everything we do, everything we have: consumer goods, transportation, food and farm-produce, you name it. This has been the case for more than a century now. The hiccup is that we are now using up fossil fuel at such speed that, with the increasing human population on this planet (we are soon beyond the 7 billion mark, that is 4 times the Earth population only a century ago!), there is less and less of this fossil fuel available for each of us; which is driving us all to a major imbalance in the world economy, where prices are bound to go up, no matter what we do: in fact, we already sense this as we go from one economic crisis to the next, with no way to stop that from getting worse each time. Added to this: rampant international conflicts to secure the spots where the sources of energy remain (think oil wells in the Persian Gulf, for instance).

Hard fact #2

While using up our main energy source (fossil fuel), we are precisely bringing about a change in the Earth climate such as has not been observed in millions of years. Fossil fuel consumption is releasing titanic amounts of CO₂ into the planet atmosphere and increasing the greenhouse effect dramatically, meaning: solar heat cannot bounce back into space as it used to and, in the (not so long) run, the ecosystem temperature is rising, the glaciers are disappearing, thus jeopardizing the populations that depend on them; the polar caps are melting, thus raising the sea levels; the huge Canadian and Russian permafrost lands are thawing out, releasing massive amounts of methane into the atmosphere and thus increasing the greenhouse effect in a deadly feedback loop. If this wasn't enough: massive cattle (beef) production, as we keep our place up the food chain, is releasing additional (and astronomical) amounts of greenhouse gases into the air.

So what? Well, if nothing else the result is likely to be: major climate imbalance, increasing droughts and all the dire consequences you can imagine stemming thereof. Bottom line: we don't know for sure if we are past the point where we can reverse the process, but for all we know we are in deep trouble and possibly facing a global mass extinction in the few decades to come... And, by and large, we go like: whatever, ain't scared!

Hard fact #3

The picture looks pretty grim, but cheer up: there's still a hope. Since the Enlightenment, we human beings have been considering ourselves as a rational, self-interested, materialistic, obsessed-with-property-and-sex-species and so on. But recent discoveries in cognitive science, brain studies and child psychology are proving otherwise: human beings are primarily softwired for empathy, altruism and intimacy. This empathic drive can be either nurtured, so that each of us can celebrate the beauty and frailty of life, or, sadly, repressed and, in so doing, we are letting secondary drives kick in, such as narcissism, aggression or violence. It all depends on parenting, education and, broadly speaking, culture.

In order to reflect on our present civilization, Rifkin then goes back to explore human history and the major changes in energy regimes, which in turn bring about new communication regimes and new domains of consciousness and empathy. In short, there are 4 stages:

Stage #1

It starts with the prehistoric nomadic foragers-hunters: energy comes from plants and animals; consciousness is mainly mythological (animist belief); empathy extends to blood-ties only (the family, the tribe, the village).

Stage #2

A few thousand years ago, humanity builds the first great hydrolic civilizations (in Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, Mexico...): energy comes from extended and centralized agriculture which gives rise to writing (in order to manage storage and trade of grains); consciousness is essentially theological (polytheism, monotheism, Buddhism); empathy extends to coreligionists. These civilizations, however, ended up collapsing: Rifkin's explanations on the fall of the Roman Empire due to entropy in agricultural energy are enlightening and made me think of our own civilization a few stages above on the energy ladder.

Stage #3

A couple of centuries ago, a new energy regime appears with coal, steam and rail (1st industrial revolution); a new communications regime is set up with the print press and the development of literacy, through public schooling; consciousness evolves to the ideological-framework stage with the creation of nation-states; empathy extends once more to our fellow citizens this time around.

Stage #4

A few decades ago in the developed countries, the energy regime switches again from coal to cheaper energy sources: oil, gas and uranium (2nd industrial revolution) and the development of mass transportation (cars, trucks, highways, tankers, planes, airports and so on); telephone is added on top of print; consciousness becomes psychological and therapeutic (the development of psychology since Freud); empathy extends to like-minded people.

This is where we are right now and we need to move fast to the next stage of energy / communication / consciousness / empathy regime, because our fossil fuel civilization is sunsetting and the planetary clock is ticking against humanity. The mind-boggling problem (the empathy/entropy paradox) is that, as communication, consciousness and empathy expand to the furthest reaches of the world, more and more energy is consumed, depleting the Earth of its natural resources and putting us all at the brink of planetary doom. So are we able to develop a biosphere consciousness and save our tiny world in time?

We are in fact on the cusp of a 3rd industrial revolution with the development of distributed Internet communications, which increases global consciousness (Rifkin calls it "dramaturgical consciousness") and empathy in a way never seen before in the history of human kind. A similar revolution needs to happen now on the energy side, a radical turn of the tide from geopolitics to biosphere-politics. This means rushing towards:

#1. Clean, renewable energy sources: sunlight, winds, tides, geothermal, recycled wastes...

#2. New ways of collecting energy, namely: every building must be its own power plant (solar panels on each roof).

#3. A massive and radical change in infrastructure: hydrogen storage and intergrid IT networks, that is: peer-to-peer energy distribution to every building, every vehicle, every home appliances.

This book, which is by the way heavily documented with all sorts of references and studies (the end notes make for about 1/4 of the volume), has far-reaching implications in politics and government, parenting and education, architecture and housing, economy and corporate life, and about every aspect of our lives. It is a brilliant call to action, perhaps a last call. In my view it is a necessary read for all humans on this Earth. It left me with a sense of both fear and wonder.

Simone Collins says

Most books provide an escape from daily life or offer information about a specific subject. Jeremy Rifkin's *Empathic Civilization* does both, and also has the power to fundamentally change one's entire worldview.

As for escape- *The Empathic Civilization* removes readers from the specific minutiae of everyday life, encouraging them instead to focus on big, broad issues and consider themselves as part of a larger, extremely powerful whole. As for information- the book introduces readers to a litany of fascinating insights related to such diverse fields as economics, psychology, history, politics, science, theology, and philosophy.

Rifkin takes *The Empathic Civilization* a step above and beyond with his overall thesis: that the world is indeed in dire straits, and that we can only solve these pressing problems through empathy.

Overall, *The Empathic Civilization* has changed the way I regard thought, civilization, family, friends, and the meaning of life. This is a book that must be read, from cover to cover, with full attention. Rarely does a book offer so much in one volume, so do not consider its heft to represent an all-you-can-eat literary hot dog eating contest, but rather a gourmet all-you-can eat buffet of some of the most fascinating concepts you'll have encountered in years. Bon appetit!

Carlos Puig says

Tremendo libro. Y no lo digo por las 600 páginas que tiene. Rifkin construye el relato de la historia de la humanidad, atendiendo al desarrollo de la empatía, característica esencial de la naturaleza humana, según lo que se desprende de los estudios de la neurociencia y otras disciplinas afines. Con claridad, precisión y una serie de información relevante se va desplegando la historia de las civilizaciones, relacionando aspectos como la economía, el pensamiento, la cultura, la ciencia y la tecnología. En este relato se puede apreciar la importancia de los recursos energéticos para el desarrollo de la humanidad, pero también la entropía que eso genera. En palabras simples, el libro nos muestra como la humanidad se ha ido desarrollando y como la empatía va ganando terreno, junto con el daño que se ha ido generando en nuestro querido y maltratado planeta Tierra. Esa es la paradoja: vivimos en un tiempo donde existe mayor conciencia de que pertenecemos a una misma familia, pero es justamente el tiempo en que nos enfrentamos a los devastadores efectos de un calentamiento global que se torna apocalíptico. Lo bueno del libro: existen formas de hacer las cosas de mejor manera. Ojalá no sea demasiado tarde.

Loring Wirbel says

The message Rifkin has to tell is one of the most important in our social and cultural history, and the only aspect keeping me from giving the book a solid five stars is the slight caveat attached to any Rifkin books, which is related to the way he tells a story. Rifkin is a pop-scientist and culturalist, hence his work won't go as deep as, say, Steven Pinker's *'The Better Angels of Our Nature'* or Peter Turchin's *'War and Peace and War.'* The advantage to taking the 30,000-foot approach as Rifkin does is not just that his ideas become more comprehensible to a wider audience, but that he can integrate a broader array of cultural and environmental trends in making his case. The disadvantage is that, when we don't dive deep into how the selfish gene and

altruistic gene interact, or in how mirror neurons have evolved in larger neural networks, Rifkin's case sounds less convincing. Particularly as he brings in elements of entropy trends and energy-use trends that Rifkin has written about before, there is a danger in pulling in any random element to prove the case for an emergent empathic civilization.

The best part of Rifkin's book resides in its center section about the shift over centuries from magical hunter-gatherer to faith-centered medievalists, to Enlightenment rationalists and nineteenth-century Romanticists, and on to the 20th-century psychology-centric and 21st-century altruists. Cognitive neuroscientists would buy into much of what Rifkin poses as a history of consciousness, and it seems almost intuitive and obvious how the empathic gene takes center stage over time - but also showing why each step in moving to multi-conscious empathy was a necessary step that would be difficult to skip. I find Rifkin to be a little too kind to the 19th-century Romanticists - I love Rousseau and Goethe, to be sure, but Byron and Shelley displayed an underside that showed that an excess of Romanticism can lead to Mussolini-style fascism. Just ask Ezra Pound.

Rifkin's opening Part 1 seemed less necessary, somehow, since he spends the first few chapters taking apart Sigmund Freud. In the 21st-century, this seems almost like a straw-man exercise. Does anyone believe in Freudian theory any more? Maybe among the humanists Rifkin hangs with, residual trust in Freud remains, but my jaded postmodern and neuroscientist friends dismissed Freud years ago. Rifkin almost could have started with Part 2 of his book and formed a coherent whole.

Many will criticize Part 3 of the book as being far too "kumbaya" for a world still dominated by materialist greed and war, but there are many who dismiss Pinker and Turchin, as well. The trends toward an empathic, universal consciousness emerging are real ones, but as Rifkin says, they emerge on a backdrop of humans befouling their own environment. The point is, we fully recognize it and are trying to confront the damages we cause. Selfish acquisition and slaughter of the Other will always be with us, but empathy does indeed seem to be coming front and center. Those who dwell in visions of Apocalypse will deny this, but the reasons for limited optimism are everywhere. Rifkin makes an important point when he says that in any era, remnants of the consciousness style of older eras remain, as evolutionary vestiges of unwanted limbs. Therefore, we should expect to still retain some forager mysticism, some Medieval monotheism, some Newton-era neutral objectivism, some Byron Romanticism, some 20th-century promotion of self-esteem, and some 21st-century multiculturalism. The trick lies in getting the balance right.

Rifkin's argument in Part 3 that the dramaturgical self makes the issue of "self-authenticity" less relevant is an important one, and I applaud the way he has applied that to social networks. Rifkin thinks that narcissism in the era of Facebook and Twitter is actually less of a problem than it was in the 1980s and 1990s, and he might have a point, though there are still a plethora of fame (and infamy)-hungry narcissists on Facebook.

Rifkin's 2009 book concludes with a nod to the 2008 election of Barack Obama, a mention that might sound dated because of all the problems Obama has faced. But the results of the 2012 elections reinforce his point somewhat, but not so much in the fact that Obama was re-elected. Most Republicans gnash their teeth, not so much over four more years of Obama, but from a universal shift to gay marriage approval, pot legalization, rejection of politicians like Akin and Mourdock, etc. It isn't so much that Obama himself represents a turning point, as much as the Millennials are ushering in the victory of multicultural hippie-paganism over Judeo-Christian traditionalism, and this probably will ease the way to the empathic civilization Rifkin describes. Skeptics would say there still are far too many Islamic Salafists, Russian Orthodox traditionalists, and East African evangelicals out there, but Rifkin would argue that this does not necessitate wars - the dominance of English-language pop culture and its multicultural support for women's rights, gay rights, etc., assures that the battle is won without a shot being fired.

I only regret that in the last few pages of the book, Rifkin returns to Goethe's critique of the scientific method. I agree with the notion of a compassionate method of neutral inquiry, but if we go too far down the route Rifkin suggests, we end up in the post-modernist mush where any narrative is equal to any other narrative. It is true that what we consider a solid objective world is actually a series of probability wave fronts, and that strengthens Rifkin's argument that the self is a process, not an object. Nevertheless, there is a physical world of wavefronts that exists outside the sentient self, and Francis Bacon had a point in describing a way of studying the external world so that we don't bring in our biases. The scientific method may be updated for the 21st century, but if we throw out the baby with the bathwater, we find that there would be as much validity for blaming Hurricane Sandy on witches or a vengeful God, as on climate fronts disrupted by human behavior. And we don't want to go back to a world dominated by magic and divine intervention.

Rifkin is a very sharp guy who has always displayed a few annoying tendencies in pop-psychology, whether writing about biotechnology or Europe or entropy. But if you can apply the right filters, you will find 'The Empathic Civilization' filled with some of the most important cultural ideas yet expressed this century, and you can always go back to Pinker or Turchin for a deeper dive.

Randy Elrod says

A great book that kept me riveted throughout. Rifkin makes a great case of empathic heritage versus religious doctrine of total depravity. It is a sweeping overview of what it means to be truly human.
[Http://randyelrod.com](http://randyelrod.com)

Dave says

Despite being sometimes overwritten, Rifkin's latest contribution to what I like to call "cosmopolitan theory" (starting now) has changed how I see things. I'm not necessarily converted to all his theories or his barely-suppressed optimism, but two experiences, one directly related to reading *The Empathic Civilization* and one indirectly related show how this paradigm-shifter shifted mine just a wee bit.

1.) Rifkin makes a strong case for an idea I had never considered before, but which rang true as if I'd been thinking it subconsciously for years. Human nature is not some static entity to which one can universally appeal. Rather, it's intimately connected with the kind of world (childhood, largest worries, methods of commerce and communication) that exists at any given time. Our conscious policy and personal decisions can take the raw material of the world and either form a large human family or deteriorate into unhealthy narcissism.

2.) Ok, maybe this isn't as indirect as I thought. Rifkin's conception of the Third Industrial Revolution (the nexus of internet technology and sustainable energy), despite my usual skepticism, made loads of sense. For some reason, I had never considered the possibility of an entire globe powered sustainably. The energy lost in the transfer of electricity, though it wouldn't disappear, would be drastically reduced, and an equally-powered planet would undoubtedly be a more empathic planet. (Although, I will say I think Rifkin is a little too impatient with nuclear power, and I think his main objection stems from his optimism and impatience to commence the new, empathic world order.)

This is probably unintelligible to folks who haven't read the book. It's long, daunting in appearance, and

sometimes meandering. But the stirring conclusion after Rifkin's survey of world everything (psychology, history, economics, biology, etc.) makes the foundational 400+ pages worth the time and effort. It's a game changer!

Matthew says

Rifkin is a brilliant guy, who portrays his ideas in a very clean and enjoyable writing style. The majority of this book is a retelling of human history with the focus being on how our consciousness has grown and been shaped by certain events. He ends with some great ideas on how we are and how we can continue to improve society while ensuring the safety of the planet we reside on. I enjoyed every page of this book, and I caught myself wondering a few times how much better the world might be if this book was required reading in every college across the globe.

Joe Brummer says

First, you need to know this book will take you months to read and it weighs a ton. It is also chock full of cool learning about empathy in the world.

Phoebe Gilpinwright says

A fascinating interpretation of the evolution of consciousness and empathy in humans. Rifkin analyzes humanity in a refreshing and comprehensive analysis of social structures and the underpinnings of human nature. This book took months to read, partially due to its sheer volume, but mostly because the ideas need to be processed meaningfully rather than blown past. As an excerpted chapter, I'd recommend Chapter 6: The Ancient Theological Brain and Patriarchal Economy.

By retelling and reshaping our own life stories, we are continually honing our identities to accommodate each passage of life and the changing circles of relationships and experiences that accompany them. We are each a composite of the stories we tell about ourselves and the stories others tell about us. (187)

Bradley Jarvis says

This is one of my favorite kinds of books, one that recasts much of what we know in an entirely new context.

Using the most current understanding of psychology, Rifkin interprets the history of humanity as the development of increasingly sophisticated empathic connection between people, each other, and other species, enabled by civilization's freeing of more and more people from preoccupation with basic survival. He explains how this has come at a terrible cost - the destruction of the Earth's biosphere which we are paradoxically becoming more attuned to - and how there is also great opportunity: to find a sustainable way of living with the true richness of life intact, and available to the majority of our population.

With well-researched discussions of a wide range of issues, from education to economics, this book is a

must-read for anyone trying to make sense of what it means to be human, and how our collective future may unfold.

Marshall says

This is an enormous book, covering the entire psychological history of our civilization, positing an argument for the direction we are now headed, what he calls "biosphere consciousness." He makes this case by showing that every paradigm shift in the history of our culture was caused by a simultaneous revolution in communications technology and energy regime, and with it always came an increased sense of individualism, which in turn led to an increased sense of empathy. He argues that we are on the brink of another such revolution, the communications technology being the internet and the energy regime being various distributed forms of energy production.

The best, but most long-winded, part of this book is the history. I found it fascinating to see history portrayed in this way. I never thought much about how our civilizations' psychologies have been developing, and now that I have, I wonder if this is a lot more relevant way of telling history. The author is definitely a believer in our civilization. He tells stories of history without flinching, acknowledging the horrors but focusing on how we've been progressively developing empathy.

For much of the book, he seems to blame the state of our civilization on entropy, rather than the destructive attitudes and beliefs. He also gets a few facts wrong, but by the end of the book, it becomes clear that he really does get it, for the most part. I agree about the direction of our civilization, but I'm not as optimistic about it. I fear it will be too little, too late.

Mathew Gross says

A delusional fantasy that humanity is evolving toward a higher consciousness, when any evolutionary biologist will tell you that evolution is "dumb" --i.e., it lacks a specific direction. But if you want a classic example of misguided neo-New Age thought, this is at least a well-written one.

Mark says

Blah.

Rifkin's argument is that as cultures become more complex, consume greater and greater quantities of energy and spend more time exploring their world, they will bump into other cultures and novel ways of ordering life. Through this exposure, the complex civilization will increase their appreciation of, and respect for, diversity.

Huh? My reading of the last 1000 years of Western civ would lead me to a starkly different conclusion.

The flip side of Rifkin's argument -- that native cultures must then lack empathy that technological societies possess -- just strikes me as completely absurd.

Granted, I'm only about 60 pages into the 600-some odd page book so maybe Rifkin can redeem himself, but this complex technological citizen doesn't have the energy to watch him try to dig himself out of the hole he has created for himself.

Senor says

So often we confront a world built on the seemingly foregone conclusion that humans are violent, aggressive, etc and thankfully Mr Rifkin has presented a cognizant, current and thoroughly researched refutation of this argument. He builds his argument starting with the simple yet unappreciated truth that at birth we are all connected or desire and are nourished by human connection, ie. empathy.

If you are feeling cynical or perhaps the opposite, you are tired of defending your optimistic point of view then you must read this book. Here is an analytical defense of 'humanity' that will not only provide you with material to convincingly present your belief in a better future being possible it will re-inspire you and remind you of why you believe this.

Other reviewers have written more eloquently than I but I did want to praise the book...

Eremite says

This book would be twice as good if it were half the size. The history of humanity is entirely rewritten to retrofit one intriguing possibility, a bunch of studies and polls were tortured into "proving" opinions, and the dead horses just kept being beaten over and over. The funny thing is I wholeheartedly agree with all the major conclusions. We desperately need to reevaluate our rampant, unsustainable, hedonistic consumerism (which doesn't make us happier!) and the best way to do that is to achieve a "global consciousness" by cultivating empathy. If the world is to be saved, it'll be by good parents raising good kids.

George Polley says

At 674 pages, 57 of which are notes and index, Jeremy Rifkin's *The Empathic Civilization* is not a book you'll sit down and read in an afternoon or evening. But if you're a person who is concerned about global or local issues, it is a book you will want to read. It is packed with invaluable information and insight about steering a (relatively) safe course through the sometimes rough seas of our rapidly changing, interconnected world. Though it took me a while to read, I find every minute spent with it informative and valuable. The information alone makes *The Empathic Civilization* worth reading because of the insights the information brings.

To many people, perhaps, the idea of an empathic civilization is oxymoronic. "An empathic civilization? You have got to be kidding! Any reading of history will tell you that!" "Not so fast," Rifkin says as he leads you back to December 24, 1914 on the fields of Flanders as World War I ground into its fifth month. "Take a look at what's happening." Contrary to all expectations about human nature, beginning with the Germans lighting candles on Christmas trees sent to the front, young men on both sides of the battle line began singing

Christmas carols where a few hours earlier they had been killing each other. It ran contrary to what everyone believed about human nature. “[W]hat transpired in the battlefields of Flanders on Christmas Eve 1914 between tens of thousands of young men had nothing to do with original sin or productive labor. And the pleasure those men sought in each other's company bore little resemblance to the superficial rendering of pleasure offered up by nineteenth-century utilitarians and even less to Freud's pathological account of a human race preoccupied by the erotic impulse.

“The men at Flanders expressed a far deeper human sensibility – one that emanates from the very marrow of human existence. ... They chose to be human. And the central human quality they expressed was empathy for one another” (page 8).

Still not convinced? Think about it – if the central human quality is aggression, would we have survived this long as a species? If an empathic impulse is embedded in our biology, why doesn't it show up in our history? It doesn't because “tales of misdeeds and woe surprise us. They are unexpected and, therefore, trigger alarm and heighten our interest” (emphasis mine) (page 10). What captures our attention and interest is expressions of empathy. It just might be, Rifkin suggests, that aggression, violence, selfish behavior and acquisitiveness – long considered basic human drives, “are in fact secondary drives that flow from repression or denial of our most basic instinct”, which is empathy (page 18). Reading my facebook page on an average day, it is empathy that is most often expressed, even when the emotion expressed is frustration and anger. What we seek is connection ... and this is the key to creating a global consciousness – the sense of belonging to a world, and not just to our own little part of it and our own little “tribe”.

As a species, we are embedded in the life of the entire planet. What you and I do in our small part of it, affects every other part. Like it or not, we are all interconnected as a part of a living global ecosystem. Tamper with one part, we affect every other part. (A great companion book to this one is E. O. Wilson's *The Creation*, which is reviewed in a separate post. A biologist, Wilson explains the biology of our global ecosystem in a way that this non-scientist easily understood it.)

Because of the Internet we are already interconnected. What we need to do with that comprises the bulk of Rifkin's book, which is divided into three major sections: I Homo Empathicus; II Empathy and Civilization; and III The Age of Empathy.

“By rediscovering our cognitive past,” Rifkin writes, “we find important clues to how we might redirect our conscious future. With our very survival at stake, we can no longer afford to remain unmindful about how empathic consciousness has evolved across history and at what expense to the Earth we inhabit” (page 178). E. O. Wilson would heartily agree with that. So do I.

Michael says

This is the book that pulls it all together! Jeremy Rifkin captures the currents of history and puts our current dilemmas as a global society into perspective. Rifkin's formulation of the core dialectic of the progression of human consciousness through cultural / technological advances balanced by the increasing entropy which results from the increasing technological demands of our increasingly complex civilization is nothing less than genius. Amazingly, Rifkin, a consultant to the United Nations and the EU knows psychoanalytic concepts better than most psychiatrists and weaves these seamlessly into his theories which incorporate an in depth understanding of complex systems theory, and of course the history of civilization and religion. Rifkin's analysis of the evolution of human consciousness through the stages of mythological, theological,

ideological, psychological and most recently what he calls dramaturgical consciousness is fascinating and convincing. His thesis regarding the historical evolution of the self and its correlation with more sophisticated capacity for empathy is also convincing. Rifkin explains how we are at a turning point with global consciousness within our grasp but the the bill for civilization's energy expenditures coming due and threatening to undo all we have accomplished. An awesome analysis of our time!
