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THE 48 LAWS OF POWER

THE
LAWS
OF
HUMAN
NATURE

ROBERT GREENE

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The 48 Laws of Power (a Joost Elffers Production)

*The Laws
of Human Nature*



Robert Greene

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To my mother

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Introduction

If you come across any special trait of meanness or stupidity . . . you must be careful not to let it annoy or distress you, but to look upon it merely as an addition to your knowledge—a new fact to be considered in studying the character of humanity. Your attitude towards it will be that of the mineralogist who stumbles upon a very characteristic specimen of a mineral.

—*Arthur Schopenhauer*

Throughout the course of our lives, we inevitably have to deal with a variety of individuals who stir up trouble and make our lives difficult and unpleasant. Some of these individuals are leaders or bosses, some are colleagues, and some are friends. They can be aggressive or passive-aggressive, but they are generally masters at playing on our emotions. They often appear charming and refreshingly confident, brimming with ideas and enthusiasm, and we fall under their spell. Only when it is too late do we discover that their confidence is irrational and their ideas ill-conceived. Among colleagues, they can be those who sabotage our work or careers out of secret envy, excited to bring us down. Or they could be colleagues or hires who reveal, to our dismay, that they are completely out for themselves, using us as stepping-stones.

What inevitably happens in these situations is that we are caught off guard, not expecting such behavior. Often these types will hit us with elaborate cover stories to justify their actions, or blame handy scapegoats. They know how to confuse us and draw us into a drama they control. We

might protest or become angry, but in the end we feel rather helpless—the damage is done. Then another such type enters our life, and the same story repeats itself.

We often notice a similar sensation of confusion and helplessness when it comes to ourselves and our own behavior. For instance, we suddenly say something that offends our boss or colleague or friend—we are not quite sure where it came from, but we are frustrated to find that some anger and tension from within has leaked out in a way that we regret. Or perhaps we enthusiastically throw our weight into some project or scheme, only to realize it was quite foolish and a terrible waste of time. Or perhaps we fall in love with a person who is precisely the wrong type for us and we know it, but we cannot help ourselves. What has come over us, we wonder?

In these situations, we catch ourselves falling into self-destructive patterns of behavior that we cannot seem to control. It is as if we harbor a stranger within us, a little demon who operates independently of our willpower and pushes us into doing the wrong things. And this stranger within us is rather weird, or at least weirder than how we imagine ourselves.

What we can say about these two things—people's ugly actions and our own occasionally surprising behavior—is that we usually have no clue as to what causes them. We might latch onto some simple explanations: "That person is evil, a sociopath" or "Something came over me; I wasn't myself." But such pat descriptions do not lead to any understanding or prevent the same patterns from recurring. The truth is that we humans live on the surface, reacting emotionally to what people say and do. We form opinions of others and ourselves that are rather simplified. We settle for the easiest and most convenient story to tell ourselves.

What if, however, we could dive below the surface and see deep within, getting closer to the actual roots of what causes human behavior? What if we could understand why some people turn envious and try to sabotage our work, or why their misplaced confidence causes them to imagine themselves as godlike and infallible? What if we could truly fathom why people suddenly behave irrationally and reveal a much darker side to their character, or why

they are always ready to provide a rationalization for their behavior, or why we continually turn to leaders who appeal to the worst in us? What if we could look deep inside and judge people's character, avoiding the bad hires and personal relationships that cause us so much emotional damage?

If we really understood the roots of human behavior, it would be much harder for the more destructive types to continually get away with their actions. We would not be so easily charmed and misled. We would be able to anticipate their nasty and manipulative maneuvers and see through their cover stories. We would not allow ourselves to get dragged into their dramas, knowing in advance that our interest is what they depend on for their control. We would finally rob them of their power through our ability to look into the depths of their character.

Similarly, with ourselves, what if we could look within and see the source of our more troubling emotions and why they drive our behavior, often against our own wishes? What if we could understand why we are so compelled to desire what other people have, or to identify so strongly with a group that we feel contempt for those who are on the outside? What if we could find out what causes us to lie about who we are, or to inadvertently push people away?

Being able to understand more clearly that stranger within us would help us to realize that it is not a stranger at all but very much a part of ourselves, and that we are far more mysterious, complex, and interesting than we had imagined. And with that awareness we would be able to break the negative patterns in our lives, stop making excuses for ourselves, and gain better control of what we do and what happens to us.

Having such clarity about ourselves and others could change the course of our lives in so many ways, but first we must clear up a common misconception: we tend to think of our behavior as largely conscious and willed. To imagine that we are not always in control of what we do is a frightening thought, *but in fact it is the reality*. We are subject to forces from deep within us that drive our behavior and that operate below the level of our awareness. We see the results—our thoughts, moods, and actions—but

have little conscious access to what actually moves our emotions and compels us to behave in certain ways.

Look at our anger, for instance. We usually identify an individual or a group as the cause of this emotion. But if we were honest and dug down deeper, we would see that what often triggers our anger or frustration has deeper roots. It could be something in our childhood or some particular set of circumstances that triggers the emotion. We can discern distinct patterns if we look—when this or that happens, we get angry. But in the moment that we feel anger, we are not reflective or rational—we merely ride the emotion and point fingers. We could say something similar about a whole slew of emotions that we feel—specific types of events trigger sudden confidence, or insecurity, or anxiety, or attraction to a particular person, or hunger for attention.

Let us call the collection of these forces that push and pull at us from deep within *human nature*. Human nature stems from the particular wiring of our brains, the configuration of our nervous system, and the way we humans process emotions, all of which developed and emerged over the course of the five million years or so of our evolution as a species. We can ascribe many of the details of our nature to the distinct way we evolved as a social animal to ensure our survival—learning to cooperate with others, coordinating our actions with the group on a high level, creating novel forms of communication and ways of maintaining group discipline. This early development lives on within us and continues to determine our behavior, even in the modern, sophisticated world we live in.

To take one example, look at the evolution of human emotion. The survival of our earliest ancestors depended on their ability to communicate with one another well before the invention of language. They evolved new and complex emotions—joy, shame, gratitude, jealousy, resentment, et cetera. The signs of these emotions could be read immediately on their faces, communicating their moods quickly and effectively. They became extremely permeable to the emotions of others as a way to bind the group more tightly

together—to feel joy or grief as one—or to remain united in the face of danger.

To this day, we humans remain highly susceptible to the moods and emotions of those around us, compelling all kinds of behavior on our part—unconsciously imitating others, wanting what they have, getting swept up in viral feelings of anger or outrage. We imagine we're acting of our own free will, unaware of how deeply our susceptibility to the emotions of others in the group is affecting what we do and how we respond.

We can point to other such forces that emerged from this deep past and that similarly mold our everyday behavior—for instance, our need to continually rank ourselves and measure our self-worth through our status is a trait that is noticeable among all hunter-gatherer cultures, and even among chimpanzees, as are our tribal instincts, which cause us to divide people into insiders or outsiders. We can add to these primitive qualities our need to wear masks to disguise any behavior that is frowned upon by the tribe, leading to the formation of a shadow personality from all the dark desires we have repressed. Our ancestors understood this shadow and its dangerousness, imagining it originated from spirits and demons that needed to be exorcised. We rely on a different myth—"something came over me."

Once this primal current or force within us reaches the level of consciousness, we have to react to it, and we do so depending on our individual spirit and circumstances, usually explaining it away superficially without really understanding it. Because of the precise way in which we evolved, there are a limited number of these forces of human nature, and they lead to the behavior mentioned above—envy, grandiosity, irrationality, shortsightedness, conformity, aggression, and passive aggression, to name a few. They also lead to empathy and other positive forms of human behavior.

For thousands of years, it has been our fate to largely grope in the shadows when it comes to understanding ourselves and our own nature. We have labored under so many illusions about the human animal—imagining we descended magically from a divine source, from angels instead of primates. We have found any signs of our primitive nature and our animal

roots deeply distressing, something to deny and repress. We have covered up our darker impulses with all kinds of excuses and rationalizations, making it easier for some people to get away with the most unpleasant behavior. But finally we're at a point where we can overcome our resistance to the truth about who we are through the sheer weight of knowledge we have now accumulated about human nature.

We can exploit the vast literature in psychology amassed over the last one hundred years, including detailed studies of childhood and the impact of our early development (Melanie Klein, John Bowlby, Donald Winnicott), as well as works on the roots of narcissism (Heinz Kohut), the shadow sides of our personality (Carl Jung), the roots of our empathy (Simon Baron-Cohen), and the configuration of our emotions (Paul Ekman). We can now cull the many advances in the sciences that can aid us in our self-understanding—studies of the brain (Antonio Damasio, Joseph E. LeDoux), of our unique biological makeup (Edward O. Wilson), of the relationship between the body and the mind (V. S. Ramachandran), of primates (Frans de Waal) and hunter-gatherers (Jared Diamond), of our economic behavior (Daniel Kahneman), and of how we operate in groups (Wilfred Bion, Elliot Aronson).

We can also include in this the works of certain philosophers (Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, José Ortega y Gasset) who have illuminated so many aspects of human nature, as well as the insights of many novelists (George Eliot, Henry James, Ralph Ellison), who are often the most sensitive to the unseen parts of our behavior. And finally, we can include the rapidly expanding library of biographies now available, revealing human nature in depth and in action.

This book is an attempt to gather together this immense storehouse of knowledge and ideas from different branches (see the bibliography for the key sources), to piece together an accurate and instructive guide to human nature, basing itself on the evidence, not on particular viewpoints or moral judgments. It is a brutally realistic appraisal of our species, dissecting who we are so we can operate with more awareness.

Consider *The Laws of Human Nature* a kind of codebook for deciphering people's behavior—ordinary, strange, destructive, the full gamut. Each chapter deals with a particular aspect or law of human nature. We can call them laws in that under the influence of these elemental forces, we humans tend to react in relatively predictable ways. Each chapter has the story of some iconic individual or individuals who illustrate the law (negatively or positively), along with ideas and strategies on how to deal with yourself and others under the influence of this law. Each chapter ends with a section on how to transform this basic human force into something more positive and productive, so that we are no longer passive slaves to human nature but actively transforming it.

You might be tempted to imagine that this knowledge is a bit old-fashioned. After all, you might argue, we are now so sophisticated and technologically advanced, so progressive and enlightened; we have moved well beyond our primitive roots; we are in the process of rewriting our nature. But the truth is in fact the opposite—we have never been more in the thrall of human nature and its destructive potential than now. And by ignoring this fact, we are playing with fire.

Look at how the permeability of our emotions has only been heightened through social media, where viral effects are continually sweeping through us and where the most manipulative leaders are able to exploit and control us. Look at the aggression that is now openly displayed in the virtual world, where it is so much easier to play out our shadow sides without repercussions. Notice how our propensities to compare ourselves with others, to feel envy, and to seek status through attention have only become intensified with our ability to communicate so quickly with so many people. And finally, look at our tribal tendencies and how they have now found the perfect medium to operate in—we can find a group to identify with, reinforce our tribal opinions in a virtual echo chamber, and demonize any outsiders, leading to mob intimidation. The potential for mayhem stemming from the primitive side of our nature has only increased.

It is simple: Human nature is stronger than any individual, than any institution or technological invention. It ends up shaping what we create to reflect itself and its primitive roots. It moves us around like pawns.

Ignore the laws at your own peril. Refusing to come to terms with human nature simply means that you are dooming yourself to patterns beyond your control and to feelings of confusion and helplessness.



The Laws of Human Nature is designed to immerse you in all aspects of human behavior and illuminate its root causes. If you let it guide you, it will radically alter how you perceive people and your entire approach to dealing with them. It will also radically change how you see yourself. It will accomplish these shifts in perspective in the following ways:

First, the Laws will work to transform you into a calmer and more strategic observer of people, helping to free you from all the emotional drama that needlessly drains you.

Being around people stirs up our anxieties and insecurities as to how others perceive us. Once we feel such emotions, it becomes very hard to observe people as we are drawn into our own feelings, evaluating what people say and do in *personal* terms—do they like me or dislike me? The Laws will help you avoid falling into this trap by revealing that people are generally dealing with emotions and issues that have deep roots. They're experiencing some desires and disappointments that predate you by years and decades. You cross their path at a particular moment and become the convenient target of their anger or frustration. They're projecting onto you certain qualities they want to see. In most cases, they're not relating to you as an individual.

This should not upset you but liberate you. The book will teach you to stop taking personally their insinuating comments, shows of coldness, or moments of irritation. The more you grasp this, the easier it will be to react not with your emotions but rather with the desire to understand where their behavior might come from. You will feel much calmer in the process. And as

this takes root in you, you will be less prone to moralize and judge people; instead you will accept them and their flaws as part of human nature. People will like you all the more as they sense this tolerant attitude in you.

Second, the Laws will make you a master interpreter of the cues that people continually emit, giving you a much greater ability to judge their character.

Normally, if we pay attention to people's behavior, we are in a rush to fit their actions into categories and to hurry to conclusions, so we settle for the judgment that suits our own preconceptions. Or we accept their self-serving explanations. The Laws will rid you of this habit by making it clear how easy it is to misread people and how deceptive first impressions can be. You will slow yourself down, mistrust your initial judgment, and instead train yourself to *analyze* what you see.

You will think in terms of opposites—when people overtly display some trait, such as confidence or hypermasculinity, they are most often concealing the contrary reality. You will realize that people are continually playing to the public, making a show of being progressive and saintly only to better disguise their shadow. You will see the signs of this shadow leaking out in everyday life. If people take an action that seems out of character, you will take note: what often appears out of character is actually more of their true character. If people are essentially lazy or foolish, they leave clues to this in the smallest of details that you can pick up well before their behavior harms you. The ability to gauge people's true worth, their degree of loyalty and conscientiousness, is one of the most important skills you can possess, helping you avoid the bad hires, partnerships, and relationships that can make your life miserable.

Third, the Laws will empower you to take on and outthink the toxic types who inevitably cross your path and who tend to cause long-term emotional damage.

Aggressive, envious, and manipulative people don't usually announce themselves as such. They have learned to appear charming in initial encounters, to use flattery and other means of disarming us. When they