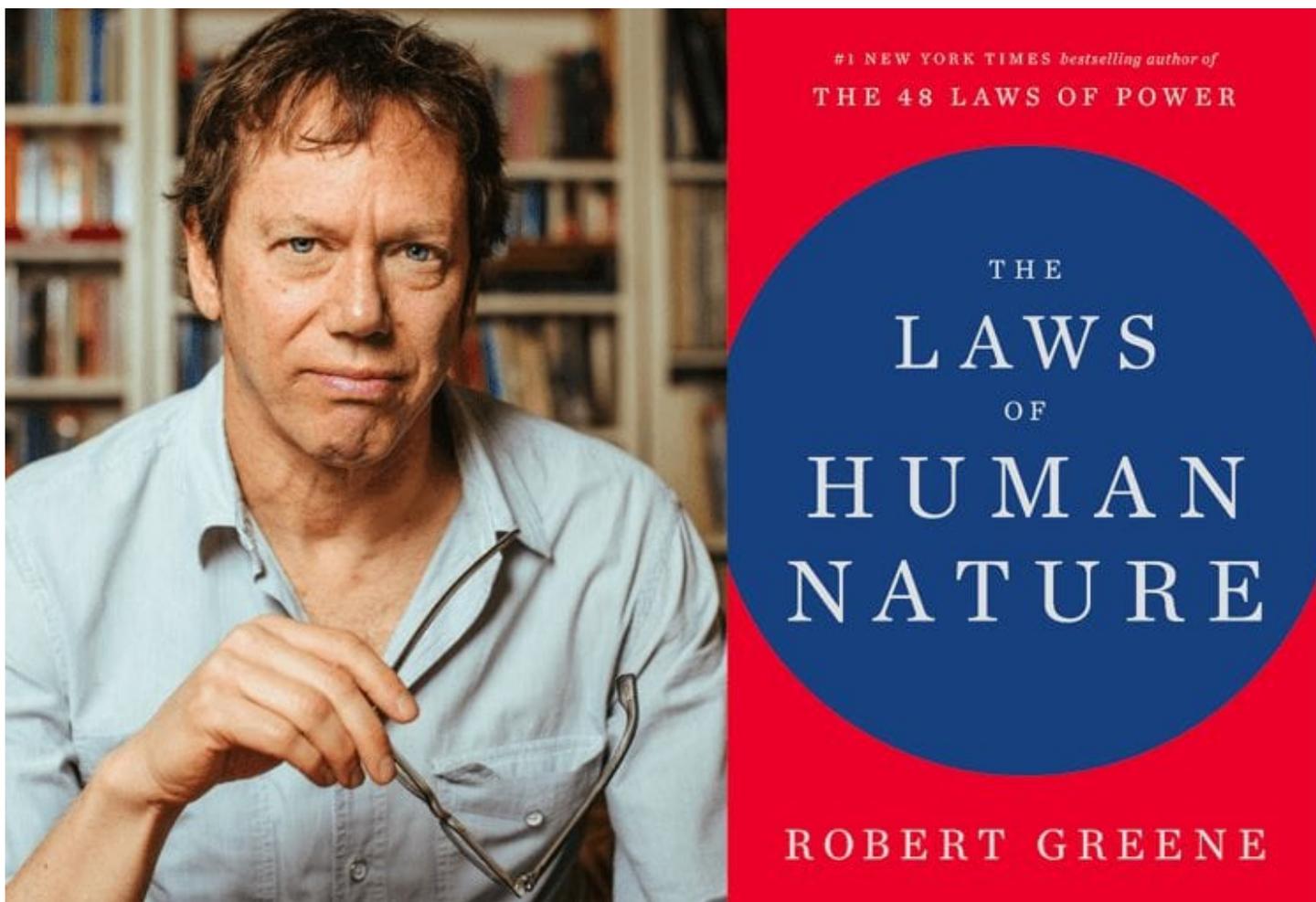


The Laws Of Human Nature: An Interview With Robert Greene



For decades, [Robert Greene](#) has been observing, studying, and writing about people and power. Through this research, he has produced a canon of bestselling books that explain why people do what they do, how these patterns affect and shape the world, and of course, how we can develop strategies to protect ourselves and thrive in this often irrational environment. His book [the 48 Laws of Power](#) has sold millions of copies all over the world. His book [Mastery](#) is now a classic for anyone pursuing a craft and a calling. All of that work has culminated in a masterwork called [The Laws of Human Nature](#), which has just been released.

We sat down with Robert and interviewed him in person about the book. Why in person? Because Robert is fighting to recover from a [serious stroke](#) that has currently left him without the use of his left hand and leg. He wasn't able to type out answers to our questions, but he was able to give thoughtful, in-depth responses about the truth of human nature, his understanding of [Stoic philosophy](#) and the very personal insights his brush with death has given him about life.

We hope you enjoy this interview—which we think is one of our best—and encourage you to read [The Laws of Human Nature](#) as well as [The 48 Laws of Power](#), [The Art of Seduction](#), [The 33](#)

Strategies of War, *The 50th Law*, and *Mastery*. It's a body of work that proves Robert Greene a master, a genius, of human behavior. If you're not a student of his, you're missing out.

You spent decades studying and researching human nature for *The Laws of Human Nature*. What have you learned about human nature that either you didn't understand, or you feel people didn't understand before?

One thing I learned is that it was an excruciating book to write because people are so complicated and so complex that whenever I wrote something and came upon an idea, I almost instantly could think of exceptions — *I know this could be that or it could be this*. We live in a computerized age where everything is about algorithms and formulas, but people are so much more complex than any machine or any computer. You can't begin to calculate the kinds of reactions you can get. Every person is so different and complicated and we tend to simplify them. We simplify human behavior. We think of everything going back to a single cause — *they did this because of that*.

When we look at our own behavior, we're quite willing to say, '*oh, I acted badly because of circumstances that forced me to.*' But we don't give that to other people. We tend to just say that they're a bad person. We turn people into cartoons or caricatures, but everybody comes from an extremely unique place in life. If you add in all the variables — they were born in a particular moment in history, in a particular social class with particular parents who have their own weirdness from their own parents and then they meet all of these people who have an effect upon them. No two people are the same.

So trying to write a book about laws of human nature is almost an exercise in futility, and it's kind of a hopeless task because. I don't mean to fuse what I attempted, but it was why I had to be so careful and think things through so deeply. It was a journey in the sense that even I'm always doing that—I'm always simplifying people. I'm always saying that this is why they responded that way. But that altered. That was sort of the main thing that I discovered.

The **book** was so extremely exhausting for me because I didn't want to just stop at simple things. I wanted to really understand *why*. So for instance—when it comes to narcissism—we tend to think of narcissists in a particular way. We think of them as people who are in love with themselves or who are just sort of wrapped up in their own world. Then we have our diagnosis of them. And it's just not true. It's not true what narcissists are. It's much more complicated than that. Every single human being is a narcissist by our nature. We cannot help it. And so I wanted to see why that is. I wanted to see what the roots of it are. It doesn't apply to everybody in the same way. But the idea of having a self and your relationship to yourself and how that defines you is much more complicated than just the superficial way we label people as narcissists.

The Stoics talk about our faculty for reasoning and the importance of logic and appealing to reason and the importance of reason, but obviously the theme of your book is just how irrational and unreasonable people are. How do you reconcile that?

Well the premise of my book is that we have — and this is a simplification — but I'm sort of saying we have a lower and higher self. I believe **the Stoics** express it similarly. The lower self is our animal

nature, our primate nature. We descended from chimpanzees. It's the fact that we tend to react to what's immediately in front of our face, like a cow or a dog or anything. We bark and that's who we are. And we tend to always want things to be easier to take the path of least resistance. We all have that lower part of our nature and it's a lot stronger, but at the same time, there's a higher self that we're straining to become. And maybe I'm being optimistic, but I'm saying that everybody has that desire to reach the higher self.

We've all known moments of rationality. Generally in life, we are slaves to our emotions. And it's because of the way the human brain is wired. The faculty for reasoning and cognition is a totally separate part of the brain than where we process emotions. **When we feel angry**, it's not registering in the part of our brain that processes thoughts. We never really know why we are angry. It comes from some unconscious place and so we have no way of analyzing it. We're always responding to emotions. So I'm saying that emotions come first then thought follows and most of our thinking is in support of what we feel—we don't like a situation or a person and we find the reasons to back that up.

To be rational is an ideal. It requires being able to step away from your emotions and to analyze them and to say, *'I don't need to feel this way and maybe what's going on in the world is not what I think.'* When I meditate, I have this idea that what I feel is not what's going on in the world. The world is this place that has existed for millions of years, billions of years. Life goes on. **Everything changes and is impermanent**, and my emotions have nothing to do with reality. They're two separate worlds. So you want to be able to have the power to subtract your emotions. That's very difficult. It doesn't come easy. To become rational is an effort and an ideal. It's something to aspire towards.

I'm trying to turn it upside down. We tend to think of rational as *cogito ergo*—I think therefore I am. But humans who are truly rational are extremely rare. Take, for instance, Socrates, who we'd have to say is a sort of the ideal of rationality. Socrates has this idea that he starts from a position of ignorance. He doesn't know what the answer is and he thinks to presume that you know something is ridiculous. Like I said in the beginning, I don't understand human nature. Socrates began from a premise of ignorance. He's questioning and he's wondering and that is the source of Socratic wisdom in the Socratic method.

Well, how many people do you know personally that ever applied that form of rationality, to begin from a premise of ignorance? People who say, *'I don't really understand this phenomenon. In fact, I could be wrong. All of my ideas could be wrong. I need to educate myself in every single instance.'* That is extremely rare. The moments of humans being rational are one out of a thousand. The people that we can point to who think like this—icons and archetypes like an Abraham Lincoln—they're so rare in history. So I want to start with the idea that we think we're rational but we're not, but it is an ideal that we can aspire towards.

One of the things that Marcus Aurelius talks about a lot is understanding the people who drive you crazy. He's talking about going into their nature and what their motivations are. He even talks a lot about when someone does something to you, think about when you have done that to other people. Your book talks about empathy through similar exercises. Why is that so important? What does it help you do?

Let's start with the primary law of human nature. If I had to say what the primary law of human nature is, the primary law of human nature is to deny that we have human nature, to deny that we are subject to these forces. We think, *'I'm not irrational, I'm not aggressive, I don't feel envy, I am not a narcissist.'* It's always the other side. It's the Republicans, it's the Spartans, it's the Ethiopians—they're the ones who are irrational and aggressive. *'Me? No.'* And so I'm really trying to rid you of this nasty habit which is so ingrained in us.

The truth is we all evolved from the same source, from the same small number of people. Our brains are basically the same. We are wired in a similar way. We experienced the world, emotionally, the same way that hunter-gatherers experienced the world. Very little has changed in that sense. So if we all come from the same source, why would it be that only a small number of people are aggressive or are irrational? We are all the same. The [Stoics](#) talk about that. It's *logos*. It's what unites everything together. This is the *logos* of human nature. And one of my [favorite quotes](#) of [Marcus Aurelius](#) is, "what injures the hive injures the bee."

We're all interconnected and we all have the same nature. The exercise is to see that in other people. For instance, if you were in their circumstances, if you had their parents and their particular experiences in life, you would probably be reacting the same way they are, even though you're a different person. It's to give you some humility.

It's not easy. It takes effort to realize this because our natural assumption is to feel that we're superior. We separate ourselves from others. We think, *'I'm more intelligent, I'm more moral, I'm more rational, I'm better looking, I'm more intelligent, I vote for the right person.'* It's so ingrained and it's so nefarious and I'm guilty of it myself, but it's a major block towards that higher self that I'm talking about.

A few weeks ago you had a surprise, what could have very easily been a fatal stroke. That's an immense obstacle. And right on the cusp of you putting out this new book. How have you dealt with what must have been frustration and disappointment and fear?

Well it's not easy and anybody who's been through it would probably understand. The impatience and the frustration are intense. Just learning to lift your pinky, your fingers, on my left hand requires as much effort as it would take to bench press 200 pounds before, and I'm not joking. I'm trying to lift my pinky and I'm sweating it's so hard and you get impatient and you get frustrated and you get angry and you blame. Why did it happen to me? Or if only this hadn't happened. But that's not how life is.

And so in terms of my book, I'm not ever saying that I blame the reader. I'm not saying the reader is a narcissist or a bad person. I'm saying that it's natural to react to circumstances in a certain way. When you're dealing with a toxic person or a bad situation like I did, it's natural to pity yourself, to feel *why me*, to get frustrated and impatient. But the process that I'm talking about—that [all my books](#) are—is to be able to move beyond that and to analyze yourself and to say it doesn't need to be this way, that I can aspire to something else.

I'm having to deal with tremendous amounts of impatience and I'm working on it and struggling with it and sometimes I'm defeated by it. I've never had to deal with this before because I've been

blessed with good health and I'm a very active, physical person, so it's very frustrating and very humbling because I'm not as good at it as I thought I was.

When it first happened, I was in the hospital, I had a pretty good attitude, I was reacting in a good way. Then as it set in, as the weeks went by and I can't walk, I can't urinate by myself, I need help to do this and that — it's very humiliating and humbling. It's a work in progress.

There's a very important chapter in the book about mortality and the way that we either deny our mortality or we are incredibly anxious. The one thing that appears the most in [Marcus Aurelius](#), [Seneca](#), and [Epictetus](#) is the importance of coming to terms with our mortality so we're not defined by it. What do you say in the book and what's your take on why we need to do that?

It's the last chapter of [the book](#). In all my books, the last chapter is the most important. I'm trying to say that our fear of death is not just a [fear of death](#). It infects everything that we are. It creates a fear of life. The latent, chronic [anxiety](#) is a function of our inability to confront our mortality. We live in a culture that is death denial at the extreme. It's natural for humans to have great fear about death, who doesn't?

But the way primitive people dealt with it was to create a religion. I'm not demeaning religion, I'm not someone like that, I have great respect for religion, but creating a sense of an afterlife and the mythology and rituals intends to soften the blow. If you feel like there's a heaven or there's something that happens, it takes the sting out of it.

That extremely human impulse is [such an overwhelmingly horrifying thought](#) and—we who are so rational and modern—we think we've overcome those kinds of superstitious pasts. But all we've done is created a different form of denial where death becomes this sort of cartoonish thing in the movies where the superhero kills 30 people and death has no meaning. It's just like a cartoon and we don't see the animals that we kill and we never see people die in the street.

I can go through my whole life, now approaching 60, and I've only seen one person die, which was my father. And in the past, [death was all around you](#). You saw all of your family members die. You saw death in the streets. You had an awareness of it. We live in extreme denial and when you deny death, you are denying life because the two go together. So I'm trying to say that there's this barrier. Your fear of death keeps us from going beyond it. And I'm saying training yourself to go beyond and [looking at death](#) square in the eye is an incredibly liberating feeling.

I compare it to standing at the shore of some vast ocean and the fear of that dark ocean makes you kind of turn away and turn your back and retreat and I want you to get into your little boat and I want you to go into that ocean and explore it. And I talk about how you explore it. You look at your own mortality. You feel [a visceral relationship to death](#).

When I meditate, and samurai warriors do this—they have death located in the *Hara*, which is part of the [seppuku](#)—when you commit suicide, it's in the gut, it's part of the gut. And so you can literally feel your own death and your own mortality in your body. You can feel it in moments when you fall asleep and you lose consciousness for a moment. You have moments like this. I want you to not be so afraid and to look it square in the eye and to explore that ocean. And I give exercises to it.

So [pushing yourself past this one elemental fear](#) can have incredible power and therapy because our fear of death is something that has bedeviled humanity for thousands of years. It's twisted us into something perverted and overcoming that is like the ultimate form of freedom. That's the quote I end the book with from [Montaigne](#) that you don't know freedom until you overcome that fear of death.

There are books written by people who've had near-death experiences and they're fascinating. But I maintain that we've all had a little bit of that experience in our own life. When you say goodbye to a person in their leaving, it's a little bit like death because you may not ever see them again.

The other thing is, death should be the ultimate engine for creating empathy. I have this exercise. I did it when I was in New York, and it was extremely powerful. I walked through New York where you can see tons of different people everywhere, and I imagined everyone's mortality, seeing them as someone who is facing their own fear of death. It's like that old [Xerxes](#) thing when he looked at his army and he says, "Look at all these people—but not one of them will still be alive in a hundred years."

Looking at people in a crowd scene makes you connect to them in a visceral way that's not intellectual and it's very powerful. So [making mortality more of a reality](#) and something that's in your gut, something more visceral, connects you more deeply to people and connects you more deeply to life and [how precious life is](#).

What do you think of the sort of [Silicon Valley obsession](#) now with either indefinitely prolonging death or ending death?

I think it's the ultimate stupidity and I've been ranting against it for years. It's like you're running away from the only reality that exists. We can argue about what reality is. We have our own reality. Our reality is not what a bat or a fly sees. We don't have echolocation. Every creature has its own reality. But the one thing that we can say is that we're born and [we die](#). So to deny that and fight against it is the ultimate form of human stupidity and the ultimate insult to human nature, as if you can transcend nature. You can't transcend nature, it defines you.

[The book](#) has these 18 laws that define who you are. This is who you are, reader. You cannot escape it. We want to wiggle out, we want to say 'I'm not aggressive, I'm not irrational.' No, sorry, forget it. This is who we are. There is no escaping it. We were defined, this animal defined us, just like a sheep or a goat has certain things that it does in every situation. We're more complicated, but we can't escape it. This is who we are.

So the idea that you want to escape death and sort of prolong your life—first of all, who wants to live 150 years? Life is kind of difficult. I don't want to die, but I don't want to see everybody that I know disappear and be completely alone amongst a group of strangers. I have my family, so why would I want to live for 100, 500 years? It'd be a nightmare. Prolonging my life would be a nightmare.

And the other thing—how selfish and how narcissistic is this? What if everybody tries to extend their life for 50, 100 years? What will happen to the planet? We already have 8 billion people on this planet. People need to die or we won't have resources, we won't have air to breathe, water to drink.

So prolonging life, you're prioritizing yourself. Your death is a necessity, it's a deed. You're dying so that other people can live.

You're going to go on consuming more *Me*, more energy, taking more space up in the world? So now instead of 8 billion, we have 15 billion people? What kind of insanity is this? It's the ultimate form of stupidity and insanity. I've hated that. That makes me so angry.

One of the criticisms of your books is that they're immoral or that the pursuit of power or success or seduction is at odds with the philosophical life, the good or the moral life. What do you say to that?

This is part of the new book. This is who we are. This book isn't as Machiavellian as *The 48 Laws of Power*, so people are going to have the idea that 'oh Robert, you've softened.' No. Human beings want power.

Human beings do not like the feeling of lacking control. So you can think that my books are immoral or that you have somehow escaped this dynamic of wanting power and manipulating people. But you cannot escape it because you're trapped in your nature. You're trapped by who you are. You're trapped by the way we are all wired.

There are psychologists who say that [the need to have an effect on others](#) is one of the most basic human needs. The sense that you can't affect your children, your spouse, your colleagues or the world around you is sheer misery. We want to have power. We want to have an effect on people. We want to be able to seduce. We want to find a partner and cast a spell on them. We want to have some control over our destiny. So my books are not immoral. They're truthful. They're realistic and I take that criticism as a compliment or as a badge of honor.

We live in a world of such denial and such bullshit. If you watch television or you look at the world that people consume with TV shows and commercials—everything is bullshit. Everything is a denial of the truth, of reality. People are running away from what's really going on in the world. I want people to look squarely in the eye at our nature as a power hungry, manipulative, aggressive animal. I want people to not shirk away from it by some desire or thinking that they have their better angels, that they're enlightened.

And not to put words in your mouth, but you're never saying that you have to do all the [48 laws](#). You don't have to destroy your enemies, but you have to be aware of the dynamic?

Yeah, I understand the criticism of that, the crush your enemy totally. Everyone likes to pick on that. It's obviously a little bit of literary license. I'm not telling you to go out there and crush your enemy totally. It's in a particular circumstance.

To explain what I'm saying here. You look at Amazon or Facebook or any of these Silicon Valley things. What is their primary motive? It is to destroy and annihilate the competition, to crush their enemy totally. So that they have zero competition. That is the monopolizing impulse behind big business. Well I'm sorry humanity, but that's "crush your enemy totally." That is a major element in business.

I'm not advocating it. I'm just saying this is how the world is, and you have to understand it. I know I'm a bit of a zero-sum person, but I'm not saying you have to go out and use these laws. It's being aware of them. It's about not being in denial, to not deny who you are.

I have this vision of the kind of ideal human that I carry in my mind. It's a person who is comfortable with themselves. It's a person who doesn't feel like they need to pretend that they're an angel or to pretend that they know everything or to pretend that they're superior in this, that or the other. They're comfortable with their own faults and frailties and flaws. And that's like a major component in this kind of ideal person. I can think of people like [Lincoln](#) or [Pericles](#) who sort of embody that.

Robert's new book is out now! If you haven't already, pick up a copy of [The Laws of Human Nature](#)—the masterwork from the master of human behavior. It will likely change the way you look at the world.