

Primates and Philosophers. How Morality Evolved.

Frans de Waal

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Reviewed by W. C. MCGREW

Leverhulme Centre for Human Evolutionary Studies, Department of Biological Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Street, Cambridge CB2 1QH, UNITED KINGDOM; wcm21@cam.ac.uk

Query: What two things do *Current Anthropology*, *Behavioral and Brain Science*, and *Politics and the Life Sciences* all have in common?

Answer: They are interdisciplinary academic journals, and they share the common publishing format of target article, multiple comments, and rebuttal.

Now Princeton University Press has produced a book that follows approximately the same framework, and the result is enlightening. The noted Dutch ethologist and primatologist, Frans de Waal, has written a 55-page essay and three appendices on the evolution of morality. These have been handed over to four philosophers who among them have penned 75 pages of critical comments. Finally, de Waal has responded to the philosophers in a 20-page reply. Throw in an 11-page introduction by two editors, both political scientists, and tack on references and an index, and you have a book.

De Waal's essay is titled, "Morality evolved: Primate social instincts, human morality, and the rise and fall of 'vener theory'." It is based on the Tanner Lectures, a series given at Princeton in 2003. Devotees of his past work will recognise the themes explored earlier in his 1996 book, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Harvard University Press); some of the same telling anecdotes are recounted here. There are echoes too of two other books, *Peacemaking among Primates* (Harvard University Press, 1989) and *Our Inner Ape: A Leading Primatologist Explains Why We Are Who We Are* (Riverhead Books, 2005).

What is new here is his sustained assault on 'Vener Theory.' This point of view sees morality in *Homo sapiens* as only a thin cultural overlay, barely hiding the brutish natural tendencies that humankind shares with other species. De Waal fiercely opposes this, instead arguing that morality has evolved gradually in our forebears, especially in the great apes, our nearest living relations. Vener Theory's proponent, Thomas Henry Huxley, is set against de Waal's heroes, Charles Darwin and Adam Smith. (Actually, as is so often the case, selective quotation from Darwin can position him on either side of the issue.) In tackling the issues, de Waal spends little time on familiar problems with anthropomorphism, but develops at length the more subtle drawbacks of anthrodenial, by which he means the *a priori* rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals. Precursors to key features of human moral behaviour are found in non-human versions of empathy, sympathy, consolation, theory of mind, and even gratitude.

The four philosophers (Robert Wright, Christine Korsgaard, Philip Kitcher, and Peter Singer) wade in with lots of opinions and clever word-play, but little that is empirically based. None of them has much if any direct experience of animal behavior and seem content to depend on de Waal's conclusions about what apes do or do not do. Furthermore, they seem to have little more than superficial knowledge of evolutionary theory (one wonders what Daniel Dennett or Michael Ruse would have made of the job). All seem to be totally unaware of ethnography and cross-cultural variation, being willing to generalise about the human species, based (presumably) on their knowledge of Western, industrialised man. Finally, only one of the commentators, Singer, offers any defence of Vener Theory, so there is a certain air of damp squibbery about the texts.

Perhaps most interesting is a sharpish exchange between de Waal and Singer on animal rights. In one of his appendices, de Waal ridicules the notion, as legalistic and unhelpful, while (not surprisingly!) Singer argues cogently and persuasively that extending limited rights to non-humans is not only feasible, but logical. If we are to tackle racism and sexism, then we must also face up to speciesism. All in all, the most penetrating critiques are those that ask de Waal to be more precise, e.g., in terms of what he means by the 'building blocks' of morality found in other species of animals.

In his response, de Waal does just this. He outlines three levels of morality, comparing humans and apes—moral sentiments, social pressure, and reasoned judgement. According to his analysis, other primates have the first, aspects of the second, and only a little of the third. Put more specifically, most animals show Functional Altruism (perform acts that are costly to the performer but benefit the recipient). Many social (group-living?) animals show Socially Motivated Helping (empathic responses to the distress of their fellows). Some large-brained animals (primates, cetaceans, elephants?) go further, and show Intentional Targeted Helping (which entails awareness of how the other will benefit from being helped). Finally, only some large-brained animals engage in 'Selfish' Helping, in which the helper is intentionally seeking return benefits. All four variants are forms of altruism, and are often confused.

What about weaknesses in de Waal's arguments? There are occasional confusions over terms, e.g., 'social' versus 'pro-social,' or 'asocial' versus 'anti-social.' Some of his crucial examples are confined to captive colonies of apes, and have never been seen in nature, e.g., females acting as

peacemaking brokers between feuding males. Veneer Theory makes a useful 'straw man,' but how many informed persons in the post-Darwinian age actually subscribe to it? Occasionally, there are infelicitous sentences that jar, at least to the ears of a field-worker, "Ideally, all research on apes should be mutually beneficial and enjoyable." Even the best conditions of captivity, in which only a tiny fraction of confined apes reside, are yet prisons, compared to

natural forest, and every aspect of the apes' daily lives are subject to human whims. Whose benefit, and whose enjoyment?

All in all, just as with the three journals cited at the outset, the interactive format succeeds in raising issues and airing them. Scholars from very different intellectual lines engage in earnest, but readers will have to form their own conclusions.