



The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates

Frans de Waal

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In this lively and illuminating discussion of his landmark research, esteemed primatologist Frans de Waal argues that human morality is not imposed from above but instead comes from within. Moral behavior does not begin and end with religion but is in fact a product of evolution.

For many years, de Waal has observed chimpanzees soothe distressed neighbors and bonobos share their food. Now he delivers fascinating fresh evidence for the seeds of ethical behavior in primate societies that further cements the case for the biological origins of human fairness. Interweaving vivid tales from the animal kingdom with thoughtful philosophical analysis, de Waal seeks a bottom-up explanation of morality that emphasizes our connection with animals. In doing so, de Waal explores for the first time the implications of his work for our understanding of modern religion. Whatever the role of religious moral imperatives, he sees it as a “Johnny-come-lately” role that emerged only as an addition to our natural instincts for cooperation and empathy.

But unlike the dogmatic neo-atheist of his book’s title, de Waal does not scorn religion per se. Instead, he draws on the long tradition of humanism exemplified by the painter Hieronymus Bosch and asks reflective readers to consider these issues from a positive perspective: What role, if any, does religion play for a well-functioning society today? And where can believers and nonbelievers alike find the inspiration to lead a good life?

Rich with cultural references and anecdotes of primate behavior, *The Bonobo and the Atheist* engagingly builds a unique argument grounded in evolutionary biology and moral philosophy. Ever a pioneering thinker, de Waal delivers a heartening and inclusive new perspective on human nature and our struggle to find purpose in our lives.

The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates Details

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Primates Frans de Waal

From Reader Review The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates for online ebook

Sorina Negril? says

Primatologul isi sustine ideea ca instinctele prosociale, altruismul si comportamentul moral preced religiile cunoscute, care mai degraba au particularizat prin naratiuni locale valori general umane, cu exemple anecdotice sau stiintifice din coloniile de cimpanzei sau bonobo. Respinge ateismul militant cum este el promovat de Hitchens, Dawkins sau Sam Harris printr-o analiza mai degraba functionala a religiei (daca a aparut la mai toate popoarele prin ce o poti inlocui, care sa confere orientarea spre scop comun, sentimentul de apartenenta si coeziune) si a evidentei ca nu poate fi generata coeziunea sociala exclusiv prin orientarea anti-ceva; dar si cu argumente de natura evolutionista sau biologica care il fac de asemenea sa respinga spre ex utilitarismul, care ar nega aplecarea noastra naturala spre sustinerea aproapelui (fam, prieteni), favorizand maximizarea binelui pentru cei mai multi, indiferent de gradul lor de apropiere fata de noi. Noteaza limitele stiintei ca ghid prescriptiv, refuza sa considere altruismul o forma mascata de egoism si nu se da in laturi de la a-l conceptualiza eventual si ca simpla placere - dar mai ales te lasa sa mai si razi de primata din tine si de scenariile sociale uneori extrem de complexe, care se bazeaza pe motivatii extrem de similare cu cele umane. Anul nonfiction a inceput bine

Dov Zeller says

Frans De Waal makes a well researched and eloquent argument about the source of human morality.

He is not feverishly opposed to organized religion, though he is an atheist. He is opposed to the kind of violence that any kind of fundamentalist mind-set can bring.

He describes empathy, and, by extension, morality as a mammalian and certainly a primate thing. He sees its formulation as a 'bottom up' rather than 'top down' approach, arguing that morality doesn't come from religion but from the mammalian need and capacity for communal living.

De Waal doesn't doubt the importance of religion and/or spirituality as forms of spiritual and cultural nourishing and sees their value as great organizing forces. But he carefully argues that all social animals (except the occasional psychopath) are by nature and neurology moral and empathic beings who rely at least as much on cooperation as on competition.

This is a very good book. There are a few things I would argue with. One is his assertion that science is a recent invention and that religion is more inherent and as old as we are. I suppose it depends on what one means by science, but if one means the observation of natural phenomenon.

Well, how about this. Here is a dictionary definition.

The intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behavior of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment.

And I am pretty sure, when reading this, that science is at least as old as religion, and that the two are not always so far apart. They both, at their best, allow for and encourage wonderment, reverence, appreciation,

etc.

I could write a book about this book, and I may write a longer review at some point, but for now, going to end with some quotes.

There is no evidence whatsoever that sexual violence is heritable. (104)

on Gould

I agree with Gould that we gain little from evolutionary guesswork about each and every human behavior. Gould made himself any enemies, though, by voicing skepticism. Several skirmishes between him and the evolutionary establishment unfolded in the pages of the New York Review of Books in 1997. It was a sight to behold, all those outsized egos tumbling over each other with innuendos, criticism by hearsay, name-calling (one was ridiculed as another's 'lapdog'), or acting as if they'd never heard of one another. The vitriol obviously didn't help them close ranks. Creationists were rubbing their hands in delight and exploited the row to their own ends as was reflected in remarks about the theoretical discord in places as unexpected as the Miss USA Pageant. Someone should have nominated those Darwinists for a Darwin Award.

But this confrontation was nothing compared with the reaction to another Gould opinion. An atheist himself, he declared science and religion compatible well before neb-atheists decided they were not. Following his untimely death, in 2002, Gould thus became a lightning rod for his lack of intolerance. (104)

More Gould

SOMETHINGISM

In his famous essay, published in the same year as the above loveliest with fellow evolutionists, Gould recalled running into a group of lunching priests at the Vatican. The priests expressed worry about a new brand of creationism that had sprung up, known as intelligent design. They asked Gould why on earth evolution was still under attack. In his essay, the paleontologist comment on the profound irony that he, an ex-Jew, had to reassure Catholic priests that evolution was in fact doing fine and that the opposition was restricted to a small segment of the American population.

This story was Gould's way of hinting that the alleged war between science and religion is overblown. (105)

On Darwin and Queen Victoria

It is precisely this impact that upset Queen Victoria. Staring into the ape's mirror, she felt the metaphysical ground shifting underneath her royal feet. Seeing the same orangutan and chimpanzee at the same zoo, Darwin reached quite a different conclusion; he invited anyone convinced of man's superiority to come take a look. Darwin felt a connection where the queen felt a threat. (107)

Empathy finds its origin in bodily synchronization and the spreading of moods. Complex forms based on imagination and projection grow out of this, but only secondarily. (133)

I have never felt any attraction to the view of animals as stimulus-response machines; it is so impoverished that I don't even know where to begin taking it apart. (135-136)

Empathy is hopelessly biased, as was shown, for example, in a study...Needless to say, the Swiss take their soccer seriously. Only their own club members activated empathy. In fact, seeing fans of the rival club

getting shocked activated the brain's pleasure areas. So much for loving thy neighbor. (141)

Empathy is multilayered like a Russian doll. At its core is the capacity to match another's emotional state. Around this core, evolution has built ever more elaborate capacities, such as feeling concern for others and adopting their viewpoint. Few species show all layers, but the core capacity is as ancient as the mammals. (144)

I refuse to use a different terminology for these reactions in human and apes, as urged by the opponents of anthropomorphism. Those who exclaim that 'animals are not people' tend to forget that, while true, it is equally true that people are animals. To minimize the complexity of animal behavior without doing the same for human behavior erects an artificial barrier. (145)

Darrel says

I am a fan of Frans DeWaal's and have read much of his work. I think he has been instrumental in opening up our view and making us less homocentric. Unfortunately, this book seems like something his editor asked him to write so as to catch the current secular wave. There is so much he could have written but didn't and so much he did write and should not have. His incessant focus on the art of Hieromimous Bosch is inexplicable. Why spend so much time discussing a piece of art (even if it is a masterpiece), when there is so much he could have told us about primates and human ethics, etc. I cannot and do not see how Bosch contributes anything to his argument. Through out the book I felt like things were just getting interesting when he would revert back to art criticism.

On the other hand, his explication of bottom up morality and ethics is important and there is no doubt that religion has usurped our natural desire for harmony and fairness, and taken credit for it. It is a good argument and demonstration by way of his and other's research with primates and I applaud him for that.

When he gets into discussing the new atheists, he seems a bit out of touch. He criticizes them, but seems unaware of the driving force behind much of the movement - church state separation, religious child abuse, political control of school boards, etc. Yes, he makes passing reference to some of these issues and to the anti science of many religionists, but he seems to need to throw a bone to the religious while ignoring much of what is done in the name of their religion. He is probably correct, that religion is not going to disappear any time soon, but I see no need for pandering to patriarchal religions.

While critical of the new atheists, he observes that Humanism is not anti religion and was not in its beginning. That may be a bit loose with the facts, but even if correct, the reason Humanism has become more aggressive of late if largely because the accommodationist approach has done nothing but emboldened the religionists. Playing nice with the Catholic Church does not stop child rape. Playing nice with evangelicals does not stop preachers preaching politics from the pulpit. Playing nice with Pentecostals does not stop religious child abuse. Playing nice with the Black Church does not stop ministers from taking the last dime from a single mom for the promise of prosperity or heaven later. Sure, we may get our ethics from natural tendencies in our species, but it is not enough to simply make that argument and then lay low on the whole issue of religion and its impact on our species.

He seems unaware of the real emotional, psychological and social damage that religion does to millions of

people even as they proclaim religious morality and ethics. He duly notes that we are a hierarchical species, but fails to show how such hierarchies can be hijacked by religion and used to oppress and distort our natural fairness instincts.

I wish he had done a more complete analysis of religion and morality rather than constantly giving religion a pass or the benefit of the doubt. If he is going to talk about religion, it seems to me that he needs to be a good deal more interested in how it actually works in our species. His only attempt seems to be in the last chapter where he tries to look through the eyes of the bonobo. It doesn't work.

I will not recommend this book. I struggled to get through it because there is insufficient information or argument to be worth the time investment. If you have not read any of his other works, this may be worth your time that is why I give it three stars, but why not just read his best stuff and let this one pass. There are far better authors to read on morality and ethics.

Nathaniel says

The most frustrating thing about this book was *how much of it was quotable*. I listened to it as an audiobook, and I use the bookmark feature of Audible regularly, but that means I have to go back after the fact and transcribe all the passages that I liked into Evernote. I probably have literally 30-40 passages I'm going to have to do that for with this book because it was just so tense with stories I want to capture, pithy lines, or surprising scientific findings. (OK, I don't really "have to,"--nobody's forcing me--but I'm going to do it.)

I've already had one person ask me--when I posted about the book on Facebook--why a religious person such as myself would like it. But I've always enjoyed the writing of smart atheists. It's kind of a weird question for me, honestly. Most of the most influential thinkers on me have been atheists (Camus, de Beauvoir, Bowles, etc.) Besides: de Waal is more than happy to go after the New Atheists as dogmatic extremists, so you know he's going to endear himself to me on that front.

But that's not the main thing that I loved about the book. That was just the empathy and respect and warmth with which de Waal wrote about animals (especially bonobos and chimps, but also others like elephants) in terms of the ability to demonstrate pro-social behavior and even the kernel of what we would consider to be friendship or remorse or other positive traits in humans.

Now: as for de Waal's primary point: I think he does not succeed. The problem is one that he pinpoints himself, but then doesn't adequately deal with: the is/ought gap. De Waal does a great job of showing that the origins of what we consider to be moral *behavior* arise in animal behavior. He also does a great job of explaining how, evolutionarily, humanity could build on those foundations to reach more and deeper morality (including, in his mind, the creation of religion.) But there are two key problems.

First, the evolutionary origins of behavior we regard as moral is *not* actually the same as the origin of "morality." He's got the "is." But--in order to be regarded as morality--he needs an "ought." And he never gets one. Intuitively, we regard behaviors such as remorse and repairing relationships as moral. And so it is fascinating to see their origins in primate behavior. But that's just an "is." It's only an "ought" if we regard our intuition as correct. And de Waal doesn't take a position on that one. I don't mind at all: I think the book is fascinating merely for the information it presents (and the way it does), but I think it's a critical flaw in his thesis.

Second, de Waal also seems to fall into a particularly problem that is common to relativism: that is the idea that if you can explain how a trait arises, then that trait must be contingent, relative, etc. But--as Thomas Nagel explains in *The Last Word*--that doesn't actually follow. Nagel's example was math.

The evolutionary origins of humanity's mathematical abilities are contingent and subjective. It's interesting to ask what survival advantage the ability to do formal logic conferred. But if we can explain that, it doesn't mean that somehow mathematics or logic stop being objectively true and become (like de Waal's idea of morality) somehow merely relativistically or contingently true.

So, if evolution can bring us into contact with objective logic in terms of math, why is it impossible for evolution to bring us into contact with objective morality?

And that, for me, is the key problem with de Waal's approach: he doesn't think very carefully or deeply about what morality means. He says, for example, that morality will be different in hunter-gatherer vs. agrarian societies because they will have different concerns regarding incentives and behavior. True. But that doesn't actually mean that morality is relative. The same moral principles can be applied in different ways.

So de Waal seems to be replying a kind of superficial notion of moral absolutism (the idea that there are moral laws that never change) as opposed to a more sophisticated notion of moral objectivism (the idea that there are moral principles that never change, but that their application can create diverse rules in different contexts.)

As an analogy: imagine the task of making an airplane for use in Earth's atmosphere. Now imagine the task of making an airplane for use in Mars' atmosphere. You're going to get very different-looking crafts, which will in turn behave differently, be integrated into society differently, require different skills to pilot, and entail different kinds of maintenance, etc. But does this mean that the laws of building airplane are relative? Not really, because behind the particular situation of Earth (thick atmosphere, lots of gravity) and Mars (thin atmosphere, less gravity) there's a common set of physical laws that apply--identically--in both cases. Terrestrial aeronautics and Martian aeronautics would be just *special cases* of general physical rules. In the same sense, it's premature to say that--because the rules are going to look like in hunter-gatherer vs. agrarian societies--we're dealing with moral relativism as opposed to special cases of objective, universal moral principles.

This isn't a proof of objective moral principles, of course, but the failure of de Waal to interact with the possibility shows a major shortcoming of his book as a philosophical text. In terms of philosophy, it just doesn't work.

But I read it primarily as a *science* book, and in terms of science it is fascinating, eye-opening, and compelling.

Arica says

For centuries, the popular idea has been that the world of animals is savage and ruthless, that man is constitutionally inclined to such "animalistic" behavior, that his morality is a thin veneer and that, but for commandments from above--whether imposed by a church or holy book, in the case of religion, or by the state, in the case of secularists--we would degenerate into savage anarchy, a sort of perpetual "Lord of the Flies" scenario.

Some thinkers, in reaction to this, try to have it the other way: arguing that if man only behaved like the more peaceable and sexually licentious among the animals, all would be well with humanity.

De Waal, who has made his career as a primatologist, has observed that the animal kingdom is neither the savage hell that it was believed to be for centuries nor the simian analogue of Woodstock that others would have us believe. He relates numerous instances of caring and unselfish behavior among undomesticated primates and even conciliatory behavior after a quarrel and argues that these are the bases of our own morality. He rejects all "top-down" moral systems--whether religious or "scientific"--as inappropriate for who and what we are, saying all such systems are merely after-the-fact summaries of what we are disposed by evolution to do anyway.

An atheist, de Waal forthrightly rejects religion's claim to be the indispensable source of morals; at the same time, he believes that the emotions and behavior that give rise to religion are so much a part of our makeup that if someone did an experiment consisting of placing children on a desert island and leaving them there, some form of religion would inevitably arise. While rejecting religion's claims to primacy of place in our moral reasoning, he equally rejects the tendencies of some atheists to "declare war" on faith.

The book is full of facts about primates (and some observations of other species), as well as reflections drawn from philosophy and art (the Dutch painters Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel are of particular interest to him). The book is written in a very down-to-earth, readable style.

Sara says

There are things I liked about this book, and things I can't agree on. I learned a lot about primatology that I didn't know before, I feel he is quite an objective expert in this. It surprised me to learn bonobo had a sense of consequence, or played pranks on each other. This was well written and I learned quite a bit.

I couldn't agree with De Waal's perspective on human issues. He opposes a "top down" morality imposed by religion but not religion. He talks about Genital mutilation and circumcision here in the US as if it is exactly the same yet treated differently. He talks about Atheist evangelicals who proselytize as much as Christians, giving the analogy that it like "sleeping furiously". It is a fair criticism to say that some atheists go out and try to convert others. It is a hotbed of an issue here, but I think he is looking in and not understanding there is a lot of infringement. He was raised in a country where religious people are a minority and are not pushing their beliefs on others, an ideal situation where it is very peaceful. He has nostalgic, and sentimental feelings toward these religious groups who are a minority in Holland, this is totally understandable.

Here unfortunately there is a vocal number of religious people who can't respect people with different beliefs or none at all. They are on TV, in government, and taking the schools to court over not teaching creationism or intelligent design. A month ago a public school librarian pulled my daughter aside and told her about Jesus, she is one of many. I am not angry about it but I do wish people would keep their beliefs to themselves and I kindly told her that. Last week a protest took place in Texas because intelligent design was trying to make its way back into the curriculum. These people that oppose this receive plenty of criticism and its easy to see how an outsider could describe it as "sleeping furiously".

He also compared female genital mutilation to circumcision in the US, seeing us a hypocrit on the issue. While I can't imagine how these trends ever started and don't agree with them they are not comparable. FGM removes sexual pleasure for a lifetime, the clitoris as twice as many nerves as the penis. Circumcision removes the outside skin, and not the ability to have an orgasm.

My last thought on this book is that he really displays a superior air throughout the book no matter the issue. When he talks about these issues he seems to put himself above them. He is a good writer and explains the

issues and discoveries in Primatology well. They are very well studied and thought out, his personal perspectives not nearly as much.

Ema says

Am aflat o mul?ime de chestii interesante din cartea asta, care atinge subiecte din domeniul ?tiin?ei, religie?i filozofiei, dar ?i al artei, cu un limbaj accesibil ?i teorii prezentate pe ?n?elesul tuturor. Am fost captivat? ?n egal? m?sur? de reflec?iile lui Frans de Waal despre religie ?i moralitate, precum ?i de pove?tile din lumea animal?, observate ?n mod direct de primatolog sau experimentate de al?i oameni de ?tiin??.

Autorul aduce numeroase exemple ?i argumente care arat? c? originile moralit??ii pot fi recunoscute ?n comportamentul altor animale, precum primatele, elefan?ii, canidele ?i roz?toarele. Opinia lui de Waal este c? umanitatea vine din interiorul nostru, fiind un rezultat al evolu?iei ?i al mileniilor de trai ?n comunitate.

Îmi dau seama c? titlul c?r?ii îi poate ?ine departe pe unii cititori cu convingeri religioase puternice. Frans de Waal se declar? ateu, iar religia este una dintre temele recurente ale c?r?ii, ?ns? primatologul nu este genul de ateu militant, care pune la zid religia ?i lupt? pentru excluderea ei din societate. Frans de Waal are o abordare tolerant? ?i echilibrat?, asumându-?i rolul de observator ?i cercet?tor pe c?t posibil impar?ial, care ia ?n calcul atât descoperirile ?tiin?ei, cât ?i latura mistic? a firii umane. Î?i declar? aversiunea pentru dogmatism, pe care îl consider? mai periculos decât religia ?n sine, fiindc? înllocuie?te g?ndirea, reflec?ia ?i curiozitatea cu dogma.

Pute?i citi aici recenzia mai lung?, scris? pentru blog: <http://lecturile-emei.blogspot.ro/201...>

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Daniel says

Aceast? carte ar fi trebuit s? fie una dedicat? religiei ?i, mai ales, moralit??ii v?zute prin ochii unui Bonobo. Din p?cate autorul ne poart? prin critica artei (?n fapt a unui singur tablou de Hieronymus Bosch, genial, dar f?r? leg?tur? cu restul c?r?ii) ?i a umanismului modern, c?nd virulent antireligios, c?nd accept?nd practicile diferitelor biserici (care ?i manifest? ?ntâietatea ?n inventarea moralit??ii, respectiv dau verdicte pseudo?tiin?ifice).

Volumul este inconstant, d?nd impresia de texte adunate la repezel?, sau scrise la cererea editorului. Nu am mai citit nimic de Frans de Waal, dar am auzit c? este un adev?rat om de ?tiin??, un deschiz?tor de drumuri. Sper s?-i pot citi c?t de cur?nd un volum pe m?sura reputa?iei.

Ce mi-a atras aten?ia: moralitatea ?i etica sunt independente de religie, aceasta nef?când altceva decât s? strâng? aceste norme ?ntr-o serie de legi (cu aspect divin sau nu). De asemenea, c? ?n mod natural oamenii se organizeaz? ?n ierarhii, iar prin religie, ?i nu numai, extremi?ii atei fiind la fel de periculo?i, potenta?ii abuzeaz? de moralitate ?n scopul asupririi celor mul?i (vedem asta zilnic la politicienii autonumi?i de stânga ?i la clerul superior din bor).

De?i pare a fi scris? f?r? un plan precis, eu recomand aceast? carte. Mai ales capitolele 7 (Golul 1?sat de

moartea lui Dumnezeu) ?i 8 (Moralitate de jos în sus) - le pute?i citi doar pe acestea.

Ça?la says

“Kilitli odan?n kap?s?na birkaç delik aç?k ama anahtar? bir türlü bulamad?k.”

“Din, bize normalde yapmayaca??m?z ?eyleri yapt?rmaktan ziyade, do?al e?ilimlerimizi destekleme ve güçlendirme gibi bir katk?da bulunuyor olabilir.”

Lucsly says

A well written and at times fascinating explanation of the author's views on similarities between humans and mammals, with other primates taking center stage (obviously as De Waal is a primatologist).

He also has interesting things to say about the origin of morality in primates, including in humans but the book falters a bit in my opinion when he tries to invent a conflict between his views and atheists' in order to give his book a problem to solve.

Not only does he generalise atheists heavily (to me it seems there are as many views of atheism as there are atheists of which there are plenty), he also handily ignores reasons for their activism or demand for equal treatment in certain countries. He doesn't give religion the same treatment however which may seem biased, though the author isn't religious himself. Interestingly, the title of the book was translated to his native Dutch (possibly by the publisher) as "The bonobo and the ten commandments". Not only are they rarely mentioned, De Waal focuses much more heavily on atheism than on religion.

On the plus side, the book has many fascinating stories of primate behaviour, further reducing the distance between humans and our closest relatives. Definitely worth a read for this alone, though the book was apparently meant as a general summary of books and views so some information might be familiar for readers of his previous works.

Edit: fixed a typo

Jimmy says

De Waal begins with a famous Nietzsche quote: "Is man only a blunder of God? Or is God only a blunder of man?"

The central question of the book seems to be: "Where does morality come from? Does it come from above or from within us?" As someone who thinks scientifically, I believe it obviously comes from within, but how and why?

De Waal speaks of apes holding a door open for another ape to get food even if it means they will eat less. And capuchin monkeys would rather play a card that gets food for others, again even if it means they get less. Mammals give and respond to affection; reptiles do not appear to. Birds show examples of emotion.

American neuroscientist Paul MacLean named the limbic system as the seat of the emotions. He said one of

the surest signs of a caring attitude is the "lost call" of young animals. A baby monkey will look miserable and coo until its mother returns. That has been noted in alligators, one example of reptilian emotion. The crocodile family transports some of their young in their mouths.

De Waal summarizes the Dalai Lama's comments by saying, "Compassion goes to the root of what life is all about." Buddhist monks laugh at the thought of measuring the brain to find compassion. They believe it comes from the heart. They make a point since the sounds of human suffering cause a quickening heart rate. In 2005, the Dalai Lama spoke of the need to integrate science and religion.

Does secularism cause a decline in moral authority? Do we fully understand the "moral implications" of secularism? And I ask this along with De Waal as a secularist myself.

DeWaal states in chapter 1: "I am not convinced the morality needs to get its weight from above, though. Can't it come from within. . . ."

But later he also asks, ". . . but what good could possibly come from insulting the many people who find value in religion? And more pertinently, what alternative does science have to offer? Science is not in the business of spelling out the meaning of life and even less in telling us how to lead our lives."

And this: ". . . For me, understanding the need for religion is a far superior goal to bashing it."

And also: "Science isn't the answer to everything."

So not only does he point out examples of seeming morality in animals, but he also shows some of the horrors of science.

For me personally, I can't escape the feeling the world would be better off if we relied more on science and appreciated our humanity rather than our different views of the supernatural.

Carl Linnaeus assigned humans their own separate genus, apparently to avoid trouble with the Vatican. Three centuries later, DNA offered better ways to compare species than anatomical comparisons. Surprisingly, the new data placed us apart from the monkeys and smack in the middle of apes. Walking on two legs is not a big deal, even chickens do it. Our ancestors probably kept returning to the apes the way grizzlies and polar bears do. They may have bred together for over a million years.

It was Jean-Baptiste Lamarck who first proposed human descent from the apes in 1809. But Lamarckian theories of evolution were no match for Darwin. Lamarck would die penniless the subject of many mocking obituaries.

Lorenz defined aggression as within-species behavior. Herbivores are no less aggressive than carnivores. And we are living proof of aggressiveness in omnivores. Predation should not be confused with aggression.

Claude Levi-Strauss proposed that human civilization started with the incest taboo. Before then, everyone did it with everyone. But suppression of inbreeding is well developed in all sorts of animals, from fruit flies to rodents to primates.

We share genes with bonobos that we don't share with chimps and vice versa. We can be as nice as bonobos and as violent as chimps.

De Waal tells an interesting story about meeting with a group of Mormons when his pet jackdaw flies in. It terrified them and they left hastily speaking of the "devil."

In the military, I agreed to speak with Mormons every Tuesday night for about two months. The deal was that they would tell me about the Mormon church, and I would express my concern about black Americans not being allowed into the Mormon priesthood. That law has since changed. On the final night, they came to see me after "praying all night" that I would "become one of them." I felt so bad. I spent the whole evening apologizing. I kept repeating that I told them from the very beginning that I would never belong. They left very disappointed.

An interesting Dutch coined word: "ietsism." "Ism" is the same as in English, and "iets" means "something." An "ietsist" does not believe in God, but thinks there must be something between heaven and earth.

Neuroscience offers two basic messages about empathy. 1. No sharp dividing line between human and animal emotions. (Makes sense since we ARE animals.) 2. Empathy runs from body to body. Stick a needle in a woman's arm and the pain centers in her husband's brain light up.

The IgNobel Award is given each year for research that "first makes people laugh, and then think." In 2011 it was given to an attempt to find contagious yawning in turtles. Investigators exposed red-footed tortoises to a member of their own species trained to open and close its mouth. Since no tortoises reacted, the researchers concluded turtles lacked mimicry and empathy.

In a debate about passing laws dealing with castration of pigs, a roomful of men was shown a video of an awake pig being castrated. By the end, the men looked very pale and sat "with their hands firmly between their legs." The video helped change the tide on anesthesia. (I remember how disgusting Joni Ernst's ad was when she bragged about "castrating hogs.")

A rat will often help another rat in distress before going to a door with chocolate chips in it.

A story of two unrelated chimps who became friends and shared everything. When one died, the other one became depressed. Friendship can be applied to animals, but it was resisted as anthropomorphic at first.

Chapter 6 discusses the Ten Commandments and the difference between "is" and "ought." The "is" is about facts, the way things are, and the "ought" is about the way they should be. Anyone interested in the environment knows we have a problem with the "ought." I recommend David Hume for the greatest discussion ever on this topic.

One of the many interesting gems DeWaal puts in his book: The apocalyptic right panel of Bosch's *The Garden* includes two ears pierced by an arrow with a knife between the ears that are riding roughshod over doomed souls. No one knows what it means.

We are good at finding reasons to suit our purposes. As Blaise Pascal said, "The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing."

Hunter-gatherers often eliminated dangerous deviants from their group by delegating a member of the community to kill the deviant.

In a famous example on *The Colbert Report*, a conservative politician spoke of the importance of the Ten Commandments, but he could not name them when asked to do so.

Most of the Commandments have nothing to do with morality anyway.

Peter Singer, the extremist animal rights activist, paid private aides to take care of his mother with advanced Alzheimer's. This went against all his theories about utilitarianism.

Chimps follow the principle of "toeing the line." They will punish chimps that get them in trouble with their keepers in a zoo.

Some chapter 7 notes:

Research implies that religion helps people simply because of its "social dimension." That's why we need more secular gatherings that promote good behavior. We need science groups and book clubs. Whatever does the trick. I'm a fan of atheist "churches."

DeWaal asks about the origin of religion. I kept wondering if animals other than humans have anything resembling religion or supernatural beliefs. Tough to do without a language. He describes chimps doing a "rain dance" at a waterfall. An early human "rain dance" that coincided with actual rain might have started someone on a path to priesthood.

"Young chimps are smarter than children." But he never explains how old the children were.

Are humans the only animals that have thanatophobia?

The piraha, a Brazilian forest people, are perhaps the only example of a tribe that lacks religion. But they do believe in "evil spirits." To me, it's the belief in the supernatural that distinguishes religion.

Is Communism an example of atheism gone wild? Pol Pot said: "To keep you is no benefit, to destroy you is no loss."

Did William Golding have it right in *The Lord of the Flies*? Children develop a pecking order quickly. I have witnessed that in playgrounds. I watched a touch football game where the "alpha male" could run for touchdowns at will because the other kids were afraid of touching him.

But children would never develop science. Religion will never go away. Science is fragile. The antisciences forces must be kept at bay. The best secular model is now in northern Europe, but it is under duress.

As I finish the book with Chapter 8, I find two flaws: 1. Not that much about bonobos in the book, so a misleading title, and 2. Not a coherent essay leading to a conclusion about "humanism" or "morality" or whatever Mr. de Waal was looking for.

But I loved all of the great stories. The book was filled with them on almost every page.

One of the last was about chimps. When there is a "female with swollen genitals," the males will try to keep peace and maintain calm. No mating until they are under control.

De Waal's ultimate conclusion is that morality arose long before any religions came about. Religion only bolstered the morality, or at least tried to.

Nikki says

If you've ever wondered about the evolution of morality and whether humans are the only moral creatures, this is a good exploration of the idea. Frans de Waal posits that we have an innate sense of morality, and like Jonathan Haidt, suggests that this sense dictates what we do – the emotional tail wags the rational dog, rather than the other way round, in Haidt's terminology.

The main attraction for me is not the ideas, which I've come across plenty of times before, but the anecdotes about the behaviour of wild and captive bonobos and chimpanzees. They're our closest relatives, on the evolutionary tree, and we can learn a lot about ourselves from observing them. Frans de Waal includes a lot of interesting titbits, and I found his work fascinating, though not surprising.

It probably won't convince anyone who thinks that morality comes only as handed down from God, but if you wonder about this kind of thing, you'll probably find this interesting.

Reviewed for The Bibliophilian.

Ça?r? Mert Bak?rc? says

It is certainly a great book in terms of animal behavior and about the quest to find the scientific basis of morality. I really enjoyed the first-hand experiences de Waal delivers, as well as the examples from the field about the relationships between the primates and even some elephants, dogs, etc. It is not up to me to criticize his knowledge in the field of ethology.

However... I am shocked by how naive he is and how much information and insight he lacks about atheism debates. He is so unfamiliar or simply uninterested about these debates that he can ask "I understand why religious people try to spread their religion, but why do atheists debate against religious people? For what they do this?" Seriously? Is this de Waal's vision about atheism and theism debates? Should not having an imaginary friend prevent us from fighting against the modern day religious crusades against secularism, education, science? I think de Waal sits too much in his office with his cute and very interesting chimpanzees, that he forgot why atheists are angry about religious right and their actions, as well as simply religious people who claim we will burn in hell since we do not agree with them.

Also, de Waal deeply disappointed me when he said that we really need something to fill the space that removing religion creates and this simply cannot be done. Are you sure? He presents no evidence for his claim, other than demonizing communism trials in the past. Can the terrible outcomes of communism be because of the dictators of those countries, rather than the communism itself or removal of religion? I don't want to go into the topic of politics; however, I strongly disagree with the idea that removal of religion would require something else that would be just like religion again. I double, even triple strongly disagree that science cannot be something that can fill the space of religion. It sure can. If you need a subject that managed completely to do that, I would love to be a subject for such research. Science can and does fill the "need to believe". It is about the education and proximity to science during development. Religious belief does not have a special space in us. I don't see a research that shows that. I know it might be useful (especially for politics), but it is not a must.

I believe de Waal wanted to play nice to "both sides" in this debate, but I find his explanations deeply poor

and they lack the power to reflect the intellectual background of the author. That deeply saddened and concerned me. I am strongly against what he calls "neo-Atheism" and I also strongly agree that these topics must not be made a field of war. Yet, his softness and naiveness about this topic is very peculiar.

Still, I tried to ignore these disturbing so-called "explanations" of de Waal about atheism and religion. When you remove those simply unnecessary and uninteresting (and mostly debatable or obviously wrong) sections, the book is a masterpiece for science of morality and ethology.

Taede Smedes says

A book about religion from one of the foremost primatologists in the world. In this brilliant book, De Waal defends his thesis that morality is not an invention of religion, but that religion is a cultural scaffolding that builds upon and enhances biologically innate moral rules. Even more, De Waal acknowledges that religion is so deeply engrained in human nature that it has become one of the defining characteristics of humanity. Interestingly, De Waal's conclusions resonate deeply with the findings of the cognitive science of religion (De Waal hints to this resonance himself in the final chapter). I am curious to see where this will go in the future.

Moreover, even though De Waal explicitly admits he is an atheist himself, he argues against the militant new atheists (whose behavior he describes as having a religious zealousness), that religion should perhaps not be done away with before atheism is able to come up with an equally solid and generally convincing scaffolding. Not surprisingly, some of these atheists, such as Sam Harris, have already responded to De Waal's view with ridicule.

This is a highly interesting multi-layered book: it is a book about the biological and evolutionary roots of human morality; it also is a book with numerous anecdotes showing how moral behavior is already displayed by non-human primates and even other animals like elephants and dogs; and it is a philosophical meditation on what it means to be human.

De Waal is an optimist. He dismisses the idea that humans are born evil and that morality is meant to keep our evil tendencies in check. He believes that humans are social animals, being born to cooperate and support each other. But De Waal is also a realist in that he recognizes that such cooperation and support is extremely volatile and difficult to maintain.

I found this book a delightful read. And as a philosopher of religion and a theologian, taking science very seriously, I wholeheartedly agree with De Waal's analysis and conclusions.

Milo? Dumbraci says

O stea nu pentru că autorul este un agnostic sup?rat pe atei, pe care-i tot cărt? în ea (eu fiind unul) în timp ce are în?elegere destul? pentru religio?i, ci pentru că nu pot să spun în recenzie despre ce este. Nici carte în ansamblu, nici fiecare capitol, nu urm?re?te vreo idee clar?, sau m?car un lan? logic de idei ?i deduc?ii, ci bate câmpii între exemple concrete de experimente (interesante, dar insuficient contextualizate ?i teoreizate) ?i diverse chestii care-i trec lui prin cap, plus analiza pe larg a unui tablou de Bosch...

