

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

de Waal, F. (2014). *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates*, New York: Norton. 289 pages. \$27.95. ISBN: 978-0-393-07377-5

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When E. O. Wilson introduced the new field of sociobiology in the 1970s, he drew upon his observations of the natural world, in particular social insects such as ants. We have learned a good deal from considering how behavior develops in the context of natural selection. Our understanding of altruism, for example, has been enhanced by this scientific approach to observation and interpretation. When it comes to understanding human nature, systematic observation of other mammals, and in particular of other primates, yields more valuable insights than observations of social insects. In this book, Franz de Waal recounts observations by himself and others, and muses on morality, goodness, and religion.

De Waal has been named among *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people. I have been reading his books for years, and I always make a point of attending his presentations when I attend one of the annual meetings of the American Psychological Association. He is a good speaker and a good writer, and he addresses big questions well.

De Waal describes observed behavior patterns in primates to consider how humans' sense of morality developed. He describes female chimpanzees dragging reluctant males toward each other to make up after a fight, and high-ranking males regularly acting as impartial arbiters to settle disputes in the community. "I take these hints of *community concern* as a sign that the building blocks of morality are older than humanity, and that we don't need God to explain how we got to where we are today" (p. 20). He does not focus on trying to prove whether God exists. Instead, he explores whether morality could – and perhaps did – arise from the bottom up rather than from the top down.

In de Waal's analysis of evolution, everything started simple. Hands derived from frontal fins, and lungs from a swim bladder. That goes for human lungs as well as for other creatures' lungs. And the same goes for emotions and behavior. "The belief that morality somehow escapes this humble origin has been drilled into us by religion and embraced by philosophy. It is sharply at odds, however, with what modern science tells us about the primacy of intuitions and emotions. It is also at odds with what we know about other animals. Some say that animals are what they are, whereas our own

species follows ideals, but this is easily proven wrong. Not because we don't have ideals, but because other species have them, too" (p. 227).

De Waal notes that humans are mammals, a group of animals marked by sensitivity to each other's emotions. He describes animal behavior that shows a sense of fair play. For example, an ape in captivity welcomes a bit of cucumber to eat. But if the same ape is presented with a cucumber while another ape gets a grape, the ape refuses the cucumber and demands a grape.

In the wild, dogs, wolves, and coyotes are pack animals that learn how to get along with others in their pack. De Waal described the work of other researchers who found that canid play is subject to rules, builds trust, requires consideration of the other, and teaches young how to behave. During play, adults sometimes let a pup "win," and all the animals learn to control their bites so they do not hurt others in their pack.

De Waal describes concepts of fairness and justice emerging from observations of apes, monkeys, dogs, and other mammals. For de Waal, it is easy to see how these basic concepts provide the underpinnings for more complex moral reasoning among humans. In looking at human patterns, de Waal notes that although a sense of morality applied within one's group may come easy—it appears to be part of human nature—broader morality requires use of human intellect. "Even though I believe that morality is firmly rooted in the emotions, biology has barely prepared us for rights and obligations on the scale of the modern world. We evolved as group animals, not global citizens" (p. 235).

Ultimately, de Waal's message is optimistic. "Everything science has learned in the last few decades argues against the pessimistic view that morality is a thin veneer over a nasty human nature. On the contrary, our evolutionary background lends a massive helping hand without which we would never have gotten this far" (p. 240).

Implications for Forensic Practice

My general expectation is that anything that helps us have a more accurate understanding of human nature is likely to assist us in our work as forensic psychologists. The more we understand the species with which we work, the better our perspective and the better our decisions.

Although I do not currently provide treatment to inmates or forensic patients, I imagine that the ideas in this book could provide food for thought for forensic treatment providers. Perhaps de Waal's perspective could be useful for people treating humans with apparently impaired (or nonexistent) senses of morality.

Coincidentally, while reading this book, I watched an episode of *Democracy Now!* that included interviews of a psychiatry professor and a correctional deputy regarding prison practices. The psychiatrist, Dr. James Gilligan, stated, "Zookeepers are not allowed to

keep zoo animals in the kind of housing that we put human beings in.”¹ The results, he says, are counterproductive. I suspect that comparative psychology can not only help us understand human nature, but also help us gain perspective on humans in captivity.

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¹ http://www.democracynow.org/2014/4/1/treating_humans_worse_than_animals_prison