

TAMING THE BEAST

A review of Frans De Waal (2013) *The Bonobo and the Atheist. In Search of Humanism Among the Primates.*

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Frans de Waal has written numerous articles and books about primate research. In *The Bonobo and the Atheist* he discusses the findings of this research in relation to religion. Apart from referring extensively to primate research conducted by himself and others, the author discusses paintings of the Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch and he draws on his experience of growing up in the south of the Netherlands at a time when the Catholic church was still quite influential.

In the first chapter, *Earthly delights*, De Waal describes how the debate between science and religion is not decided by evidence. All the available evidence supports evolution and natural selection, but the discussion between science and religious fundamentalists continues. De Waal expresses his weariness of people who state that their faith is the only thing preventing them being cruel towards others. According to De Waal this cannot be true because natural selection encouraged the development of empathy in all mammals, including humans, and empathy is a barrier against being cruel.

The title of the first chapter refers to a painting by Bosch in which sex and other sorts of pleasures are depicted on one part of the painting and the clergy on the other part. De Waal claims that it might have been clear to Bosch that there was nothing wrong in principle with these earthly delights. According to De Waal religion does not cause empathy in humans and many activities considered sinful by various religions are not necessarily bad.

In *Goodness explained*, the second chapter, De Waal describes how he has argued against the so-called veneer theory all his life. The veneer theory implies that humans are selfish and competitive and that they only have a superficial outer layer of moral behaviour, which can disappear quite quickly. De Waal asserts that mammals have a genuine altruistic impulse. He admits that it is a bit speculative, but he thinks that the caring behaviour started with mothers being biologically programmed to look after their offspring and getting a 'warm glow' from doing this.

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Bonobos in the family tree is the title of the third chapter and De Waal further elaborates on his theory that empathy is not uniquely human and certainly not something implanted in humans by religion. Neanderthals looked after sick members of their tribe and so do chimpanzees and bonobos. Some human DNA is shared with chimpanzees and not with bonobos and the other way around. Therefore, there must have been a common ancestor to chimpanzees and bonobos, which was not a human ancestor, but there also have been shared ancestors of bonobos, chimpanzees and humans who already did care for conspecifics.

In the fourth chapter *Is God dead or just in a coma?* De Waal describes how he is not religious himself but also not dogmatic. His upbringing in the Catholic south of the Netherlands was religious but not very strict. In the predominantly Protestant north of the Netherlands Catholics tended to be quite strict. De Waal argues against dogmatism and claims there are religious and non-religious dogmatists (i.e. militant atheists).

De Waal refers to the problems he experienced when discussing his observations that chimpanzees display reconciliation behaviour after fights. He asserts that the way scientific debates are conducted almost make one think that arguments are not about finding the truth but about winning the argument (MERCIER and SPERBER, 2011). De Waal argues in favour of reflection and states that one should strive at finding the truth.

In *The parable of the good simian*, the fifth chapter, De Waal discusses the results of various ethological studies. Humans have often underestimated animals on the basis of negative experimental test results, while there were flaws in the design of the experiments. For example, elephants can recognise themselves in a mirror, provided researchers make sure that the mirror is large enough for elephants to see themselves. Elephants can use tools, but they are unlikely to use their trunk, because then their nasal passages are blocked and they can no longer smell or feel.

Chimpanzees care about each other's welfare. In a carefully designed experiment they were more likely to choose a token which benefited both themselves and another chimpanzee than a token which only benefited themselves. Even rats help another rat to escape from a cage before eating chocolate. Therefore, helping somebody in need is a biological norm, not a religious norm. However, chimpanzees were more likely to choose a token which benefited both themselves and another chimpanzee, but they did not choose that token all the time. De Waal did not give an evolutionary explanation for this, but one could argue that evolution has selected for helping conspecifics but also for getting more resources than conspecifics.

In the sixth chapter, *Ten commandments too many*, De Waal makes clear that there are many 'rules' in primates groups. There are not only humans who have to obey rules and are punished for not obeying them. Chimpanzees and bonobos punish rule violations and seem to feel guilty, if they have violated a rule themselves.

De Waal explains that chimpanzees can do a lot of planning and they are able to control their impulses. He claims this is an argument against Kitcher who stated that chimpanzees are 'wantons'. What De Waal does not make clear here, is that

this argument depends on the definition of wanton. In the original article by FRANKFURT (1971) a wanton can do planning, but is unable to reflect upon his desires. A wanton does not have second-order desires in Frankfurt's terminology. De Waal did not provide any evidence that chimpanzees have second-order desires and this seems unlikely. Therefore, the difference between DE Waal and Kitcher is probably more a matter of how to define wantons than a real difference of opinion.

Emotions guide human and primate behaviour, including moral behaviour. The Ten Commandments but also philosophical principles such as the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers have their exceptions and cannot be applied in every situation. De Waal argues that a moral system should be grounded in biology.

In the seventh chapter, *The God Gap*, De Waal explains how both humans and chimpanzees are aware of death, but it is unclear whether non-human primates are aware of their own death. Maybe awareness of their own death has encouraged humans to become religious. However, other explanations are possible as well. Belonging to a community is beneficial for humans and this seems to be something religions can provide. In northern Europe there is now a massive experiment going on whereby children no longer get a religious upbringing. If biological mechanisms determine human behaviour and not religion, societies will not change much.

In the last chapter, *Bottom-up Morality*, De Waal repeats his argument that not reason but emotions (shaped by natural selection) are driving moral behaviour. Chimpanzees respect ownership and a chimpanzee higher in rank will accept the ownership of a lower rank chimpanzee who has found something valuable. Chimpanzees, capuchin monkeys and even dogs have some idea of fairness about proper rewards for tasks. They will not do something, if they know that another chimpanzee, monkey or dog gets a higher reward for the same task. Religion latched on to these selected-for functions, which were already present in humans and did not introduce morality.

The Bonobo and the Atheist is an interesting book, well written and, although De Waal is critical of what he describes as evolutionary guesswork, overall the book is broadly in favour of evolutionary psychology. The author makes the prediction (p. 103) that in fifty years from now Darwin's portrait will hang in every psychology department.

De Waal emphasized that dogmatism can have adverse consequences and that critical thinking is important for scientific progress. On the other hand, the consequences of evolutionary theory are radical, namely that humans and animals are just there to enhance the replication of their genes. If one wants to follow strict rational argument, it is difficult to sustain a middle ground (STANOVICH, 2004), and this is not about winning the argument (MERCIER and SPERBER, 2011). But then maybe I am more inclined to say this because I grew up in the north of Netherlands where Protestants bought bread from the Protestant baker and Catholics from the Catholic baker. This illustrates how *The Bonobo and the Atheist* certainly gives food for thought.

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