

Godly and Godless Morality

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

By Frans de Waal, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 289 pp., Hardcover, \$27.95.

What do bonobos and atheists have in common? Neither believes in God, but for different reasons. Whereas *Homo sapiens* live in a symbolic niche comprising a wide variety of emergent communal symbolically mediated beliefs, values, and social codes, including ideals and standards of moral and ethical behavior, bonobos and other nonhuman beings appear not to conceive of ethereal intangible beings that can counsel, punish and reward them with a happy existence after corporeal demise or a hellish afterlife for selfish, hurtful behavior toward fellow beings. Bonobos clearly recognize lifeless versus living others and can engage in a great variety of societies that cohere via socially learned behaviors that include awareness of the needs and agency of group members, but like atheists, they need not involve spiritual beings, were they capable of doing so (Tuttle 2014, pp. 588-597).

This, Frans de Waal's tenth book, is more breezy and rambling than prior opera: a curious mix of anecdotes, art criticism, autobiographical snippets, conclusions from experiments on captive bonobos, chimpanzees, elephants and monkeys, personal experiences, impressions of particular persons and opinions based on them. He self-describes to be an apatheist, albeit one who respects other spiritual persons who are members of formal religious institutions and nonsubscribers to formal religions, who nevertheless believe that there is something more than that which can be explained by

scientific methods or philosophical cogitations. De Waal (2011) presented the essence of *The Bonobo and the Atheist* in a delightful 17-minute Ted Talk, which I highly recommend.

De Waal's argument for "bottom-up" instead of heaven-sent morality is reasonable. Indeed, at least one Catholic priest —Father Andrew Geeley— was convinced by de Waal's *Good Natured* (1996), which I invited him to review for the *International Journal of Primatology*. It places him among a long line of secular humanists, like Julian Huxley, who caused quite a stir on Thanksgiving Day, 1959, when he invoked his creed of scientific humanism (1939, pp. 127-136) from the pulpit of Rockefeller Memorial Chapel during the centennial celebration of the publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. This operatic event, organized by imaginative anthropologist Sol Tax not only enhanced the status of anthropology and evolutionary biology at the University of Chicago and other institutions in the USA but also caused Christian fundamentalists to coalesce and to increase political opposition to teaching evolution in US schools. The strong reaction was catalyzed by heavy media coverage of Huxley's Convocation address —"The Evolutionary Vision"— wherein he proffered that because religion is subject to the laws of evolution it was rapidly becoming obsolete and would eventually evolve itself out of existence (Pavalich, n.d.).

De Waal (p. 172) recognizes two basic levels of morality: "one-on-one morality" in animals that recognize how their behavior affects others, thereby facilitating constructive social relationships between individuals; and community concern, whose "goal is harmony within the larger group." He acknowledges that the latter "is the level at which human morality begins to depart from anything else...even though some animals show rudimentary forms of community concern."

Based on experiments with captive capuchins De Waal (p. 232) concluded they exhibit “first-order fairness,” i.e., they became upset when one received a less desirable food reward than that of its neighbor for performing the same task; but, unlike humans, they never exhibited second-order fairness, viz. sharing the better reward with the individual that had not been rewarded equally. The entertaining 1-minute cine piece meant to illustrate capuchin first-order-fairness (de Waal 2011) is open to simpler explanations of the grape-deprived capuchin’s behavior. For example, it simply wanted a grape and, were there no partition between them, the teased monkey probably would have gone directly for the grapes.

In many social species, community cohesion is vital to survival of individuals. In *Pan* species, it is maintained by individuals seemingly understanding the plight of others (empathy) and consoling them, reconciliation after dust-ups, assisting one another (altruism), and occasionally sharing prized foods. De Waal is on solid ground when he claims that such behaviors in (Chimpanzees (*Pan* spp.)) probably characterized ancestral species and groups of prehistoric *Homo sapiens*.

Clearly, given the vicissitudinous environments in which they foraged and sought shelter at night, our terrestrial social ancestors must have been able to live cooperatively in relative tranquility. They probably also had greater opportunities to move away from competitive or hostile neighboring groups because there was much more habitable territory available in the Plio-Pleistocene (Tuttle 2014, pp. 591; 593-597).

Devout Christians of many denominations and practitioners of other formal religions should have no fear that de Waal’s research and ideas based upon them will rapidly accelerate the demise of Yankee moral codes and belief in God. As a Christian participant observer into my late teens, followed by two decades attempting to be an

atheist, and then participation in the music ministry at a wide variety of churches over the past 30 years, I aver that the bonding of congregations based on love of God and one another are substantive enough to withstand the sarcastic remarks and mockery of professed atheists who command notable space in print media and on the airways.

Further, although some religious communities seem to be (but fewer actually are) basically united by hate and fear of rival belief systems —both religious and secular— closer examination reveals the communities to be bound by “mutuality of being” (Sahlins 2013, ix) based on care for one another and projects to assist persons less fortunate than themselves at home and elsewhere on the globe.

In brief, I proffer the author 3 cucumber slices for his too liberal use of anecdotes and 5 grapes for his fairness toward people of faith and atheists and promotion of the gentler qualities of nonhuman beings.

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