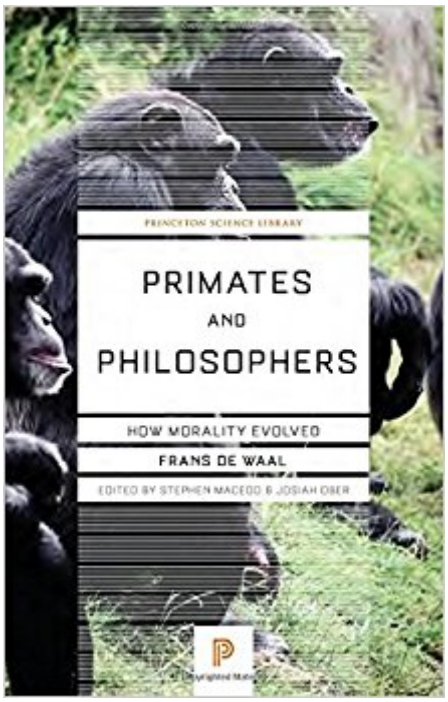
Primates And Philosophers: How Morality Evolved (Princeton Science Library)



Synopsis

Can virtuous behavior be explained by nature, and not by human rational choice? "It’s the animal in us," we often hear when we’ve been bad. But why not when we’re good? Primates and Philosophers tackles this question by exploring the biological foundations of one of humanity’s most valued traits: morality. In this provocative book, renowned primatologist Frans de Waal argues that modern-day evolutionary biology takes far too dim a view of the natural world, emphasizing our "selfish" genes and reinforcing our habit of labeling ethical behavior as humane and the less civilized as animalistic. Seeking the origin of human morality not in evolution but in human culture, science insists that we are moral by choice, not by nature. Citing remarkable evidence based on his extensive research of primate behavior, de Waal attacks "Veneer Theory," which posits morality as a thin overlay on an otherwise nasty nature. He explains how we evolved from a long line of animals that care for the weak and build cooperation with reciprocal transactions. Drawing on Darwin, recent scientific advances, and his extensive research of primate behavior, de Waal demonstrates a strong continuity between human and animal behavior. He probes issues such as anthropomorphism and human responsibilities toward animals. His compelling account of how human morality evolved out of mammalian society will fascinate anyone who has ever wondered about the origins and reach of human goodness. Based on the Tanner Lectures de Waal delivered at Princeton University’s Center for Human Values in 2004, Primates and Philosophers includes responses by the philosophers Peter Singer, Christine M. Korsgaard, and Philip Kitcher and the science writer Robert Wright. They press de Waal to clarify the differences between humans and other animals, yielding a lively debate that will fascinate all those who wonder about the origins and reach of human goodness.

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Customer Reviews

Celebrated primatologist de Waal expands on his earlier work in Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals to argue that human traits of fairness, reciprocity and altruism develop through natural selection. Based on his 2004 Tanner Lectures at Princeton, this book argues that our morality grows out of the social instincts we share with bonobos, chimpanzees and apes. De Waal criticizes what he calls the "veneer theory," which holds that human ethics is simply an overlay masking our "selfish and brutish nature." De Waal draws on his own work with primates to illustrate the evolution of morality. For example, chimpanzees are more favorably disposed to others who have performed a service for them (such as grooming) and more likely to share their food with these individuals. In three appendixes, de Waal ranges briefly over anthropomorphism, apes and a theory of mind, and animal rights. The volume also includes responses to de Waal by Robert Wright, Christine M. Korsgaard, Philip Kitcher and Peter Singer. Although E.O. Wilson and Robert Wright have long contended that altruism is a product of evolution, de Waal demonstrates through his empirical work with primates the evolutionary basis for ethics. (Oct.) Copyright Ã Â© Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

It was not until a year and a half after his voyage on board the Beagle that Charles Darwin first came face to face with an ape. He was standing by the giraffe house at the London Zoo on a warm day in late March of 1838. The zoo had just acquired an orangutan named Jenny. One of the keepers was teasing her—showing her an apple, refusing to hand it over. Poor Jenny "threw herself on her back, kicked & cried, precisely like a naughty child," Darwin wrote in a letter to his sister. In the secret notebooks that he kept after the voyage, Darwin was speculating about evolution from every angle, including the emotional, and he was fascinated by Jenny’s tantrum. What is it like to be an ape? Does an orangutan’s frustration feel a lot like ours? Might she cherish some sense of right and wrong? Will an ape despair because her keeper is breaking the rules—because he is just not playing fair? Our own species has been talking, volubly and passionately, for at least 50,000 years, and it’s a fair guess that arguments about right and wrong were prominent in our conversation pretty much from the beginning. We started writing things down 5,000 years ago, and some of our first texts were codes of ethics. Our

innumerable volumes of scripture and law, our Departments of Justice, High Courts, Low Courts, and Courts of Common Pleas are unique in the living world. But did we human beings invent our feeling for justice, or is it part of the package of primal emotions that we inherited from our ancestors? In other words: Did morality evolve? Dutch-born psychologist, ethologist and primatologist Frans de Waal has spent his career watching the behavior of apes and monkeys, mostly captive troupes in zoos. As a young student, he sat on a wooden stool day after day for six years, observing a colony of chimpanzees at the Arnhem Zoo. Today he watches chimpanzees from an observation post at Emory University’s Yerkes National Primate Research Center in Atlanta and at other zoos and primate centers. His work, along with primatologist Jane Goodall’s, has helped lift Darwin’s conjectures about the evolution of morality to a new level. He has documented tens of thousands of instances of chimpanzee behavior that among ourselves we would call Machiavellian and about as many moments that we would call altruistic, even noble. In his scientific papers and popular books (including Chimpanzee Politics, Our Inner Ape and Good Natured), he argues that Darwin was correct from that first glimpse of Jenny at the zoo. Sympathy, empathy, right and wrong are feelings that we share with other animals; even the best part of human nature, the part that cares about ethics and justice, is also part of nature. De Waal’s latest book, Primates and Philosophers, is based on the Tanner Lectures that he delivered at Princeton University’s Center for Human Values in 2004. In this book he tries—as he has many times before—to refute a popular caricature of Darwinism. Many people assume that to be good, be nice, behave, play well with others, we have to rise above our animal nature. It’s a dog-eat dog world out there—or, as the Romans put it, homo homini lupus, man is wolf to man (a curious proverb for a people whose founding myth was the suckling by a wolf of the infant twins Romulus and Remus). Thomas Henry Huxley, Darwin’s self-appointed bulldog, promoted this dark, cold view of life in a famous lecture, Evolution and Ethics. "The ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it," he declared. In Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov, Ivan puts it another way: if there is no God, then we are lost in a moral chaos. "Everything is permitted." De Waal calls this "Veneer Theory." In this view, human morality is a thin crust on a churning urn of boiling funk. In reality, de Waal reminds us, dogs are social, wolves are social, chimps and macaques are social, and we ourselves are "social to the core." Goodness, generosity and genuine kindness come just as naturally to us as meaner feelings. We didn’t have to invent compassion. When our ancestors began writing down the first codes of conduct, precepts, laws and commandments, they were elaborating on feelings that evolved thousands or

even millions of years before they were born. "Instead of empathy being an endpoint," de Waal writes, "it may have been the starting point." Back in the 1950s and 1960s, when animal psychologists talked about "sympathy" and "empathy," they always put those words between quotation marks, de Waal notes. Now he wants to take away the quotation marks. He describes one of his best-known demonstrations that animals care about fairness. In the experiment, he had pairs of capuchin monkeys perform simple tasks in their cages. For successfully completing each task they would get a reward, sometimes a slice of cucumber, sometimes a grape. All the monkeys would work for and eat the cucumber slices, but they preferred grapes. If one monkey kept getting paid in cucumber and it could see that its partner in the next cage was getting grapes, it would get mad, like Darwin’s Jenny. After a while the monkey would refuse to eat or throw the cucumber right out of the cage. Is de Waal right about all this? In the second half of Primates and Philosophers, his arguments are critiqued by a series of commentators, all of whom have written important studies of evolutionary ethics. They cite Freud, Kant, Hume, Nietzsche and Adam Smith. They circle and circle around those pairs of capuchin monkeys: "A capuchin rejects a cucumber when her partner is offered a grape—is she protesting the unfairness, or is she just holding out for a grape?" writes Christine M. Korsgaard, Arthur Kingsley Porter Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University. "Of course, if the lucky capuchin were to throw down the grape until his comrade had a similar reward, that would be very interesting!" writes Philip Kitcher, John Dewey Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University. They disagree, they discuss, they bicker a little, like all primates and philosophers. They illuminate not only ageless questions of ethics but also current concerns such as the Geneva convention and "why universal empathy is such a fragile proposal," as de Waal writes in his response to his critics. By the end of the book it seems clear that we can no longer look at morality as a sort of civilized veneer on a cold and selfish animal, even though that view goes back long before Darwin went to the zoo. Its origin lies in the Western concept of original sin—when Adam and Eve ate their first apple. Jonathan Weiner won a Pulitzer Prize in 1995 for The Beak of the Finch. He teaches science writing in Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is a great book if only because it provides views from five different scholars. "In the Tanner Lectures on Human Values that became the lead essay in this book, Frans de Waal brings his decades of work with primates, and his habit of thinking deeply about the meaning of evolution, to bear upon a fundamental question about human morality. Three distinguished philosophers and a prominent student of evolutionary psychology then respond to the way de Waal’s question is

framed, and to his answer. Their essays are at once appreciative of de Waal's endeavor and critical of certain of his conclusions. De Waal responds to his critics in an afterword."The main thrust of de Waal's essay is what he calls "Veneer Theory," which is the argument that morality is only a thin veneer overlaid on an amoral or immoral core. The first to respond is Robert Wright (The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life), who states that he is in fact not an adherent to de Waal's Veneer Theory. Second is Christine M. Korsgaard (Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity), who denies that Veneer Theory is even real. Third is Philip Kitcher (Living with Darwin: Evolution, Design, and the Future of Faith (Philosophy in Action)), who generally attacks Veneer Theory as not being relevant to bridging the divide between primates and humans. The fourth, last, and my personal favorite, comes from Peter Singer (The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty). Singer, I believe, does the greatest justice to the entire argument and I happen to agree with almost everything he says. Singer states, "The issue, then, is not so much whether we accept the Veneer Theory of morality, but rather how much of morality is veneer, and how much is underlying structure. Those who claim that all of morality is a veneer laid over a basically individualistic, selfish human nature, are mistaken. Yet a morality that goes beyond our own group and shows impartial concern for all human beings might well be seen as a veneer over the nature we share with other social mammals."In conclusion, I think this is a valuable book and do recommend it. I would also recommend getting Michael Tomasello'sÃ Â Why We Cooperate (Boston Review Books)Ã Â as it is similar in nature and style. Lastly, I would also mention that Frans de Waal mentions a research experiment in which he "demonstrates" primate empathy, but as Tomasello points out, "But studies [contra de Waal] from three different laboratories in the case of the capuchins, and from our laboratory in the case of the chimpanzees, have all found that this is a spurious result in that it does not depend on a social comparison at all. One of the studies found that simply seeing and expecting to receive the grape makes the cucumber look less attractive to chimpanzees. No other individuals need to be around. There is no social comparison going on, only food comparison. So nothing related to norms of fairness are at work either (pg. 32)." Hope that helps.

Primates and Philosophers is not a comprehensive analysis of the origins of morality, but focuses on one minutia of the subject: whether human morality goes deep into our evolutionary past or is new with the arrival of our bulbous brains and cultures. The answer depends on how morality is defined. If moral behavior falls under the definition of morality, it seems clear that other primates such as chimps share at least rudimentary moral behavior. But if morality is defined as abstract

thinking about right and wrong and living by principles derived abstractly, then morality must be pretty recent in humans' evolutionary past.De Waal quotes Richard Dawkins as saying "we, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators" and "[we are] nicer than is good for our selfish genes." De Waal takes this as lending support of what he calls 'veneer theory', the position that morality is "a cultural overlay, a thin veneer hiding an otherwise selfish and brutish nature." Having read seven of Richard Dawkins' books, I feel like I understand his views pretty well, and I don't think he would agree with veneer theory at all. I think there is some ambiguity here between proper domain vs. actual domain. The proper domain is the conditions under which a behavior evolved, and the actual domain is the conditions under which the behavior is manifest. Sometimes they are the same, sometimes not. For example, the proper domain of a moth's light-sensitive navigation system is a light source in the dark that an ancient moth would have encountered, such as the moon. But today, the actual domain may be a light bulb, candle, or bug zapper. The navigation system doesn't work correctly when the source of light is nearby, and it causes moths to spiral into light sources, sometimes to their deaths. Our genes (and moth genes) provide rules-of-thumb that aren't necessarily survival-enhancing in every conceivable actual domain; it is only necessary that these rules were useful on average to our ancestors in our evolutionary past. So saying that we are "nicer than is good for our selfish genes" in the world we currently live in, which is much different than our evolutionary past, is not to imply some mysterious cause outside of nature accounts for this deviation. Similarly, every time we use contraception we are "rebelling against the tyranny of the selfish replicators" because the proper domain (in the technical sense) of sex is procreation, but the actual domain may be recreation. Having as many offspring as possible would be beneficial to our genes, but we can obviously choose not to do so.In a table on page 22, de Waal compares veneer theory to his own theory of the evolution of ethics. Under veneer theory, he lists Richard Dawkins as an advocate and states that the empirical evidence in favor of that theory is "none." This is a textbook straw man, and I am confident that at least one of the alleged "advocates" is no advocate at all.On the next page, de Waal hastily concludes that Steven Pinker's brilliant work on human language skills requires "postulating discontinuities" in evolution and thus is saltatory. Apparently he takes it as self-evident that a language module in the brain cannot possibly evolve by gradual degrees, although I'm baffled as to why he thinks that.In Christine Korsgaard's section, she writes "it is absurd to think that nonhuman animals are motivated by self-interest...acting for the sake of your best interests requires the capacity to be motivated by the abstract conception of your overall long-term good." [p 102] Self interest, I think, can be pretty simply defined as the most effective way of spreading your genes.

There is no need to have a conscious conception of what that consists of because the genes that program the best gene-spreading behavior are automatically propagated. I found Korsgaard's chapter to be lacking in scientific rigor. She seemed to make conclusions about empirical questions based on casual observation and reasoning. However, she did provide a clear definition of morality which was lacking from de Waal's part.In Phillip Kitcher's section, he defines four dimensions of 'altruism space': intensity (the degree to which one meets the needs or desires of others), range (how high can the stakes get before one acts selfishly), extent (the set of individuals one acts altruistically toward), and skill (ability to discern the desires of the beneficiary). He agrees that non-human primate morality lies somewhere in the defined 'altruism space' away from pure selfishness, but until we have a clear definition of the ideal moral individual with respect to these four dimensions, "it's premature to claim that human morality is a 'direct outgrowth' of tendencies [non-human primates] share." [p 129] But if non-human primate morality differs by degree and not by kind (as implied here) is it not reasonable to conjecture that human morality is a direct outgrowth of the tendencies of primates?Kitcher goes on to say that when chimpanzees are faced with an opportunity for altruism, their impulses for selfishness and altruism duke it out and they are ultimately "vulnerable to whichever impulse happens to be dominant at a particular moment." But I am far from convinced that humans are much different. Since when have we humans overcome our impulses? As Peter Singer argues later in the book, our emotional impulses constitute a large part of our morality. In those rare cases where abstract thinking overturns our gut reactions to moral questions, one could argue we are not acting on impulse but on reason. But those cases probably represent a vast minority of moral judgments. As de Waals mentioned, moralistic and altruistic intuitions come from deep in the evolutionarily ancient part of the brain, and conscious rationalization of those intuitions does not mean we've overcome them. Steven Pinker has revealed a world in which unconscious brain processes have profound impacts on our thoughts and decisions even though, by definition, we don't notice them. But we surely notice when they're gone, such as in people who have suffered damage to various parts of the brain, leaving certain parts of the intellect unscathed while some capacities are completely destroyed.Peter Singer's section was the highlight of this book. I found his section better-argued than the others and his explanations more compelling. "Like the other social mammals, we have automatic, emotional responses to certain kinds of behavior, and these responses constitute a large part of our morality. Unlike the other social mammals, we can reflect on our emotional responses, and choose to reject them." [p 149] "Perhaps we do so only on the basis of other emotional responses, but the process involves reason and abstraction." Singer points out that this ability to reflect and abstract is evolved not just

to make moral choices but is useful in many other parts of life as well.

In a series of lectures, De Waal attacks the notion that human morality is just a thin veneer of recent invention provided by the intellect, which barely hides a brutal animal, and is unique to humans. He supports his attack with data and observations from his own and from other scientists' research on primates, particularly on capuchin monkeys, chimpanzees and bononbos.Robert Wright, Christine Koorsgard, Philip Kitcher and Peter Singer respond to De Waal's arguments with their own observations, and De Waal responds with an final argument to close the book.Most of the counterarguments agree with DeWaal's hypothesis that the basis of morality can be observed time and again in other species, and that empathy, sympathy and the rudiments of self-sacrifice are already present in the higher primates. They criticize De Waal's oversimplification of their positions. However Koorsgard, with the longest and densest response entry, seems recursive, and her final position is not clearly far from "veneer theory".This book, along with the previous books and journal articles by Frans De Waal and other scientists and philosophers, adds tremendous weight to the idea that by studying other species, especially our closest relatives, we can understand much more about our psychology, our cognitive abilities (including morality), and our place in nature.However, this is not the best book for those who want to start getting information about this subject. De Waal's "Chimpanzee Politics", "Good Natured", "Peacemaking Among Primates", "Our Inner Ape" and "Bonobo: The Forgotten Ape" are much better starters into De Waals research and hypotheses.

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