

# A Gentler, Kinder Darwinism

## SCIENCE

### GOOD NATURED

The Origins of Right and Wrong  
In Humans and Other Animals

By Frans De Waal

(Harvard University Press: \$24.95, 384 pp.)

Reviewed by Richard A. Shweder

**G**ood Natured" is a tale about the theory of evolution told with a happy face. It tries to persuade us that, despite the fact that "nature is red in fang and claw," it is possible to be a Darwinian and to believe in the goodness of nature at the same time.

The book is also a sparkling master work in a new humanistic (some might say "romantic") branch of biology called "cognitive ethology." These days in the academy, those who speculate most about the thoughts, feelings, desires and values of animals are not the philosophers, poets and creative writers but rather a group of naturalists, zoologists, psychologists and biological scientists who are convinced that monkeys and apes and other nonhuman animals are persons too and that Rene Descartes was quite wrong when he said that only human beings have a conscience, a mental life and a soul. It is ironic that cognitive ethology has become popular at precisely the moment when computer scientists have become convinced that our own minds can be simulated by a machine and that if we could actually experience the way our brain functions we wouldn't find a person there at all.

Frans De Waal, a Dutch-born zoologist who is a research scientist at Emory University's Yerkes Regional Primate Center, is perhaps the most literate, entertaining and soulful of the cognitive ethologists. It is hard not to be charmed by an author who says of "Mama," the oldest female ape at the Arnhem Zoo, who moves her arthritic bones to greet him at the moat's edge with pants and grunts: "Mama and I go back a long way."

In "Good Natured," De Waal takes his humanizing project a step further, employing the rich lexicon of human moral concepts as figures of speech to depict and lend meaning to the behavior of nonhuman animals. Nonhuman animals can't tell us about their mental states, and we might not believe them if they could. But they do grunt, gesture and move. Many of their sounds and behaviors strike us as familiar and recognizable from a human point of view.

De Waal invites us to react to the behavior of chimpanzees, gorillas, macaques and baboons as if we were witness to such intentional acts as "sympathy," "gratitude," "reciprocity," "love," "forgiveness," "duty," "obligation," "testimony," "justice," "retribution" and "altruistic care," even unbiased arbitration. He wants to know whether elephants, who "return for years to the spot where a relative dies, touching and inspecting the relics," miss each other. He wants to know whether they recall and think about how he or she was during life.

"Good Natured" depicts the lovable, heart-warming and humane side of animal behavior, based on anecdotes and observations from the jungle, the zoo, the experimental lab and the game preserve. It is the story of the chimpanzee pals who attend to the needs of their wounded friend, the old ring-tailed lemur grandmother who teaches a negligent adult daughter how she ought to take care of her kids, the two golden monkeys who have been bitter enemies but who decide to bury the hatchet and hold hands in reconciliation. The author challenges the skeptical reader to say precisely "what is different about the way we act that makes us and not any other species moral beings."

In the history of the human consciousness of animals there have been two types of answers to De Waal's question. There is the "pre-modern" answer, which differentiates human and nonhuman animals in terms of some hierarchy of virtue. And there is the "modern" answer. The modern answer draws a distinction between the behavior of humanistic entities (for whom things happen because of mental states) and the behavior of

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SAN DIEGO ZOO

Millions of years of natural selection for mothers who pay close attention to their offspring have promoted strong nurturing tendencies in mammal females, De Waal writes. Above, a bonobo chimpanzee with her daughter.

mechanistic entities (in which things happen because of material or physical causes) and it then places human animals and nonhuman animals on opposite sides of that divide.

The pre-modern answer goes like this: Nonhuman animals have a soul and complex mental life but just don't know how to speak. This view is well-presented around the world in the court of common-sense opinion, where various species of animals have standing as moral beings and are held accountable for their (moral and immoral) actions, praised or blamed and judged to be either dignified or ignoble.

Of course, the moral reputation of particular species is not necessarily the same in all societies. In India, where many people do not eat animals precisely because they believe that animals bear a soul, cows (who "mother" human beings with their milk) are near the top of the moral hierarchy while dogs (who shamelessly copulate in public) and owls (who stay up hooting all night making a racket, keep filthy nests and viciously prey on baby crows) are near the bottom. In India it is a curse to tell someone they will be reborn as an owl.

In contrast the modern answer goes something like this: Moral beings are those who feel obliged to regulate their behavior because they recognize that certain principles ("treat like cases alike") are valid and thus ought to be upheld. That is what it means to have a "conscience." Animals are not moral beings because they do not do things for reasons, have no conception of the long-term consequences of their actions and do not aim to promote some idea of the good. Their behavior is not motivated by a self-conscious desire to be justified in what they do. They do not criticize themselves, ruminate over their transgressions or come clean and confess their sins. They can't talk because they lack the conceptual capacities that support both language and morality (not to mention religion). They are more like mechanistic entities than humanistic entities. At best it is a convenient shorthand or a manner of speaking, at worst a highly misleading choice of words, to say that nonhuman animals are "just," "grateful" or "self-sacrificing" or that they take pleasure in recalling the accomplishments of a

dead relative. It is sort of like saying that clouds are "generous" when they give their rain to the Earth or that alarm clocks "know" the time of day.

It is tempting to suggest that De Waal's intellectual temperament is far more pre-modern than modern, which is not necessarily a bad thing. He is quite prepared to praise the behavior of some nonhuman animals (he approves of the "impartiality" of chimpanzees) and to condemn the behavior of others (he thinks that rhesus monkeys are "despots"). All creative scientists practice their trade with poetic license, leaving us to decide whether their similes and metaphors are for real. In this case the final judgment is not yet in.

If you already believe in animism for animals, or if you want to be reassured that there is a validity to your natural inclination to personify the behavior of animals, or if you just don't care whether willows really weep, whether the computer really "wants" to win the chess match, or if you simply want to learn a lot about "the dismantling of despotic hierarchies in the course of hominoid evolution" or the nature of the human propensity to be moved by a moral sense, then you are going to love this provocative, endearing and brilliantly written book.

On the other hand if you are a hard-core modernist, you are probably going to conclude that apes and monkeys are moral beings in the same sense that the person who catches a ball "knows" the quadratic equations for predicting the trajectory of the throw, that is to say in no sense at all. You may even begin to suspect that De Waal's intellectual journey on the path of poetic license is really the infamous middle way between right and wrong.

"Good Natured" is not only a defense of the moral rectitude of beasts. It is also a defense of the moral rectitude of human beings.

Why is such a defense necessary? Well, it turns out that it is not just the creationists who associate the theory of evolution with callous egoism and selfish benefit and think of Darwinism as godless virtue-destroying science. Since the time of "Origin of Species," numerous biologists have argued that Darwin made it possible to be a credible atheist. They have felt moved by their theory to point out that behaviors judged to be vicious by human beings (infidelity, rape, murder, despotic rule) are "abundant in nature" and therefore, according to theory, must be "functional" or "adaptive" for getting one's genes into the next generation. They have harbored a Darwinian suspicion that human moralists are merely self-interested egoists in disguise. They have suggested that, after millions of years in which our ancestors have engaged in a ruthless struggle to be "fit," any behavior judged by human beings to be truly virtuous (sacrifice, fidelity, beneficence, the keeping of promises, the returning of favors) must really be in the service of reproductive success (me and mine), which is the only genuine Darwinian value.

In these pages De Waal tries valiantly, against all odds, to fashion a gentler, kinder Darwinism of the heart. "To give the human conscience a comfortable place within Darwin's theory without reducing human feelings and motives to a complete travesty is one of the greatest challenges to biology today," he writes. He points out that a motive or intention is not the same as the consequence of an act; sexual desire, for example, leads nonhuman animals to reproduce even though the production of progeny is not their conscious aim. Similarly, moral motives and intentions such as sympathy, sacrifice and a sense of fairness can be indirectly consequential for long-term survival even though that is not the moralist's goal. Mother Nature, he argues, has a capacity of room for the goodness we associate with moral intentions, even from a Darwinian point of view philosophical egoism is not a necessary truth.

So far, so good—and quite convincing. If goodness pays, it may do so whether or not you are aware of it, which makes it possible for motives and intentions to be unsullied by selfish interests. Yet given the "good natured" premise of De Waal's book, the reader wants more. If Darwinism is going to come out on the side of the angels, one wants a demonstration that it is only goodness that pays. One wants it to be shown that goodness pays but only if you are not motivated by the payoff (for otherwise the egoists will thrive and they will invest in virtue). Of course no such romantic demonstration is forthcoming. How could it be?

Perhaps De Waal only intends to be character witness

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on the side of the defense in the case of Morality versus Mother Nature and to tilt the testimony a bit more in her favor. He certainly knows that the defendant is amoral, not virtuous, and that she reserves plenty of room for the bad as well as the good. Even those adorable "impartial" chimpanzees turn out to be pitiless predators who viciously tear to pieces the monkeys they devour. Mother Nature is so amoral that De Waal seems unable to tell us how a Darwinian would distinguish a virtuous motive (fidelity, honesty) from a vicious one (infidelity, deception) when both have been selected and regenerated in the

natural world.

He certainly does not tell us what new moral concept a well-spoken ape (or any other nonhuman animal) would introduce into the debate about the character of a good life, except perhaps this: "If you are an ape, it is good to beat up on monkeys." In the end our winsome author seems to want what no one has been able to achieve: a Darwinian answer to the question, "How ought I to behave," which is other than the familiar utilitarian refrain, "If it pays [genetic dividends] it must be good." I still think he gets very high marks for the try.

It is hard to be a Darwinian and believe in the goodness of nature at

the same time. It is so hard that one of the founders of the theory of evolution, Alfred Russell Wallace, eventually came to believe that the human brain (with its rare capacity to compose music, speak English, recognize the meaning of the Ten Commandments and contemplate the idea of divine retribution) was far more powerful than was necessary for survival (you don't need a brain to make it in nature) and far too unique to have been shaped by evolution. He was led to infer existence of a higher intelligence and even to embrace spiritualism. Whether the soulful De Waal will one day follow Wallace's path I cannot say. Read the book and make your own predictions. ■

LOS ANGELES TIMES / BOOK REVIEW