BOOK REVIEW

PRIMATES AND PHILOSOPHERS:
HOW MORALITY EVOLVED

Frans de Waal; Published by: Princeton University Press, 2005
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Primates and Philosophers contains De Waal’s Tanner Lecture, comments by Robert Wright, Christine M. Korsgaard, Philip Kitcher, and Peter Singer, a response by de Waal, and a crisp introduction by Josiah Ober and Stephen Macedo. For those familiar with de Waal’s books on chimpanzees, his brief lecture suffices, but others will need more details and especially the striking examples with which he illustrates his points. They will then approach this new work with the attitude with which Hume examined the reasoning of animals:

Next to the ridicule of denying an evident truth, is that of taking much pains to defend it; and no truth appears to me more evident, than that beasts are endow’d with thought and reason as well as men.¹

It is difficult after reading de Waal to deny that our relatives reason causally, sometimes very cleverly. There was the monkey who retrieved the treat stuck beyond her reach in a plastic tube by taking her baby by the legs and sticking it down the tube. There is the use of limbs to bypass the electrical wiring encircling the trees within the compound so that the chimps could climb to the fresh greenery. The list is long.

Just as difficult to deny is that apes evince behavior that, were they human, would be recognized as moral. A bonobo, Kakowet, saw that several youngsters were in the moat when the keepers started to fill it after cleaning. He ran to the keepers and, through gestures, got them to turn off the water and rescue all the youngsters but one he rescued himself (71). Kuni, another bonobo, carried an apparently stunned starling to the top of a tree and, holding out the bird’s winds, threw it so it could fly (31). She put herself in the bird’s place, “changing places in fancy with the sufferer,” as Adam Smith described it, and then did the right thing.
We would think our children had progressed wonderfully far towards becoming fully moral were they as empathetic and kind to other creatures.

De Waal’s thesis in *Primates and Philosophers* is that our moral behavior has an evolutionary basis. He attributes to Huxley the view that we are essentially evil, or at least self-interested, and that morality is a cultural overlay. Remove the culture, and we revert to type — as in William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. De Waal thinks this Veneer Theory, as he calls it, is fundamentally mistaken. We see the sources of our own moral behavior — our sympathy and empathy, for instance — in the moral behavior of our closest relatives and see that they have evolved cooperative communities where certain behaviors such as reconciliation, reciprocity and impartial dispute resolution are accentuated.

*Primates and Philosophers* is such a wonderful book in part because the critics and de Waal discuss almost the full range of issues which arise that must be addressed before what seems an “evident truth” becomes commonly accepted. Some concern the nature of morality; some concern methodology; some concern what is required to complete de Waal’s theory.

Do apes behave morally? Korsgaard argues they cannot because they lack self-awareness of the grounds of their beliefs and actions, a capacity she thinks uniquely human and necessary for moral autonomy (113, 116). If the capacity to universalize is essential, we have no reason to believe apes can be moral. But that they engage in what for all the world would look to be moral behavior were it performed by human beings is some evidence that self-awareness of the grounds of one’s beliefs and actions is not essential. At issue is the nature of morality: what is required for a being to be moral?

If apes are moral beings of some sort, Singer asks, what is their moral status? Do they have rights? Do we have obligations to them? What kind of moral standing do they have in our moral world — and in theirs?

How can we know that apes behave morally? What may we properly infer from what we observe in the behavior of chimps and bonobos? How do we observe normative behavior — a problem that arises for our behavior as well?

What are we entitled to infer from what we observe in apes? Wright argues that de Waal is likely to claim that a chimp has reasoned that compassion is called for, say, when it could just be that the chimp feels compassion. At issue are the criteria for interpreting observational data.
Even if we had that straight, we would still need to ask what our criteria are for explanatory theories. Does parsimony require that we use the same hypothesis to explain behavior that, were it a human’s, would be clearly labeled moral? Do we risk losing sight of subtle differences if we make that assumption?

If de Waal is correct that our moral behavior has an evolutionary basis, exactly how, Kitcher asks, did we get from the kind of moral behavior evinced by apes that we presumably shared to where we are now morally? What are the evolutionary details? We have a huge gap to fill. Can we fill in the details with anything more than speculation?

The book is short, only 181 pages, and small, the pages only 4” by 6”, but the issues it raises are central to our understanding of morality. De Waal’s observations of chimpanzees and bonobos are so detailed, and the examples he provides so wonderfully striking, that no one can ever again look at these relatives with intellectual or moral indifference. The book is a wonderful teaching tool, the examples catching the students’ imaginations and prompting just the issues the critical essays discuss.

NOTE
