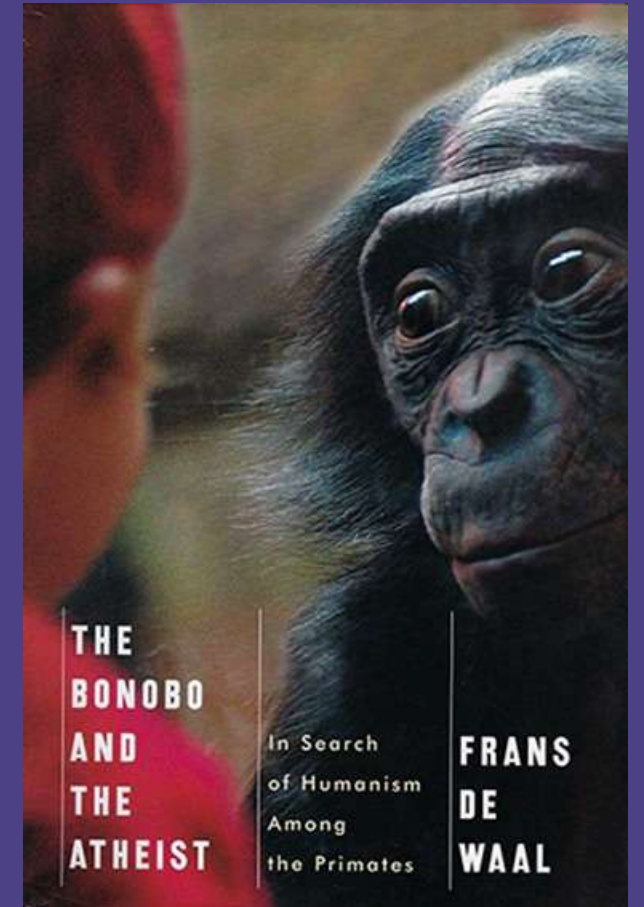


Introduction by David Good

Sunday 8th March 2026



Agenda

- **Philosophical View**
- **Biological View**
- **Frans de Waal**
 - **Short Biography**
 - **Primates and Philosophers**
 - **Opposition to “Veneer Theory”**
 - **The Bonobo and the Atheist**
- **Discussion**

Philosophical View: Morality Grounded in Reason

- **Key thinker: Immanuel Kant (18th Century)**
 - Morality arises from pure practical reason
 - Moral laws are universal, necessary, and independent of emotion or desire
 - Treat people as an end in themselves, never merely as a means to an end
 - Moral worth lies in intentions, not outcomes
- **Contrast with David Hume: morality is grounded in emotions, not reason**
- **Contemporary neo-rationalist philosophers still use Kant's moral framework as one of the main reference points in ethics**

Biological View: Morality as an Evolved Ability

- **Key figures: Bill Hamilton, Robert Trivers, E O Wilson and Richard Dawkins (20th Century)**
 - **Morality emerges from natural selection as an evolved set of psychological abilities**
 - **Morality shapes cooperation, empathy, reciprocity, and group cohesion**
 - **Moral norms vary across cultures due to differing selection pressures**
 - **No guarantee of universality, only recurring patterns such as fairness, reciprocity, and harm avoidance**
 - **Morality is descriptive: explains evolution of moral tendencies**
- **Evolutionary view of morality stood in opposition to the rationalist view**

Frans de Waal (1948 – 2024)

Short Biography

- **Primatologist**
- **Research centred on primate social behaviour, including conflict resolution, cooperation, reciprocity, empathy, and food-sharing in primates**
- **Prolific author and populariser of science – won many awards**
- **Transformed attitudes about emotions and morality in animals**
- **Stood between the ideas of morality grounded in reason and morality as an evolved capability**
- **Considered himself to be a humanist, but not anti-religious**



Experiments with primates

- **Frans de Waal performed many experiments with primates to understand their social behaviour**
- **Others went on to repeat these studies, and to extend them to other mammals**

Fairness Study with Capuchin Monkeys

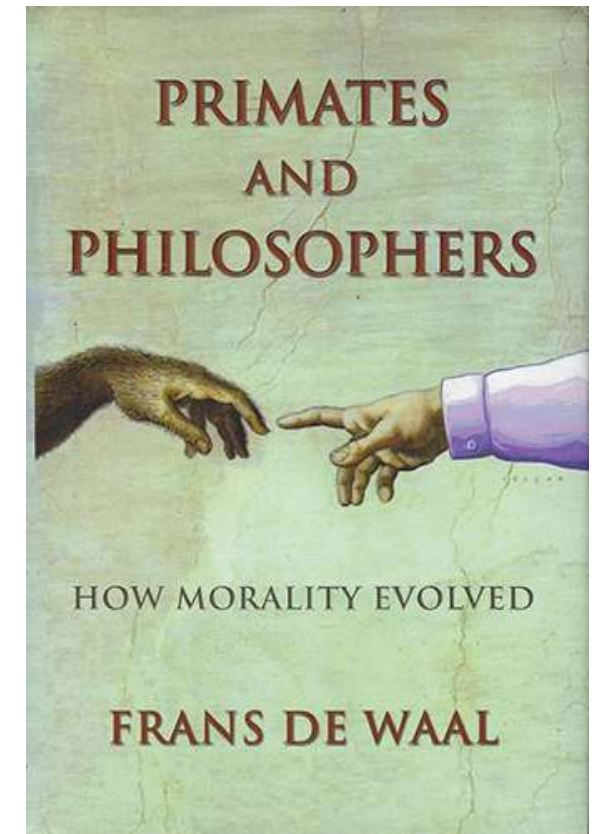


https://www.ted.com/talks/frans_de_waal_moral_behavior_in_animals

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=meiU6TxysCg> < excerpt on rejecting 'unequal pay'

Frans De Waal: Primates and Philosophers (2006)

- Public debate with philosophers
- De Waal opposed a purely rationalist view of morality, and also “Veneer Theory”
- Argued that human morality
 - Is not a cultural invention built from scratch
 - But an extension of evolutionary roots shared with primates – built from building blocks of empathy, reciprocity, conflict resolution and a sense of fairness
- Contrasting approaches
 - Philosophers focus on primate and human differences
 - De Waal emphasises shared characteristics



Frans de Waal

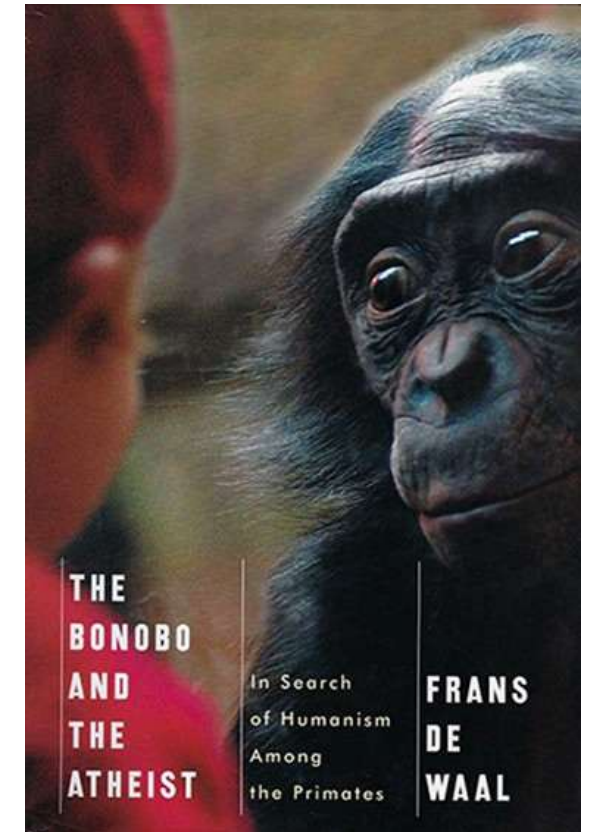
Opposition to “Veneer Theory”

“[The alternative to Veneer Theory] sees morality arise naturally in our species and believes that there are sound evolutionary reasons for the capacities involved. Nevertheless, the theoretical framework to explain the transition from social animal to moral human consists only of bits and pieces. Its foundations are the theories of kin selection and reciprocal altruism, but it is obvious that other elements will need to be added. If one reads up on reputation building, fairness principles, empathy, and conflict resolution, there seems a promising movement toward a more integrated theory of how morality may have come about”

(Frans de Waal, Primates and Philosophers 2006, p53)

Frans De Waal: The Bonobo and the Atheist (2013)

- Human morality is not a cultural invention, but is an extension of deep evolutionary roots shared with other primates
- Discusses religion and morality
 - Believes morality comes from within, part of human nature
 - Sees religion as a cultural system that builds on, channels, and sometimes distorts those instincts
 - Religion strengthens group cohesion, provides moral reminders, emotional comfort and shared identity
- Criticises new Atheists, believing they underestimate the role of religion
- He argues for the development of a theory of morality that is grounded in our evolved human nature – work to be done



Frans de Waal: Morality Grounded in the Emotions

“The view of morality as a set of immutable principles, or laws, that are ours to discover ultimately comes from religion. It doesn't really matter whether it is God, human reason, or science that formulates these laws. All of these approaches share a top-down orientation, their chief premise being that humans don't know how to behave and that someone must tell them. But what if morality is created in day-to-day social interaction, not at some abstract mental level? What if it is grounded in the emotions, which most of the time escape the neat categorizations that science is fond of?”

(Frans de Waal, *The Bonobo and the Atheist*, 2013. P23)

Frans de Waal

On Humanism and Religion

““ . . . humanism is nonreligious, not anti-religious. Tolerance of religion, even if religion is not always tolerant in return, allows humans to focus on what is most important, which is to build a better society based on natural human abilities. The outcome is the ongoing experiment in the West of an increasingly secular society.”

(Frans de Waal, *The Bonobo and the Atheist*, 2013. P237)

Summary

- **Enlightenment Philosophy: a rationalist view of morality**
- **20th Century biology: morality as an evolved capability**
 - Biology explains why we behave in the way we do
 - Reason is required to decide what we should do
 - Animals, lacking reason, can only follow their instincts
- **Frans de Waal**
 - Opposed both rationalist morality and biological “vener theory”
 - Developed an evolutionary view of morality: instincts drive behaviour, and form the emotional basis for deciding what we should do
 - Rationality is used to develop moral codes as an extension of our evolved moral instincts – not in opposition to them

Discussion

- **What do you believe?**
 - **Is morality grounded in reason or is it an evolved ability?**
 - **Do we share moral foundations with other animals?**
 - **Is morality a fixed set of principles or is it “created in day-to-day social interaction, not at some abstract mental level”?**

Thank You