The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates by Frans de Waal
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The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates.


The author’s recent effort offers a calm respite from the cacophony of hooting between the New Atheists and their religious targets. De Waal employs a subtle, nuanced, and multilayered critique with offerings for anyone interested in morality, religion, atheism, science, and animal nature. This volume is also quite funny; de Waal artfully uses humor to make the read as enjoyable as it is thought-provoking.

The author argues that good behavior does not require a top-down moral code inspired by religion, politics, or science. Instead, empathy, the prerequisite feature of morality, can be found readily throughout much of the animal kingdom; therefore, the materials necessary for good behavior are already within us and have been for quite some time. By examining and comparing anecdotal and experimental evidence, de Waal advances the view that the foundations of morality are more widespread than many are willing to admit.

Even upon reading this book with the nagging awareness of how good humans are at anthropomorphizing, how good we are at attributing other beings with mental states (including others’ ability to do the same), how good de Waal is at portraying our nonhuman primate cousins as though they effortlessly reason about other minds, and how suspect anecdotal evidence can often be, I am still impressed by how convincingly the author navigates the riddle of empathy. Just because we recognize it in other animals does not mean we are merely projecting our own abilities onto them. Rather, it strongly suggests that their signals resonate with our own sensibilities precisely because we share cognitive systems designed by natural selection, survey emotional communication in different mammals, which is likely to be the “go-to” reference for years to come. This book contains 20 chapters that discuss a wide variety of topics generally related to emotional communication in mammals. Organized into six parts that discuss models of emotional communication, survey emotional communication in different mammals, explore emotional communication in nonhuman prosody and music, the volume ends by setting a research agenda for the future. Readers will quickly be immersed into this highly transdisciplinary literature that includes neuroscientists and musicians with a few evolutionary biologists and animal communication experts thrown into the mix.

The best thing about this transdisciplinary field is that it forces readers out of their intellectual comfort zone. This may make some of the chapters hard going for people steeped in one or a few while some individuals might very well have “born bad” or “born nice,” nastiness and niceness will be expressed under various conditions, and dispositions can change. We are capable of and inherently both. Still, the author’s take-home message remains intact and this is where the volume develops the nonreligious position in ways that militant atheism has largely failed.

Devoid of chest-thumping, The Bonobo and the Atheist cultivates the secular position by actually examining what religion does for people and by delineating between intuitive moral processes and models of morality. In doing so, de Waal pushes the nonreligious movement forward by steering us not toward a world where religion is simply dismissed as illness and where reason is the cure, but rather, toward a world in which religion is rendered irrelevant. This book is a welcome entry into the canon of literature that resists faith and dogma. By addressing who we are and where we have come from, de Waal shows us how we are already equipped with the necessary means to arrive at a more enlightened and equitable future.


The ideas that humans and animals communicate their emotions predates Darwin, but Darwin’s functional approach permeates this new edited volume, which is likely to be the “go-to” reference for years to come. This book contains 20 chapters that discuss a wide variety of topics generally related to emotional communication in mammals. Organized into six parts that discuss models of emotional communication, survey emotional communication in different mammals, explore emotional communication in nonhuman prosody and music, and discuss human prosody and music, the volume ends by setting a research agenda for the future. Readers will quickly be immersed into this highly transdisciplinary literature that includes neuroscientists and musicians with a few evolutionary biologists and animal communication experts thrown into the mix.

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