



CHICAGO JOURNALS

The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates by Frans de Waal
The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates by Frans de Waal
Review by: Benjamin Grant Purzycki
The Quarterly Review of Biology, Vol. 88, No. 4 (December 2013), p. 342
Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/673794>
Accessed: 07/12/2013 10:36

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Quarterly Review of Biology*.

<http://www.jstor.org>



BEHAVIOR

THE BONOBO AND THE ATHEIST: IN SEARCH OF HUMANISM AMONG THE PRIMATES.

By Frans de Waal; illustrated by the author. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. \$27.95. xi + 289 p. + 8 pl.; ill.; index. ISBN: 978-0-393-07377-5. 2013.

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 quite 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 to interpret the same behavioral signals in the same way. We are animals, too.

Drawing from this, de Waal defends the argument that humans are "inherently good but capable of evil" rather than having a "veneer" of goodness or being inherently evil. I am leery of such positions, since humans—consistent with de Waal's own observations of chimps and bonobos—exhibit variation both across individuals, situationally, and ontogenetically within individuals. In other words,

while some individuals might very well have been "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.

BENJAMIN GRANT PURZYCKI, *Centre for Human Evolution, Cognition & Culture, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada*

EVOLUTION OF EMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION: FROM SOUNDS IN NONHUMAN MAMMALS TO SPEECH AND MUSIC IN MAN. *Series in Affective Science.*

Edited by Eckart Altenmüller, Sabine Schmidt, and Elke Zimmermann. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. £49.99. xiv + 376 p.; ill.; author and subject indexes. ISBN: 978-0-19-958356-0. 2013.

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 nonspeech human vocalizations, 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.

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