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Book Review

Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals by Frans de Waal. 1996, Harvard University Press. ISBN 0-674-35661-6; viii+296.

Reviewed by

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This is a book with two faces. One face wears an academic frown, indicating a serious and important goal; the other face is genial, with the look of someone about to tell an entertaining story. Either alone would have made for a readable book, but they sit uneasily together — rather like IM, a two-headed snake at the University of Tennessee, which de Waal uses to illustrate something or other (I'm not really sure what).

It's not entirely clear what the serious aim of the book is, but it seems to be something like this: to present an account of morality that does justice both to the biological facts of evolution and to the central nature of the moral attitude: sympathy and altruism. The less serious aim quickly becomes clear, though: it's to present the reader with a string of sometimes amusing, sometimes sad, but always interesting anecdotes about animal social behaviour (mostly about primates, but with the odd wolf or elephant thrown in for variety).

Now, the non-serious part is admittedly fascinating, but there's a danger that the unwary reader will start to make too much of the anecdotes — that she'll see them as supporting some substantive conclusion about morality. The half-wary reader who is drawn into such an approach will then begin to find the anecdotes less entertaining, distracted by the gaps, the inconsequentialities, the unanswered questions. She'll notice, for example, the peculiar fact that, in a photograph illustrating an experiment using chimps, in which two experimenters point to possible locations of food, the hand of one of the experimenters is out of sight of the subject; she'll probably be correspondingly less impressed by the information that the chimp took the advice of the other experimenter. She'll notice that almost every

story could be explained in more than one way, and that de Waal switches from saying that an anecdote *suggests* something, to saying that it *shows* something, to saying that it's *evidence for* something, without apparently noticing the difference.

It will perhaps be unsurprising, then, that when we turn to the parts of the book that constitute the serious side of things, matters don't improve. De Waal serves up the hoary old misunderstanding that Descartes thought that animals were "machines unable to suffer and therefore unworthy of compassion" (p.214); he treats us to a description of the paranoid and irascible Rousseau, permanent combatant and author of the *Confessions*, as "a timid, retiring man most at ease during solitary botanical outings" (p.166); he offers a brief account of Rawls' political theory that involves a complete misunderstanding of what Rawls was arguing. There's the odd error even in the non-philosophical material, as for example his occasional lapse into talking as if human beings were at the top of some evolutionary tree, rather than level with every other extant creature.

But these are simply symptoms of a deeper malaise. The book sets out to bring together ethics and the study of animal behaviour, yet the author displays an almost total ignorance of the ethical literature. Instead, he offers a vague, pre-philosophical sketch of what he takes to be important about ethics, and hurriedly moves on to the animal behaviour with which he feels more familiar. There's little indication of the available range of ethical theories, from crude emotivism to Platonic realism, from McDowellian objectivism to virtue theory. There's no mention of important ethical notions such as the distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives (crucial to much of what goes on in the book), or the criterion of universalisability. Yet these aren't dispensable technicalities or bits of mere philosophical jargon; they're essential to any useful discussion of ethics.

Moreover, even leaving aside the question of de Waal's *knowledge* of the area, there are significant lapses of reasoning and argument. For example, there are long stretches in which the reader becomes more and more irritated that de Waal has ignored some central problem, only to find him mentioning it casually, and often in a sentence or two, with no indication that he realises what he's been doing. Worse is when the same thing happens, but in reverse, and he make a false assumption or commits a fallacy that he's just criticised in others. He's also prone to *non sequiturs*, and in general presents some rather weak arguments. Perhaps the worst examples of this come when he's criticising others; one example of this will suffice.

Talking about the argument that animals, especially the great apes, should be accorded moral rights, de Waal offers a common response: "rights are normally accompanied by responsibilities, which cannot possibly apply to apes."(p.215) He doesn't argue for this latter assertion, but let that pass. He then cites one of Cavalieri and Singer's arguments against such a claim: "since mentally retarded people are exempt from this linkage, why not apes?"(*loc. cit.*) De Waal's response to this is indignant:

To my mind, Cavalieri and Singer's plea reflects profound condescension. Have we really reached the point at which respect for apes is most effectively advocated by depicting them as retarded people in furry suits? (*loc. cit.*)

Yet it's surely clear that Cavalieri and Singer were doing no such thing; they were arguing, against the principle that only beings capable of having responsibilities could have rights, that we admit at least one major exception, so that the principle can't be applied without further argument. The idea that they were comparing apes with mentally retarded human beings in any sense other than the inability to have responsibilities is peculiar to say the least.

I have to say that, in general, I enjoyed this book. For all its faults, there's plenty here that's genuinely suggestive to the philosopher, as well as entertaining to the lay person interested in what animals get up to. For a serious approach to the relationship between morality and evolutionary biology, ethology, and animal behaviour, though, the reader will have to look elsewhere.

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