

Our Inner Ape: A Leading Primatologist Explains Why We Are Who We Are, by Frans de Waal (New York, NY: Riverhead/Penguin, 2005), 274 pp., \$24.95.

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At the 2005 annual conference of the American Psychological Association, Frans de Waal received an award from the American Psychological Foundation and delivered a presentation on the subject matter of this book. The talk was intriguing, as is the book. De Waal is a keen observer and integrator. In reading the book we learn commonalities and differences among the apes, including orangutans, gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos (the two species most genetically similar to humans), and humans.

De Waal draws heavily on naturalistic observations of apes (including humans) in the wild and in captivity. He tells us how various primates deal with power, sex, violence, kindness, and cooperation. Among the lessons is that apes are social creatures; it is necessary to understand the social context in order to understand our behavior. Apes regularly experience empathy and will spontaneously help not only their kin, but others, including other species.

Bonobos are as closely related to humans as chimpanzees. Popular conceptions of apes – and by extension, primitive aspects of humans – are largely drawn from chimpanzees. Bonobos have different behavioral and cultural patterns than chimpanzees. Bonobo groups are matrilineal, are led by an alpha female and a group of largely cooperative females, and typically resolve conflict via cooperation, often including sexual behavior to reduce tension and promote cooperation. Understanding of bonobo behavior and culture, as well as that of chimpanzees and other apes, helps to illuminate human behavior: “Being both more systematically brutal than chimps and more empathic than bonobos, we are by far the most bipolar ape. Our societies

are never completely peaceful, never completely competitive, never ruled by sheer selfishness, and never perfectly moral” (p. 221).

Some aspects of human behavior that are often thought of as arising after language and being uniquely human are clearly present in other primates. An example is morality, which de Waal summarizes as the two H’s, Helping and (not) Hurting. He describes how a group of chimpanzees responded after two adolescents made everyone late for dinner, and then integrates that with other ape behavior. “Having or not having [resources], appropriating, stealing, reciprocity, fairness: all have to do with the division of resources, a top concern of human morality” (p. 192). Morality is clearly present in non-human apes, and is therefore not dependent on language and cultural factors such as religion.

De Waal notes that, by the age of two, humans “distinguish between moral principals (‘do not steal’) and cultural norms (‘no pajamas at school’). They realize that breaking some rules harms others, but breaking other rules just violates expectations” (p. 192). De Waal’s broad perspective, drawn from observations across primate species and across cultures within a single primate species, provides a useful framework as we consider such behavior as authorities in the United States arresting a woman for breast feeding in a shopping mall, or Europeans’ concern about a person’s decision to keep a gun at his or her house.

Trying de Waal’s perspective on, I now consider whether purported moral rules pass the test. Is this about the interconnected moral principals of do Help others and do not Hurt others, or is this merely about cultural expectations like no pajamas at school?

De Waal’s observations and analysis lead to an understanding that “our noblest achievement – morality – has evolutionary ties to our basest behavior – warfare” (p. 212). “In the course

of human evolution, out-group hostility enhanced in-group solidarity to the point that morality emerged” (p. 212).

De Waal considers and rejects the old Roman proverb “Homo homini lupus” (man is wolf to man). De Waal shows that the proverb misrepresents and insults wolves, humans, and other mammals: “One can’t reap the benefits of group life without contributing to it. Every social animal strikes its own balance between the two” (p. 215-216). “Evolution has instilled a need to belong and to feel accepted. We are social to our core” (p. 220).

Our Inner Ape includes some cautionary notes at the level of human societies (or countries). De Waal avoids *proscribing* political solutions to problems: “Political ideology and biology are awkward bedfellows, and most biologists prefer to sleep in a separate room” (230). But he *describes* apparent conflicts between social systems and human nature: “When Margaret Thatcher dismissed society as a mere illusion, she was clearly not describing the intensely social primates we are. ... Our societies probably work best if they mimic as closely as possible the small-scale communities of our ancestors. ... In the words of Edward Wilson, biology holds us ‘on a leash’ and will let us stray only so far from who we are. We can design our life any way we want, but whether we will thrive depends on how well the life fits human predispositions” (pp. 232-233).

“In the same way that Communism collapsed due to a mismatch between ideology and human behavior, unmitigated capitalism may be unsustainable as it celebrates the material well-being of a few while shortchanging the rest. It denies the basic solidarity that makes life bearable. In doing so, it goes against a long evolutionary history of egalitarianism, which in turn relates to our cooperative nature. Primate experiments show how cooperation breaks down if benefits aren’t shared among all participants, and human behavior likely follows the same principle” (p. 232).

“Compared to the rest of the world ... the United States is an experiment in unbridled competition. This experiment has made it the richest nation in the history of civilization. Something puzzling is going on, however, as the nation’s health is increasingly lagging behind its wealth. The United States used to have the world’s healthiest and tallest citizens, but now ranks at the bottom among industrialized nations in terms of longevity and height and at the top in terms of teenage pregnancy and infant mortality. ... In terms of life expectancy, too, the United States is not keeping up with the rest of the world. On this critical health index, Americans don’t even rank among the top twenty-five nations anymore. How to explain this? The first culprit that comes to mind is the privatization of health care, resulting in millions of uninsured people. But the problem may go deeper. ... With its giant underclass, the income gap in the United States resembles that of many third-world nations. The top one percent of Americans has more income to spend than the bottom 40 percent taken together. This is a huge gap compared with Europe and Japan. ... Large income disparities erode the social fabric. They induce resentment and undermine trust, which causes stress to both the rich and the poor. No one feels at ease within such a system. The result is that the world’s richest nation now has one of its poorest health records” (pp. 231-232).

More broadly, de Waal recommends that we increase our understanding of other primates as a way to enhance our understanding of our own species. He notes that we humans are capable of great violence and destruction, but we are also quite capable of exercising cooperation, empathy, and love. Because we have come to dominate this planet, the choices we make will largely determine the fates of our primate family, ourselves, and our world.