

## A Catholic Atheist and His Good Monkeys

Cameron Brinitzer & Nicolas Langlitz

To cite this article: Cameron Brinitzer & Nicolas Langlitz (2015) A Catholic Atheist and His Good Monkeys, Anthropology Now, 7:3, 118-124

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19428200.2015.1103622>



Published online: 18 Dec 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## A Catholic Atheist and His Good Monkeys

Cameron Brintzer and  
Nicolas Langlitz

de Waal, Frans. *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013). 320 pages.

At the opening of the Institute of Zoological Theology at the University of Münster, Germany, the primatologist and devout Christian Jane Goodall described observing a group of chimpanzees perform a display or dance before an 80-foot waterfall in the forests of Gombe. Hair standing on end, they swayed rhythmically from foot to foot, throwing around boulders and stamping in the water, before eventually sitting still as they watched the water gush down. “I can’t help feeling that the chimpanzees are experiencing something similar to the wonder and awe that I myself experience as I contemplate some marvel of Nature,” Goodall mused in her keynote address. “The sort of feelings, perhaps, that led to early animistic religions.”<sup>1</sup> In his new book, *The Bonobo and the Atheist*, the Dutch-born primatologist Frans de Waal writes that he too has witnessed chimpanzee expressions of wonder in the face of natural events. At a time when atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Sam

Harris have gone militant, several primatologists have offered alternative configurations of science and religion that do not conform to the polemics between godless Darwinism and Christian creationism that have shaped public perception of evolutionary anthropology in the United States.

In his most recent publication, de Waal brings his experimental research on capuchin monkeys, chimpanzees and bonobos at Emory University to bear on what he calls a five-century-long debate about the place of religion in society. When Napoleon Chagnon compared the sociobiology of the Yanomamö with that of monkeys, apes and other mammals, he presupposed a Hobbesian conception of man who, in the state of nature, was supposed to be a wolf to man — emphasizing the predatory and aggressive qualities of *Homo sapiens*.<sup>2</sup> While many cultural anthropologists took exception to the sociobiologists’ emphasis on selfish genes and competitive social relations, often turning their backs on evolutionary anthropology altogether, Frans de Waal helped initiate a shift in research toward prosocial behaviors including reconciliation, cooperation and altruistic helping. The thesis that de Waal has been advancing through his laboratory research and prolific popular writing for more than three decades is that humans share the foundations of morality with other mammals, especially primates.

In *The Bonobo and the Atheist*, de Waal explores what this exceptionally peaceful species of “primate hippies” can teach unbelievers like him about the relationship between morality and religion. His key claim is that the sources of moral behavior are not found in the history of religious beliefs

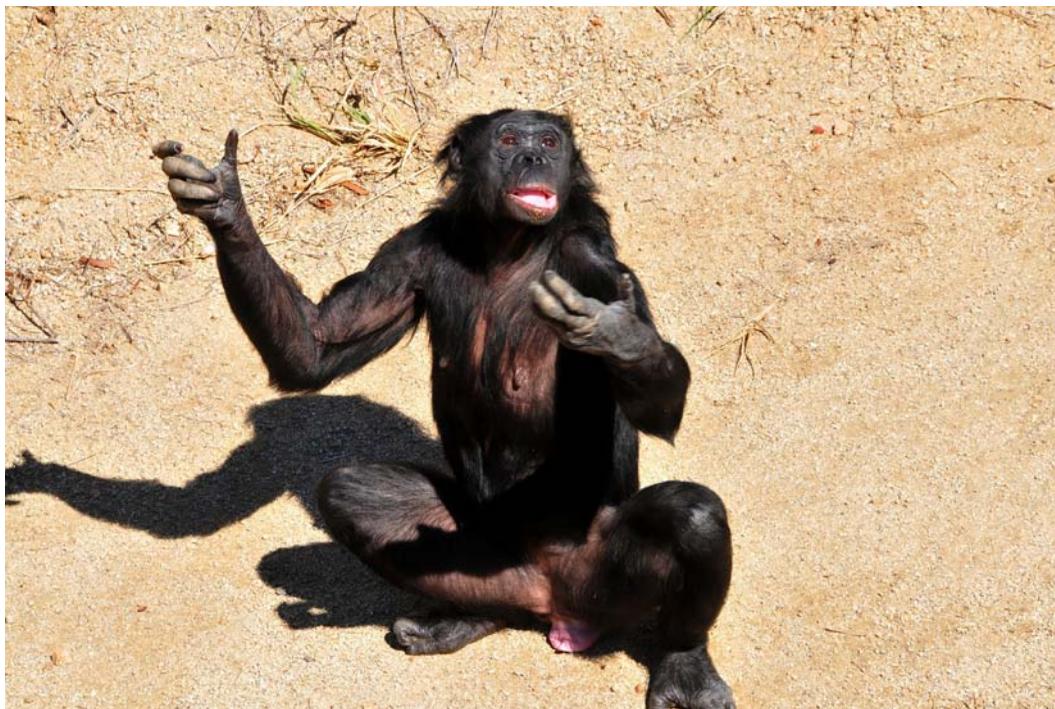


Figure 1. Female bonobo at San Diego Zoo Safari Park catching food thrown into her enclosure. Photo courtesy of Michael Seres.

and practices, but in the deep history of the human species: “I have heard people echo Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov, exclaiming, ‘If there is no God, I am free to rape my neighbor!’ Perhaps it’s just me, but I am wary of any persons whose belief system is the only thing standing between them and repulsive behavior. ... Why not assume that our humanity, including the self-control needed for a livable society, is built into us? ... Humans must have worried about the functioning of their communities well before current religions arose, which occurred only a couple of millennia ago. Biologists are unimpressed by that kind of timescale.”

The book continues de Waal’s campaign against the so-called veneer theory of moral-

ity. Since the publication of *Good Natured* in 1997, de Waal’s primary target has been the view that morality is just a thin veneer concealing people’s nasty natural tendencies.<sup>3</sup> This bleak assessment of human nature has given rise to an anti-naturalist ethic, which found its most prominent expression in Richard Dawkins’ *The Selfish Gene*. Contrary to the opinion of many social constructionist critics who mistook sociobiology as drawing from the moral authority of nature to support the radically individualist moral order of Thatcherism and Reaganomics, Dawkins emphasized that he was not advocating a morality based on evolution, but wanted to warn his readers “that if you wish, as I do, to build a society in which individuals co-

operate generously and unselfishly towards a common good, you can expect little help from biological nature. ... Let us understand what our own selfish genes are up to, because we may then at least have the chance to upset their designs, something that no other species has ever aspired to."<sup>4</sup> Historically, de Waal traces this view back to Thomas Henry Huxley, whose aggressive defense of evolutionary theory against the Anglican Church earned him the sobriquet of "Darwin's Bulldog" — in de Waal's eyes a terrible misnomer since "Darwin's writing massively contradicts Veneer Theory." Taking recent behavioral research to support Darwin's speculation that morality grew out of our animal instincts, de Waal sets out to defend Darwin from these latter-day Darwinists who oppose linking evolution and morality.

It may be noteworthy that de Waal's recuperation of Darwin is not exactly straightforward. Attempting to provide a natural historical explanation of how moral behavior might have evolved led Darwin to believe that natural selection operated on multiple levels. "A high standard of morality," Darwin wrote, "gives but a slight or no advantage to each individual man and his children."<sup>5</sup> Outstanding bravery may in fact make one less, rather than more likely to survive and leave progeny. Darwin overcame this theoretical difficulty of explaining unselfish acts by imagining the evolutionary value of another sort of legacy: in acting for the good of his group, an individual might excite and strengthen in others social virtues which, if shared, could increase the fitness of the group as a whole. In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, group theories of selection became widely considered a scientific heresy, irredeemably

associated with eugenic dreams of improving the species. Although multilevel analysis, which integrates all levels of selection from genes and individuals to groups and species, has recently been revived and become a new paradigm, de Waal continues to "recoil" from evolutionary scenarios that stress the group level, reaffirming the sociobiologists' premise that selection only acts on individual organisms because divisible groups and species do not act as genetic units. But just as beautiful music could be composed in Ludwig van Beethoven's filthy apartment, de Waal sees no contradiction in assuming that the ruthless process of natural selection could engender genuine altruism, at least on the psychological level.

Such psychological altruism is not opposed to selfishness, de Waal argues. He writes that the 1992 discovery of mirror neurons (first in macaques, the reader is reminded), which are activated both when primates carry out an action and when we perceive others doing the same thing, was "of equal importance to psychology as the discovery of DNA has been for biology." This is only the most prominent of many findings leading de Waal to believe that "our brain has been designed to blur the line between self and other." If emotions are mirrored by a similar mechanism,

**de Waal sees no contradiction in assuming that the ruthless process of natural selection could engender genuine altruism, at least on the psychological level.**

this contested theory suggests, an organism would be physically affected by the distress of others and the difference between selfish and unselfish behavior thereby dissolved. In de Waal's cosmology, the capacity for empathy and altruism endows not only humans but all primates with a this-worldly analogue of agape, the Christian God's love of humankind. The zoological counterpart to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, whose active charity allowed him to step beyond the bounds of ethnic community and rescue a wounded Jew at the roadside, is de Waal's

oft recounted anecdote of a bonobo who tried to help a stunned bird regain its capacity to fly after hitting a glass wall (apparently showing appreciation for the specific needs of a bird, for bonobos have no wings). This naturalization of beneficence rearticulates a hallmark of 18<sup>th</sup> century secular humanism in the vocabulary of 21<sup>st</sup> century behavioral sciences.

What de Waal is looking for among primates is the assurance that a social order without God is possible. In the face of an anti- and posthumanist tradition ranging from Heidegger and French poststructuralism to current attempts to devise an "anthropology beyond the human," de Waal's evolutionary anthropology reanimates the political quest for a humanist society compatible with human nature, which inspired 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment philosophers such as Rousseau and Hume to launch the intellectual project

**De Waal's anecdotes about prosocial behavior in other animals fuel a social imaginary, in which a moral order emerges from lower instincts and passions rather than divine commandments or rational reflection.**

of anthropology in the first place. De Waal's anecdotes about prosocial behavior in other animals fuel a social imaginary, in which a moral order emerges from lower instincts and passions rather than divine commandments or rational reflection. He challenges the mistaken belief in "a top-down process in

which people formulate the principles and then impose them on human conduct." As morality comes from within — "it's part of our biology" — humans do not require directives from above to explain or guide it. "The big challenge," as de Waal sees it, "is

to move forward, beyond religion, and especially beyond top-down morality."

But there is a familiar hitch. When it comes to questions regarding the conduct of life, de Waal laments, "What alternative does science have to offer? Science is not in the business of spelling out the meaning of life and even less in telling us how to live our lives." He criticizes evangelical atheists for pitting science against religion as though the two were competing as sources of knowledge regarding the same phenomena: "We face two distinct sets of questions, one related to physical reality and the other to human existence." Citing Stephen Jay Gould's notion of science and religion as "non-overlapping magisteria," de Waal writes that the two "occupy separate spheres of knowledge." Of course, empirically speaking, this is not true. As the philosopher of biology Michael Ruse asserts, religious people — and not just

Christian fundamentalists — do make ontological claims: if not about Mary's virginity, faith healing and other wonders, then about the existence of God, God's creation of the universe or the special cosmological status of humans, which is associated with *Homo sapiens'* unique endowment of distinctive qualities and abilities.<sup>6</sup> De Waal and the neo-atheists resemble those blind men touching an elephant to learn what it is like. It seems as if de Waal is groping for the moral end of religion while the new atheists feel about its epistemic and metaphysical parts, considering God's existence "a scientific hypothesis like any other."<sup>7</sup> Having been brought up Catholic in Den Bosch, a Dutch city that for centuries has been celebrating temporary role reversals and social liberty during carnival, de Waal does not conceal the alienation he feels from the iconoclastic zeal driving the scientific *Beeldenstorm* of his fellow infidels. Even as an atheist, de Waal maintains a catholic attitude toward religion.

His tolerance leads de Waal to downplay the new atheists' own moral assessments of religion. For the latter, the Abrahamic religions may preach certain prosocial behaviors, but they also condone intergroup violence, sexist discrimination and homophobia. If one opposes naturalism to culturalism rather than supernaturalism, de Waal's indulgence seems due to more than his liberal and accepting temperament: he is actually a more thoroughgoing naturalist than Richard Dawkins. "Because we are born selfish," Dawkins sug-

gested, "let us try to teach generosity and altruism."<sup>8</sup> Beneficence is acquired socially, it requires a culture that promotes doing good. In Dawkins' eyes, religions are simply a questionable way of achieving this goal. By contrast, de Waal feels confident that prosocial behavior is deeply rooted in biological nature. As far as moral behavior is concerned, cultural differences matter little: Dutch Catholics, Kenyan Pentecostals, Brooklyn Hasidim, Tibetan Buddhists and British atheists are all primates who share with capuchin monkeys an aversion to inequity and with bonobos the ability to empathize.

What does matter is the almost universal human penchant for religion in general. Here de Waal follows the functionalist tradition running from Émile Durkheim through Pascal Boyer, which views religion as "an adaptation that permits human groups to function harmoniously." De Waal reanimates a social evolutionist narrative, presenting religion as both more primitive and more fundamental than science. Unlike scientific reasoning,

**De Waal reanimates a social evolutionist narrative, presenting religion as both more primitive and more fundamental than science.**

which in the history of our species came into being only lately, religion appears to be phylogenetically ancient — a fact which de Waal, in good Haeckelian manner, also finds reflected in

human ontogenesis: "Contrast the ease with which children adopt religion with the long and laborious road young people travel to achieve a Ph.D. around the age of thirty." Dawkins, on the other hand, wants readers to flinch when they hear phrases such as "Catholic child" or "Muslim child" because

“children are too young to know where they stand on such issues, just as they are too young to know where they stand on economics or politics.”<sup>9</sup> De Waal’s naturalization of religion has a seemingly paradoxical ramification. While he vigorously rejects veneer theory in the realm of moral philosophy, it is recapitulated in his anthropology of science: “Religion has always been with us and is unlikely to ever go away, since it is part of our social skin. Science is rather like a coat that we have recently bought.”

Consequently, de Waal’s assessment of the sciences’ social function is ambiguous. As a good modern, diligently separating facts from values, he has “trouble seeing how science and the naturalistic worldview could fill the void and become an inspiration for the good.” And yet, despite such intermittent rejections of the naturalistic fallacy, de Waal occasionally betrays another take: “Science has the potential to affect our social and moral outlook. ... Conversely, existential questions feed into science. ... In many areas, it is hard to tell where our worldview ends and science begins, and vice versa. We need to step beyond a simple dichotomy between the two and consider the whole of human knowledge.” Maybe science can’t tell people what to do, but empirical research by some anthropologists and sociologists of religion suggests to de Waal that humankind’s

**Cultivating people’s confidence in their own powers of moral ordering created new sources of moral direction and inspiration.**

natural inclination toward religious community-building fosters social cohesion — and that appears to be a good, or shall we say, well-adapted thing for a social species such as *Homo sapiens*.

Thus de Waal’s scientific worldview allows him to acknowledge what Durkheim called the “secular utility” of religion. As an atheist humanist, he tolerates religion not because he accepts the validity of religious truth claims but because he deems such civility crucial to fostering a benevolent social order in a world populated by religious people: “Tolerance of religion, even if religion is not always tolerant in return, allows humanism to focus on what is most important, which is to build a better society based on natural human abilities.” Charles Taylor argues that the emergence of humanism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was contingent upon a double movement. While the universe was disenchanting, cultivating people’s confidence in their own powers of moral ordering created new sources of moral direction and inspiration. “The locus of the highest moral capacities was identified as in ‘human nature,’” Taylor writes.<sup>10</sup> Not unlike his Enlightenment predecessors, de Waal promotes a vision of human nature that includes innate empathy and a bent for solidarity. In this contemporary version, these moral passions are rooted in primate evolution. Although de Waal reminds readers that humanism is nonreligious as opposed to antireligious, he also notes that “the main ingredients of a moral society don’t require religion, since they come from within.” His relative politeness toward believers should not belie his own secular stance: “I am all for a reduced role of religion, with less emphasis on the almighty God and more on human

potentials. This is nothing new, of course; it is the humanist agenda.”

Among the alternative configurations of science and religion currently emerging in primatology, de Waal’s position contrasts with Goodall’s. Since her adolescent fantasies about serving as a missionary in the officially godless Soviet Union, Goodall has never abandoned her Christian faith. The expression she gave to her religiosity in the speech quoted early in this review is a mystical one, conjuring up a unity of the human, the animal and the divine in the face of a sublime aesthetic and spiritual experience of nature. De Waal, on the other hand, shows little interest in such inwardness. As could be expected from a primatologist whose promotion of research on prosocial behavior is unmatched, he centers his account on the social side of religious life.

Given that *The Bonobo and the Atheist* was written for a broad, not necessarily academic audience, it should not come as a surprise if some cultural anthropologists find de Waal’s accounts of “science” and “religion” to be painted with too broad a brush. However, at a time when many culturally oriented researchers are trying to go beyond the nature/culture divide by including other species in their ethnographic writing, it is all the more important to engage with de Waal and other thought-provoking primatological writers who address the kind of questions a general audience still expects anthropologists to answer. Read alongside the works with which it is in conversation, de Waal’s new book provides an opportunity to explore the wide spectrum of epistemological, ontological and political positions so often smudged under the label of naturalism.

## Notes

1. Jane Goodall, “Why It Is Time for a Theological Zoology,” in *Wenn sich Tiere in der Theologie tummeln: Ansätze einer theologischen Zoologie*, ed. Rainer Hagencord (Regensburg: Pustet, 2010), 16.
2. Napoleon A. Chagnon, “Fission in an Amazonian Tribe,” *The Sciences* 16, no. 1 (1976): 14–18; *Noble Savages: My Life Among Two Dangerous Tribes — the Yanomamo and the Anthropologists*, Reprint edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 7–10, 325.
3. Frans de Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1997).
4. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 2.
5. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 166.
6. *Atheism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 112.
7. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), 50.
8. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2.
9. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 3.
10. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2007), 245.

**Cameron Brintzer** is a graduate student in the Anthropology Department at The New School for Social Research.

**Nicolas Langlitz** is associate professor of Anthropology at The New School for Social Research