

Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved
by Frans de Waal (Princeton University Press, 2006)

Review by Richard Joyce
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The lead text of this book is based on primatologist Frans de Waal's 2003 Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, to which he adds three short appendices. There are commentaries by Robert Wright, Christine Korsgaard, Philip Kitcher, and Peter Singer, followed by a 20-page response. Josiah Ober and Stephen Macedo provide a brief introduction.

As befits a Tanner lecturer, de Waal's scope is broad, his writing accessible, and the pace lively. He continues his crusade against the "veneer theory"—the idea that humans are naturally sociopaths and that empathy, altruism, and morality are the result of recent cultural forces. The extent to which de Waal dichotomizes this debate, however, masks much of interest. One can agree with the seemingly obvious fact that humans are *obligatorily gregarious* organisms—replete with various prosocial mechanisms—while still expressing reasonable doubt that our capacity to make *moral* judgments is the result of an innate mechanism dedicated to that task.

De Waal is an unparalleled source of rich first-hand primatological data, arguing cogently that humans show continuity with other apes regarding empathy, consolation behavior, peacemaking, and reciprocal relations. Yet he admits these "building blocks" are "by no means sufficient" (p. 20) for morality, and in his Response discusses two further levels of morality: rule enforcement for the community's good, and disinterested moral reasoning. He doesn't address whether this third, uniquely human, level is a distinct innate adaptation, apparently not appreciating that if it isn't, and yet is necessary for being literally accorded a "moral sense" (as he seems to indicate on pp. 20, 49, 55), then moral nativism is false and at least some of human morality is "veneer." In characteristic non-philosopher manner, de Waal ultimately rejects the question as "semantics" and thus "mostly a waste of time" (p. 181). It seems a surprising blemish that the author of a book subtitled "How Morality Evolved" should grow impatient with those wondering what precisely is necessary and sufficient for *morality*, and what specifically has *evolved*.