

Book Review

Frans de Waal

The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism among the Primates

New York: W. W. Norton, 2013

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Innovation in the absence of human purpose is literally meaningless, which is to say that it defies interpretation, measurement and evaluation; it is pointless change for its own, which is to say for nobody's sake.

Innovation, in order to have meaning, must be designed to meet some identifiable challenge, to solve some particular problem or to achieve some expressible purpose—even if that purpose is nothing more than delaying or deflecting the inevitable and “buying time” until a better alternative can be found.

In striving to meet some positive objective or escape some negative fate, innovation must have some ethical, moral, political, economic, social or even technological means and ends in mind. Only when it stops being an exercise in wheel-spinning and begins to move down a particular road in some discernible direction can its proponents even try to justify it as an honourable or at least a useful direction. Only then can it be properly understood and assessed. What's more, only when it is put in a definable evaluative framework can its opponents properly criticize it. In short, innovation must be *about* something.

A singular problem in the contemporary world is that establishing ethical and moral frameworks for governance has become exceedingly difficult. The old banalities such as honesty and integrity don't get us very far, and the vapid encouragements to be cheerful and upbeat in our work are beyond annoying. We lack much in the way of a set of principles to judge policies other than admonitions to be efficient and responsive when we do whatever it is that we do. The best we seem to come up with is some version of a market-driven imperative and the importance of good people doing what the majority of good people among our customers and clients wish to be done.

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Now, don't get me wrong! I am not in principle opposed to “good people”; I just feel deprived of any coherent view of good policies or the standards of goodness according to which we could determine the what, in fact or theory, counts as “good.” This is important because, in the absence

of an authentically universal system of philosophical truths and a generally valid set of specific social norms that can be deduced from them, innovation is likely to be contemplated and designed within a specific cultural context and, more importantly, devised to serve specific economic, political and social interests. Since those interests are almost surely to be in latent opposition or in manifest conflict with others, any pretense to objectivity by innovators is bound to be false on its face. Since innovation should be *about* something, it must also be *for* some people and *against* others. In short, unless we are content to decide public policy by public opinion polls or, more likely, by the influence of organized interest groups, we have some responsibility to ponder whether public sector innovation is guided by anything other than narrow, utilitarian self-interest in political systems where equal access to governmental decision makers is far from guaranteed.

People in and out of government and the public service, of course, have not been insensitive to the need to see innovation in a moral, which is to say in a political context. We have understood the need and made valiant efforts to come up with universal systems of right and wrong that embrace many cultural traditions and material interests. Evidence of these efforts are everywhere and few are more grand, eloquent and comprehensive as the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. In its time, it did its best to pretend that a broad consensus existed on basic ideas about the freedoms that ought to apply to all individuals and communities on the Earth. It still does. Nonetheless, no one can sensibly believe that all of the nations which are signatories to that charter have lived up to its precepts; on the contrary, it would be hard to find a single one that has met all of its ideals. At best those inventories of generally ambiguous moral ambitions present a measure according to which we can calibrate our respective human failures.

Why is this so? How are we to explain not human evil (which is an important but slightly different issue), but the failure of our disparate cultures to reach a minimal consensus on what evil entails and how best to combat it?

One important obstacle to consensus is religion. The problem, again, is not just that it seems impossible to get all faiths to agree on matters of doctrine and dogma; rather, the hundreds or even thousands of human "faith groups" cannot even manage to "agree to disagree" on some issues, while working together on others. Religious hostilities over creeds and canons, rituals and rules have prompted some civil debates, but they have resulted in more bloody conflicts. They are continuing problems for our species. The question of whether these normative and procedural antagonisms are *fundamental* problems or whether they merely exacerbate other cultural, economic or social conflicts is significant, but it can be at least temporarily set aside; the fact is that religious disagreements at least inflame passions even if they do not totally account for them. Bringing such bitter rivalries under control might not solve all the world's problems of violence and oppression, but it certainly wouldn't hurt.

At one time, not so long ago, there seemed to be some hope for a more open-minded future. Those of us whose intellectual roots were nourished by the European Enlightenment of the 18th century, passed through the latter half of the 20th century much humbled. The Enlightenment had promised that science would displace religion, prosperity would overcome poverty, medicine would triumph (at least temporarily) over illness, education would prevail over ignorance and

democracy would defeat tyranny—all in good time. The mass slaughter and ruthless totalitarianism of our recent past made many of us question the narrative of progress and despair of any tolerable future for our species. Or, as Theodor Adorno (1967, p. 19) controversially put it: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”

Despite the horrors produced by political fanaticism, solidified by socio-economic injustice and globally threatened by ecological catastrophism, however, there were some of us who marched on with the reasonably confident view that at least organized religion was pretty much a spent force. What we meant, of course, was that European religion and, more specifically, Christianity had become more-or-less intellectually exhausted with Hegel. Feuerbach, Marx and Nietzsche combined to reveal, at least to our satisfaction, that at least the more advanced human societies were on the verge of breaking the chains of superstition. Whether Marxists or not, we took some hope from “the Moor’s” pronouncement in *A Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (Marx, 1843) that religious “criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower. The criticism of religion,” he went on, “disillusions man, so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses, so that he will move around himself as his own true Sun. Religion is only the illusory Sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself.” Heady stuff!

Many of the remaining Christian thinkers were prepared to make their peace with various sorts of Marxism (Friere, 1970) and Existentialism (Tillich, 1952). There were important Christian thinkers from John A. T. Robinson (1963) to John Shelby Spong (2011) who foreswore “theism” itself and took advantage of the space opened up by Pope John XXIII and his endorsement of “ecumenical” outreach. We saw this as a sign that, in time and without terror, religion would simply fade away. After all, modern science had discredited Biblical literalism and modern philosophy had rendered religious rituals and beliefs little better than personal eccentricities to be indulged perhaps as a token of liberal tolerance, but seldom to be taken seriously as forces for public good or ill. We were quite wrong.

Not only has religion in the form of *jihadist* Islam made a significant comeback, but various sorts of evangelical Christianity have been revitalized in North America and in parts of Africa and South America as well. Jews, Hindus and even some Buddhists have aggressively affirmed their beliefs and shown the will to deploy violence in defence of their communities and in the hope of conquering others. And, of course, the return of Christian beliefs in the former Soviet Union and its former satellites and the rebirth of plucky religious communities in China are not to be ignored.

As early as 1882 and not without some poignancy, Nietzsche had proclaimed that “God is dead.” As it happened, the news was sternly rejected by many more people than we had imagined. Despite declining attendance in well-established churches, the conceit of what is often called “secular humanism” has been exposed as premature at the very least. Instead, what is now rather indiscriminately called “fundamentalism” (regardless of the particular faith in question) is experiencing a significant resurrection (so to speak).

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In the current circumstances, anyone claiming to offer even an educated guess about the future of religion is on a fool's errand. Instead, particularly in North America and other parts of the English-speaking world, we hear a cacophony of competing and sometimes ill-considered opinions emanating from what I choose to call civilized nihilists. They range from militants in the anti-God movement (names like Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens come prominently to mind), to mild-mannered and diverse pragmatists such as Stanley Fish, Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty and Willard van Orman Quine and to critical social theorists including Karl-Otto Apel, Jürgen Habermas, Cornel West and many more. They also take in a large inventory of cultural relativists, deconstructionists, poststructuralists and other species of postmodernists from Derrida to Foucault and at least half-way back again, whose books can at last be obtained in English translations and provide the basics for the maintenance of critical literary theory posing as radical social analysis. In any number of ways, they have attempted to build a respectable intellectual foundation for ethics that rejects, either as false or as meaningless, all appeals to the transcendent, the immutable, the absolute and the supernatural—in short, to the deity.

The sceptics raise perplexing questions about the existence of evil, the existence of good or, for that matter, the existence of *anything*. One such question that has immediate practical and well as overarching theoretical importance is this: On what basis, if both religion and either Kantian or Hegelian rationalism are rejected, are we able to judge any particular action morally right or wrong?

The arguments that usually follow are the stuff of passionate sophomore debates and are entertaining, at least for a time. I was, for example, quite pleased to have heard an example of this sort of thing when Chris Hedges (2008), the “Eeyore” of contemporary American Calvinism, won my *heart* in a debate at the University of Toronto with Chris Hitchens (2007). Hitchens, of course, won a little of both my *head* and my heart. He would soon succumb to cancer, but he was happy to shout out a last note of defiance against the gods whom, he ardently believed, we'd all be better off without.

With all this noise persisting at precisely the time that I had once hoped we'd have put most of it behind us, it is refreshing to welcome another adult voice into the conversation. Even more than religion itself, fractious debates about religion are surely among the greatest barriers to intelligent thinking about serious ecological, economic and ethical problems—of which we have an ample supply.

In our relentlessly globalized society, for example, some of the most controversial issues facing public health officials will inevitably concern questions of reproductive technology, women's rights to choose whether to carry a pregnancy to term and end-of-life decisions concerning assisted suicide and euthanasia. We have already seen how much disagreement these matters raise when we note the fiery debates over “family planning” and “birth control” that are taking

place among health agencies and the proponents of certain organized religions—even to the point where opposition is raised to condoms when the primary purpose is to limit the spread of HIV/AIDS.

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Considering the nature and intensity of the religious disputations, I have come generally to think that it is a far better strategy to promote a conversation about the origins and evolution of religion in general than to leap immediately into the fray about any particular moral postulate set forth by any specific religion. The conversation may be lengthier but the possibility of establishing the basis for common understanding will, I choose to hope, be firmer.

Frans de Waal is just the man to enlist in any contemporary attempt to promote common understanding among well-meaning people who are prepared to discuss religion and social change without reaching for a weapon. I first came across de Waal almost two decades ago when I was exploring the connections between Chimpanzees or *Pan troglodytes* and human beings. Among other things, he helped introduce me to our species' other close cousin, the Bonobo or *Pan paniscus* (de Waal, 1995; de Waal, 1997).

The work of this accomplished primatologist is of tremendous importance to his scientific colleagues; however, like an increasing number of physical and biological scientists, he is adept at making the crucial findings in his field accessible to a broader readership. In this instance, he applies his meticulous research, his deft analysis and his dazzling writing skills to the matter of morality—human and (other) animal.

Many of the aggressive atheists who find ongoing religious commitments both disheartening and dangerous have posed an alternative theory to divine revelation or to reason-based formal codes arising out of logical strategies such as Immanuel Kant's far-famed "categorical imperative." They pick up and extend a line of evolutionary thinking that goes back at least to Thomas Malthus, if not all the way to Thomas Hobbes. Their fundamental claim is that humanity, faced with scarcity, adapts to dire circumstances by means of learned patterns of behaviour that are passed on through the generations in a manner similar to genetic inheritance and rooted more in biology than in either revelation or human reason. More often than not, they assert that these biological imperatives tend distinctly toward aggression and violence, that we are "natural-born killers" and that the will to power through annihilating our enemies is located deep in our genes.

The current elder statesman of what's come to be known as "evolutionary psychology" is E. O. Wilson; but his massively successful tome, *Sociobiology* (1975) was built on themes that evoked the work of ethologists such as Konrad Lorenz and a host of journalists, quasi-biologists and zealous pretenders who argued forcefully, if not always convincingly, that human beings were the descendents of belligerent, territorial, ravenously carnivorous and murderous apes. The line of reasoning echoed 19th-century social theorist Herbert Spencer who (not Darwin) popularized the phrase "the survival of the fittest." This fashionable theory was immensely popular among

neoliberal economists, superannuated cold warriors and anyone impatient with unemployment insurance recipients, welfare cheaters and soft-hearted liberals who, wittingly or unwittingly, were creating a “culture of dependency” among people who were weakening the human gene pool.

Wilson and others argued that belief in God and in the dictates of religious observance was the product of evolution. They were adaptations to circumstances which proved valuable for the survival of the human species. The behaviours that they encouraged, particularly with regard to family and social cohesion and to economic cooperation within groups, were helpful in the preservation of the species and belief in divine regulation and retribution assisted in ensuring that these adaptations were maintained. Religions in general and the moral codes they enforced *worked*. They provided the necessary glue to hold societies and, eventually, civilizations together.

The scientific basis for attributing moral sentiments to anything more than a survival instinct was well and truly laid. Of course, not everyone leapt to the conclusion that a biological explanation of moral beliefs and behaviour *necessarily* entailed the abandonment of religion (the Lord does work, after all, in very mysterious ways). And, in fact, not even Wilson himself insisted that religion should be abandoned or rejected. His account of religion holds that it is an essential part of human existence and has led him not to atheism, but rather to a “provisional deism.”

However much Wilson may wish to hedge his theological bets, the scientific efforts he is largely responsible for promoting have produced an enormous body of work bringing together experts from various fields but all related somehow to the “cognitive sciences” and all engaged in sorting out exactly how mind, language and culture have come to define our species. Beginning with powerful principles, they have deduced the evolutionary path using neuroscience, genetics and a little old-fashioned anthropology to come up with a theory that purports to describe the function and explain the structure of belief and behaviour involving everything from toilet training to professional sport and from marriage to constant threat of thermonuclear war. Generally speaking, theirs is a strong Darwinism which considers cultural factors of any sort to be pure consequences and not modifiers of behaviour. *In extremis*, their biological reductionism leaves them ready to condemn viciously any sort of Darwinian revisionism as despicable Marxism, destructive Feminism or naïve Idealism (Pinker, 2003). For the strict advocates of unreconstructed Darwinism, biological determinism isn't much more than Hobbesian pessimism locked firmly in our DNA. Life is nasty, brutish, short and infinitely heritable.

My preference for Frans de Waal derives from the fact that he seems more scientific than many of the scientists who have laid the foundation for banishing God from the domain of determining what's right and wrong, but who have sometimes lacked the courage or the consistency to take the full-blown leap into atheism in their personal or professional lives. He is also far more curious and far less condemnatory than the strident sociobiologists-cum-evolutionary psychologists whose approach to the vexing question of human nature smacks of a fierce ideology more than an unbiased intellectual inquiry. In essence, it's all a matter of what Sir Arthur Conan Doyle mistakenly called “deduction.”

Deduction, after all, is the method of divine revelation and abstract human reason. It applies to religious thinking and to the non-empirical sciences such as logic and mathematics. If we assume certain axioms (that the internal angles of a triangle must equal 180° or that God is omniscient), then certain conclusions can be made about the application of those principles to the real world, all without actually investigating the real world.

Science is not a good friend of deduction. It prefers getting scraps of information and building hypotheses, theories and ultimately laws that must be at least provisionally accepted (with the admission that new evidence may require a change of understanding). It's called *induction* and it's where de Waal begins and pretty much ends. He criticizes a tendency to adopt a "top-down perspective" that comes to conclusions without first establishing the nature of the underlying mechanisms that make those explanatory principles actually work. So, he argues for an "increased appreciation that the basic building blocks of cognition might be shared across a wide range of species" and a research program which focuses on the constituent capacities underlying larger cognitive phenomena" (de Waal and Ferrari, 2010).

Frans de Waal urges the collection of "the basic building blocks of cognition from a wide range of species." He encourages a multidisciplinary approach to the identification and patterning of relationships between biological capacities and evolving cognitive capabilities. When this exploration and preliminary analysis is done competently, we find that broad claims about essential human and non-human animal nature are more likely to reflect the ideological bias of the theorists than anything that is to be found in the data itself. In de Waal's account, the survival of the human (and many non-human) species depends largely upon strategies of cooperation and reciprocity.

Others have explored the evolutionary basis of mutual assistance and disclosed similar patterns. Anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt (2005), for instance, popularized the phrase "affect hunger" in his largely successful attempt to account for the emergence of a morality based on the development of an innate need for affective expressions from others. By bringing together knowledge about primate behaviour, ethnography, cognitive psychology, hormonal studies, neurology and genetics, he posited that what we call morality represents an increasingly conscious awareness of the practical need for mutuality and the consequent building of cooperative norms into our cultures. If human beings use words like "good" and "virtue" and "duty" to describe these behavioural traits, it follows that religious injunctions and admonitions are mainly pre-legal means to codify and apply actions that have already been sanctioned by their success in promoting survival and the need to ensure that these successful strategies are followed across clans, tribes and eventually whole civilizations. Frans de Waal offers parallel arguments, but with much more emphasis on the larger animal kingdom and especially on the "second chimpanzee," the bonobo.

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In the hands of a primatologist like de Waal, morality isn't emptied of meaning because it requires neither a divine voice in its construction nor a supernatural hand in its dissemination; quite the contrary, morality emerges as a distinctly human achievement. Though its origins can be traced to an age of "innocence" and despite the Biblical description of the fruit of the tree of knowledge tempting humanity to commit the sin of disobedience by learning the difference between right and wrong, a rather splendid new narrative can be formed in which human beings not only act in concert for mutual benefit, but also become capable of learning consciously to choose good (life enhancement or *Eros*) over evil (life denial or *Thanatos*). So, even the Freudian version of human nature (the pre-existence of libidinal drives) and the development of civilization (repression) to control them struggles against the possibility that our species might actually select behaviours that coincide with both survival needs and with deliberation about how best to achieve them. The assessment of humanity that follows is really quite remarkable—perhaps enough to permit a very cautious optimism, not about what we have done which is deeply dispiriting, but about what we might be capable of doing if we put our minds to the project of acting as our own good nature allows.

Frans de Waal opens up the evidence-based, scientifically argued prospect that traces of a benevolent humanism can be found in our very own background, among our ancestors and, Adorno's pessimism notwithstanding, even among ourselves.

The evidence that de Waal gathers comes from an enormous catalogue of studies of "standard" chimpanzees and especially of bonobos which can, without pressing the matter to absurdity, be considered the "poster species" for the 1960s slogan "make love, not war. By studying not only our species, but also those genetically closest to us, de Waal is able to discern early indications of what were to become rationality and irrationality, imagination and observation, practical knowledge and faith. For de Waal, religion explains nothing; rather, religion is something that needs to be explained. And it can respectfully be understood as long as we construct the proper evolutionary order of things; that is to say that from de Waal's scientific viewpoint, religion is explanans, not the explicandum .

Frans de Waal is uninterested in being an anti-religious ideologue. From the deep roots that religion has in human society and the human psyche, it appears to be something to which all people across time, space and cultural affectations are equally amenable. By looking at other primates and other demonstrably intelligent mammals, he finds inchoate forms of our own moral triumphs and occasional conceits. He finds empathy and reciprocity among elephants, negotiation and conflict resolution among bonobos and emotionally based and socially responsible choices among a number of species whose abstract reasoning capacities and linguistic prowess, while not unsubstantial, do not appear able to contemplate deities and a plausible purpose for the universe.

In short, de Waal locates signs of morality well before humanity lost its innocence and created religion. So, if biologically based morality precedes religion, and if religion functions mainly as a monitor and enforcer of moral behaviour, religion and morality can be seen in a quite different light. Religion, then, becomes not merely an evolutionary adaptation, a cultural "meme" with parallel qualities to a biological "gene," but takes its place as a means through which self-

conscious primates with complex neural pathways not only permit constructive social relations, but (unlike ants, bees and other social insects) also allow critical self-awareness and, therefore, an opportunity to alter, to improve or, in revolutionary circumstances, to abolish social relations that no longer seem helpful to them.

De Waal's optimism is not boundless. The sources of our preternatural empathy and affect, the small family groups, the clans, the tribes and eventually the nations which were the contexts for our loyalties and obligations remain exclusive. Indeed, the religions which have structured that initial empathy and affect and codified it in seemingly infinite doctrinal variations on a collective theme are now among the chief sets of symbols that block inclusion of all faiths, ethnicities and nationalities into the ultimate moral community—humanity itself. Much remains to be done.

In *The Bonobo and the Atheist*, we are treated to some vivid writing and to many compelling stories, anecdotes and engaging discussions of rigorous scientific research. The persuasive case that de Waal makes is for an explanation of morality that makes it truly our own and not the imposition of some deistic fiat. At the same time, de Waal builds the argument that biological reductionism and materialistic determinism are not the inevitable philosophical consequences of his cheerfully atheistic approach. The difference between the conclusions that he draws and the religious narratives that offer alternatives to the despair at crucial failures of Enlightenment are plain. Morality is not the invention of religion, but it is also not merely an automatic response to our awareness of our own mortality, the consequent fear of death and the desire for some superstition to relieve us of our existential anxieties. Instead, we are, in de Waal's beautifully expressed view, the inheritors of traditions of kindness, fairness and even of love which are constantly threatened by socially induced cleavages and fissures created by competition for wealth, status and power.

Understanding the natural origins of our higher moral impulses will not, in itself, transform a world of artificial scarcity, brutal inequity and mass slaughter; it will, however, make it clear that our evolutionary achievement of the knowledge of good and evil imposes on us the responsibility to be aware of the choices that exist and to make the proper ones. Thus, the impetus to innovate must be made in the sure and certain knowledge that change is a moral and a political act, rather than merely an instrumental and opportunistic method to extend and amplify the *status quo*.

Frans de Waal writes with formidable passion and deep compassion. He is also committed to telling the truth as it is revealed by scientific study. His message is, as an inevitably anonymous writer at *The Economist* (2013, April 6) put it, "that religion is not necessary in order for animals to display something that looks strikingly like human morality," and that religion may even undermine natural morality. It falls to us, therefore, to use our small dollops of wisdom and our occasionally penetrating insights to ensure that we respect our primal sources of good. We must do this whether or not we regard them as no more than pragmatic survival strategies. We must do this precisely because they are *no less than* survival strategies. It is, after all, no longer irresponsible to acknowledge that our survival is not guaranteed as long as we fail to assess and address our vast ecological, economic and ethical problems.

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