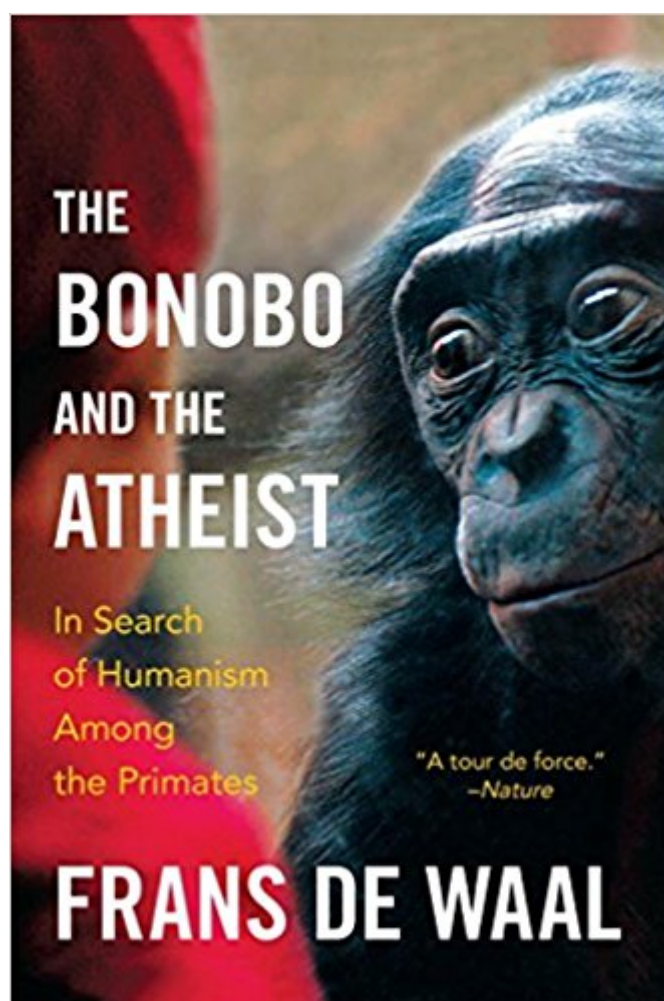


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# The Bonobo And The Atheist: In Search Of Humanism Among The Primates



## Synopsis

In this lively and illuminating discussion of his landmark research, esteemed primatologist Frans de Waal argues that human morality is not imposed from above but instead comes from within. Moral behavior does not begin and end with religion but is in fact a product of evolution. For many years, de Waal has observed chimpanzees soothe distressed neighbors and bonobos share their food. Now he delivers fascinating fresh evidence for the seeds of ethical behavior in primate societies that further cements the case for the biological origins of human fairness. Interweaving vivid tales from the animal kingdom with thoughtful philosophical analysis, de Waal seeks a bottom-up explanation of morality that emphasizes our connection with animals. In doing so, de Waal explores for the first time the implications of his work for our understanding of modern religion. Whatever the role of religious moral imperatives, he sees it as a “Johnny-come-lately” role that emerged only as an addition to our natural instincts for cooperation and empathy. But unlike the dogmatic neo-atheist of his book’s title, de Waal does not scorn religion per se. Instead, he draws on the long tradition of humanism exemplified by the painter Hieronymus Bosch and asks reflective readers to consider these issues from a positive perspective: What role, if any, does religion play for a well-functioning society today? And where can believers and nonbelievers alike find the inspiration to lead a good life? Rich with cultural references and anecdotes of primate behavior, *The Bonobo and the Atheist* engagingly builds a unique argument grounded in evolutionary biology and moral philosophy. Ever a pioneering thinker, de Waal delivers a heartening and inclusive new perspective on human nature and our struggle to find purpose in our lives. 12 illustrations

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“A tour de force.” - Christopher Boehm, *Nature*  
“A writer marshaling the evidence of his life, particularly his life as a scientist, to express a passionately held belief in the possibility of a more compassionate society.” - Meehan Crist, *New Republic*  
“A primatologist who has spent his career studying chimpanzees and bonobos, two of humanity’s closest living relatives, Mr. de Waal draws on a lifetime of empirical research. His data provides plenty of evidence that religion is not necessary in order for animals to display something that looks strikingly like human morality.” - *The Economist*  
“The perpetual challenge to atheists is that moral behavior requires religion. All that prevents tsunamis of depravity is a deity or two, some nice hymns, and the threat of hellfire and damnation. De Waal shows that human morality is deeply rooted in our primate legacy, long predating the invention of that cultural gizmo called religion. This is an immensely important book by one of our most distinguished thinkers.” - Robert Sapolsky, author of *Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers* and *Monkeyluv*  
“Frans de Waal’s new book carries the important message that human kindness is a biological feature of our species and not something that has to be imposed on us by religious teaching.” - Desmond Morris, author of *The Naked Ape*

Frans de Waal has been named one of *Time* magazine’s 100 Most Influential People. The author of *Our Inner Ape*, among many other works, he is the C. H. Candler Professor in Emory University’s Psychology Department and director of the Living Links Center at the Yerkes National Primate Research Center. He lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

This was a very educational and eye opening book, in which the author offers examples of the practice of morality, empathy, and sympathy in bonobo chimpanzees (and other animals as well) and postulates that having a religious perspective is not necessarily a prerequisite for moral behavior, but that moral practices are part of our evolutionary history as evidenced by our closest living relatives, the primates. The book does not denigrate religion though, offering that it is a good in that it offers those who practice it community, fellowship, and social bonding. There is ample evidence offered in the book though that religious belief is not at all required for morality to be practiced among the "higher primates" (i.e., us!) Really an enlightening and mind expanding book, recommended.

What do a Jeroen Bosch, Rembrandt, Vermeer and Frans de Waal have in common? They don't look up but, look around and appreciate what they see and use it as their source of inspiration. During times when painters of other countries were painting kings queens and holy saints, in the low lands they were painting normal people. In times when many still believe that god has created their religion or is on the side of their great country and makes them think they are superior, de Waal looks around and appreciates the creatures with whom people share 98% of the genes and shows they too have empathy, make plans and plans and are political. Yes, it is a good book to read. Only the "empathy, religion, believe, non believe and atheist" part in which he becomes a early Sunday morning preacher-man makes it loose one star..

Frans de Waal goes into great depth in his research to put to rest some very disturbing ideas science has been plagued with for a long time. Animals are automatons, they have no feelings, all their actions are based on instinct, humans are the only being with feelings. Humans are intrinsically nasty, evil, brutish killers that are only barely restrained by the laws and morality civilization has imposed on us. All of these ideas are being proven very, very wrong in field research everyday. De Waal takes the time to show how our inner nature is shared with other mammals, and how we are not what we have been told. He does this in a light hearted and gentle way to not offend, but educate. I recommend this book very highly.

A very thought-provoking book, with a more reasonable slant on the science vs. religion debate than I've heard from other scientists. I think, though, that anyone interested in the debate over the necessity of religion in morality would find a very convincing argument in this book.

Don't let the title fool you. This book is less about the religious perspective than you think. The author claims to be an atheist, but is quite complimentary to religion and farley chastising of modern atheism. In my opinion, his statements about religion and religious practices is the least interesting part of the book. Thankfully he doesn't spend a lot of time on the matter. The fascinating part of this book is the authors personal accounts of his work with primate species, the sanctuaries, zoos and other scientists in similar or other animal behavioral fields. The similarities and differences between the primate social societies and our own are truly amazing. He concentrates mostly on morality, empathy, sympathy, altruism and a few other behaviours that many mistakenly deem as solely human attributes. If you love animals and love to learn about their behaviours. I definitely

recommend this.

A very interesting and illuminating book. First of all, my knowledge of bonobos was shamefully small. Their faces are so different from chimpansees and even more human. The insights into their behaviour, their gentle natures, their inborn "moral" concerns for their community, the elderly or injured amazed me no end. The book is easy to follow and I enjoyed it very much. Thank you, Mr. de Waal.

Deliciously eclectic, it talks about a crazy range of things, from Bosch's Garden of Eden to how modern Japanese youth spend their time online. All this beautifully interwoven with the story of the evolution of empathy, compassion and the sense of what is right and wrong in primates and other animals. Some of my intuitive convictions and beliefs were corroborated, and I could learn what amazing animals (having read de Waal, I really should start saying - creatures, they are so much more than animals) apes are. Now I feel like reading a couple more of de Waal's books, and also check out some other authors he refers to. Fascinating read, true page-turner and so convincing.

SUPERB discussion and objective analysis of the author's years of observation of Bonobos' and Chimpanzees' caring behaviors. Especially the Bonobos ! They share food, spontaneously adopt orphans, give help and care to their elderly and injured; even from other tribes. Their genetic pro-social, community behavior (an extension of maternal mammalian instincts/ Love) clearly made them the survivors where competing individuals without these ethics succumbed to the environmental dangers. My guess is that they didn't learn these ethics/desires and Morals by reading the Bible.

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