

Study Questions on Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*.  
Princeton University Press, 2006.

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## PART I: MORALLY EVOLVED

What are the two ways of interpreting social contract theory and what is wrong with both of them?

The historical interpretation presupposes an asocial group of humans who rationally decide to enter society. Even in the Rawlsian option, it ignores the biological reality of humans as "obligatorily gregarious."

In what disciplines has our social nature been overlooked? What picture of humans has been put in its place?

In the social sciences of law, economics, and political science, we find the rational utility maximizer or *homo economicus*. But this ignores our affective side as well our sociality.

1. NB: link of sociality and affect.
2. The real problem is that this "methodology has become a metaphysics." IOW, the allegedly descriptive assumptions of the model-builders have become a vision of ideal reality. Anything that detracts from this alleged rational individuality is wrong, bad, a perversion of how things should be. So the (allegedly descriptive) assumptions then become policy prescriptions, so that neo-liberals experiment with social relations to see if they can force people to break their affective and social ties and become rational utility maximizers. The neo-liberals are the real "social engineers": it's time to call them what they are: radical experimenters with a false metaphysics.

What is Veneer Theory? How is it associated with Dawkins?

Allied with original sin, it says we are "naturally" selfish and that morality is a cultural overlay. Dawkins will say it's genes that run the show, and they are amoral replicators. (But I don't even buy the way they construe "genetics." DST shows us we can see cultural evolution linked to biological evolution. There is no dichotomy between the two.)

What are the big problems with Veneer Theory?

1. It confuses proximate psychological motivations and ultimate genetic explanations.

2. It cannot explain how human morality is exempted from allegedly universal natural selfishness and competition.
3. IOW, it can't explain our evolution from amoral beasts to moral humans (52).

What did Kropotkin have to say?

We see lots of cooperation in nature. Darwinists focused too much on intragroup competition.

What did Darwin have to say about ethics? How does de Waal stand on the "unit of selection" issue?

Darwin recognized cooperation and expansion of sympathy beyond parent – child relations. He thought group selection was at work. De Waal thinks we don't need group selection and that kin selection and "reciprocal altruism" are enough.

Who was Westermarck and why is he important?

First to promote an integrated view of both animals and humans and both cultural and biological evolution ("culture and evolution" is how de Waal puts it). He's also important for emphasizing the sentimentalist tradition in morals (Hume) and for trying to define what is a "moral emotion" (disinterested concern with how "anyone" should be treated).

What is the Russian Doll model and how does empathy play a role in it?

Morality is seen as an outgrowth of animal sociality; this is a "bottom-up model."  
Empathy is a prime building block.

What are the different aspects or stages of empathy?

1. Emotional contagion: having same feeling as the other
  - a. Personal distress: selfishly seek to relieve your own distress (provoked by distress of others).
2. Empathy proper: being able to "know" what the other is feeling
  - a. Sympathy: being able to put yourself in the other's shoes. (Cf. Adam Smith quote on p. 31: "changing places in fancy with the sufferer.")

Why has empathy been missed in biological studies?

VERY IMPORTANT: p. 26: because of individualistic focus in biological studies. So tool use is seen as important mark of "intelligence" rather than social competence. There is a lot to say here about the "Tarzan" image of lots of cog sci that takes an evolutionary

look: it's all about "solving problems posed by the environment." A solitary hunter is the implied model. Robin Dunbar is particularly scathing in diagnosing this. The problem of course, is that old-time hunting and fishing are intensely social activities: where to go, how to go about the hunt, how to distribute the results. Plus there tends to be a masculinist orientation. Current hunter-gatherers rely on female-produced food (fruits, nuts, seeds) for the majority of calories (though of course we can't allow modern vegetarian ethics to cloud the huge benefits of animal protein).

What is targeted helping? Why is it important?

Requires ability to see what the other needs (32).

What does consolation behavior require?

Self-other distinction (36).

How does the Russian doll model help us understand autism? How does ToM figure here?

Most accounts of autism equate it with failure to develop cognitive capacity of mind-reading or Theory Theory. But now some think autism is more of an affective problem, probably tied to a deficit in simulation of the other person's emotional state.

Theory Theory versus Simulation Theory debate in ToM. That is, TT says we impute a mental state to others due to cognitive inference we do after gathering "evidence" from observation of the outside surface of the body of the other. Whereas ST says we do the imputation after an inference derived from observation of our internal state which simulates the inner state of the other.

But to me the whole thing is falsely posed: you don't need to figure out what's in someone's head, because most of the time the "meaning" of their actions is readable on their surface. ToM presupposes an inside / outside dichotomy that phenomenology shows isn't the case most of the time. IOW, the "location" of an emotion is not in the head, but on the face. You don't have to infer a private mental state for an emotion, bcs it's already publicly available. And that's bcs human ontology is not that of a collection of private mental spheres with outsides that need to be cognitively deciphered by others, but is fundamentally public, shared, and corporeally affective.

Why is gratitude a complex act?

Requires time lag, memory, and ability to recognize the individual benefactor.

How do expectations play a role in considerations of fairness? What social conditions are necessary?

You have to be able to expect a certain reward. You can't live in a despotic hierarchy, because then you expect to be treated unequally.

This is very important. With DST, we have to fold cultural practices into our notion of evolution and development. So we are opened up to the investigation of politics and affect, as well as the question of revolution and "ideology." Why don't people revolt from conditions of inequality? They come to believe they get what they deserve, even if that is unequal. But this is not "ideology," if by that you mean they have the wrong ideas, that is, that they don't understand social reality, which is hidden from them by a veil of illusion. But this is way too cognitive. We have to deal with affective structure as it's embodied in corporeal upbringing. The real "German Ideology" Marx diagnosed is the idea that ideas are an important area to investigate. But Marx's problem was he focused too much on violence and coercion and not enough on embodied affective structure. Which is not to underplay the role of violence in human history! Recall the immortal words of the chapter on primitive accumulation: "And the history of this, their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire."

How is emotional contagion like a reflex? (51)

It comes over us from outside.

Deleuze will push this and stress the independence of affect, its non-subjective, involuntary aspect. In the cinema books he'll talk about the ability of the close-up to capture "affect" as non-subjective, as environmental, if you will. There is something to this: we easily talk about the mood of a landscape (natural or artistic), the mood of a party or even of a conversation: it's between the people, it's independent of them. Which is not to say it would stay even if the people left (although some architecture captures affect the way a landscape does). At least we can say the mood of a party or conversation is emergent and not a mere summation of individual moods? Now what about the affect of a painting? Can we say it is just the probability of triggering an emotion in an audience with a certain affective structure? But even then there's something that deserves ontological investigation: what is the mode of being of such an "emotional potential"? Isn't it precisely "virtual," i.e., capable of divergent actualization?

What is the relation of pure rationality and psychopathy?

Have the students recall Damasio here. Affect and reason need to work together.

What is the "fragility" of morality?

It's being able to be expanded from in-group to universality. This expansion is subject to available resources.

De Waal says "loyalty" to group is itself a moral virtue. OK, maybe, but lots of questions here about nationalism (165). In what sense is a nation a group? Isn't nationalism parasitic on evolved feelings of (small) in-group loyalty. Aristotle called this *philia*; recall his limit on the size of a polis to about 5000 citizens [not total population of course: excluding women, children, slaves, and resident foreigners or *perioikoi*].

What is the "profound irony" linking war and morality (55)?

War served as selection pressure for socializing / subjectifying practices producing intense group loyalty.

De Waal, like many others, underplays in-group hierarchization: creation of warrior caste / class and attendant domination. Tie-in with agriculture and surplus allowing specialization. Cf Nietzsche and the cultural evolution of guilt.

How does de Waal marshal psychological evidence?

Cites Haidt on affect driven intuitions; cites developmental psychology on early and reliable ontogeny of moral sentiments and capacities (spontaneous comforting of others) (55-57).

How does de Waal account for the overlooking of his continuist theory by evolutionary biology?

He calls it the Beethoven error: the idea that a cruel process can't produce morality, just like it's hard to see that B's messy apartment could be the site for his precise compositions. But if social cooperation helped fitness of ancestors, then it's easy to see selection pressure for cooperation.

But this lets the imbrications of biology and individualist / capitalist / masculinist / racist political economy off the hook way too easily!

What is the relation of behaviorism and anthropodenial? How does it relate to the conflict btw cognitive and evolutionary parsimony?

Behaviorism wanted a unified theory of psych for both animals and humans. But because of the problems with black-boxing human mind (66), behaviorism finally gave way to the cognitive revolution in human psychology (Kohlberg, etc.). But they then dug in their heels with regard to animals. But this creates an artificial duality in nature (cognitive humans and mechanical animals), which violated evolutionary parsimony.

What sort of anthropomorphism should be avoided? What sort is okay?

We shouldn't just project human emotions and intentions onto animals. But careful proposal of affective / cognitive abilities of animals for purposes of hypothesis formation is good, in fact, necessary.

Why is de Waal leery of notion of animal rights? What does he propose in its place?

He thinks they won't be real rights, bcs of the asymmetry of the animal / human relation. He proposes an ethic of care instead of animal rights. For the great apes, he proposes that all research be "mutually beneficial and enjoyable" (80).

He doesn't connect the dots and criticize rights as rationalistic and individualistic, when his whole approach is to stress affect social interconnection. The challenge, as he states, is to expand our partial affective loyalty from in-group, to all humans, to human-like animals. (This is Hume's starting point: it's not that humans are egoists: it's that we are partial to small groups: kin, friends, neighbors).