

Study Questions on Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*.
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ROBERT WRIGHT

What are the two types of anthropomorphic language? What is de Waal's error in Wright's opinion?

He credits animals with too much cognitive capacities when emotional regulation is probably enough (91-92). The key is that "many emotions are proxies for strategic calculation" (87).

What are the problems with Wright's formulation on p 87? "According to evolutionary psychology, human emotions were 'designed' by natural selection to serve the strategic interests of individual human beings (or more precisely, to further the proliferation of the individual's genes in the environment of our evolution—but for purposes of this discussion we can assume the interests of the individual and of the individual's genes align, as they often do.)"

This crude, as so much EP is. First of all, he doesn't distinguish basic emotions from social emotions. Secondly, he thus assumes massive modularity even for advanced social emotions. Third, he has assumed individual gene selectionism (Dawkins and the "selfish gene"). But surely with social emotions we have to factor in cultural inputs. But he can't because he neglects DST perspective which would include cultural factors in individual ontogeny. Instead he has classic Dawkins selfish gene notion, complete with notion of interests of genes, which Joyce demolished.

How does Wright define Veneer Theory and what is his alternative?

He sets up dichotomy between VT w/ morality as cultural overlay and "naturalistic" idea that "our moral impulses are rooted in our genes."

But again, this is laughably crude, given a DST perspective. It's Wright's simple-minded selfish gene notion that sets up his whole bit about how "our moral judgments are subtly and pervasively colored by emotionally mediated self-interest" (93). This is key to his theory on 95 about "systematic 'corruption'" whereby emotional self-interest interferes with moral / rational universality.

But this is vulgar use of "genes" to naturalize capitalist individualism (to be equally crude – more subtly, he overlooks study of how cultural embodiment via subjectification practices has a wide leeway along the autonomy / community axis.)

How does Wright botch Haidt and the affective research tradition on 95 when he says "our moral judgments, though reached through a seemingly conscious and rational process of deliberation – a cognitive process – can be biased subtly by emotional factors"?

First of all, Haidt shows that affect leads to intuition which leads to judgment and that rationalization is ex post facto (in most cases). It is true that there is a retrospective, wag the dog, illusion that reason is what generates judgment, but that is an illusion in most cases. It is also true that when philosophers do moral reasoning leading to a judgment (a rare occurrence), then they might be prey to unconscious biases.

Anyway, the real problem is Wright's unquestioning individualism. De Waal's whole point is that much affect is social, not individual. It's only a confusion of proximate psychological motivation and ultimate genetic explanation (and an unquestioning individualism on the genetic level) that leads to Wright's idea that morality is purely cognitive universalism and that emotion is biasing or corrupting individualism.

The Humean problem is that moral sentiments are partial, not individualist / egoist. You can't escape the prison of psychological egoism (remember this can be emotional proxies producing unconscious bias as well as conscious calculation) rooted in genetic individualism (altruism is just hypocrisy for the true egoist). But you can expand a partial, but already social, affective structure.

CHRISTINE KORSGAARD

What are Korsgaard's main points against VT?

1. That the principle of self-interest is not proven to be an effective principle of practical reason. IOW, that it's not effective in actually getting your way.
2. That the idea of self-interest is coherent for a social animal like humans.
3. That most of us don't in fact have to struggle to act in a moral manner. Only psychopaths have to restrain rampant self-interest.
4. It's absurd to think non-human animals act in their self-interest. This requires a cognitive sophistication we can't assume they have.

Why do her objections miss the point?

VT is not just an intellectual position “popular in the social sciences” (100). For one thing, it is used for policy proposals. That’s because the “social sciences” are completely taken up in more or less transparent power relations with contemporary capitalism. The idea the economics is an intellectual pursuit, that it is a “science” the way physics is a science (leaving aside the difficult question of the social context of physics!), is absurdly naïve. A glance at the history of the “Chicago School” (Chile, etc.) should be enough.

Where does Korsgaard locate the discontinuity btw humans and other animals?

Positive characteristics: “...elaborate cultures, historical memory, languages ... art, literature, science, philosophy ... jokes ... our ability to make friends across the boundaries between species” (104).

Negative characteristics: “we seem to be psychologically damaged” (104).

Why does Korsgaard not think morality is a matter of the content of intentions? How does this restrict morality to humans? (107)

Because animal goals are given by affective states. That means they are determined, not free (110). Freedom and morality go together with rationality as ability to judge your goals, or “normative self-government” (112). This requires self-consciousness, i.e., knowledge of grounds of action as grounds (113). This is unique to humans (116).

PHILIP KITCHER

What is the alliance btw Darwin and Hume? Why is it a “lure”?

Moral sentiments grounded in animal prosociality. It’s a lure bcs it underestimates the complexity of psychological altruism (128-9). Note the notion of a multi-dimensional “altruism space” (129).

What is the difference btw animal altruism and human moral practices?

Moral emotions have to be expanded to include all humanity; animals can’t universalize like that (132-133).

What are “wantons”?

Creatures governed by the most powerful impulse, whatever that is at the moment (136).

What is Kitcher's story about evolution of morality?

Linguistic ability to share formulation and evaluation of plans leads us to regulate conduct of small groups. Then came a process of cultural evolution (variation in sets of socializing practices), with reproductive success or "smoother societies, greater harmony, and increased cooperation" as selection pressures (136-7). This leads to development of capacity for "normative guidance—perhaps understood in that enlargement and refinement of sympathy that gives rise to Smith's impartial spectator" (137-8).

This is still pretty naïve. It doesn't account for war as selection pressure, nor for big break that agriculture and class society makes in different war practices (co-evolution). Thus it doesn't account for internal hierarchies. To make a society efficient, smooth, harmonious, etc, can mean all sorts of violence and unequal distributions, when it has to be good at war.

PETER SINGER

How does Singer nuance de Waal's reading of Greene?

He shows that a few people are able to do utilitarian / rational judgments in the "hot" / personal version of the trolley problem. This means they have to use reason to over-ride emotional tug towards deontology (147-48). Oddly, this puts us on Kant's side after all (150).

What is Singer's position about rights with regard to moral obligations?

Rights are not the foundation of our moral obligations. They are instead founded on "concern for the interests of all those affected by our actions" (154).

How does he deal with de Waal's concern about the asymmetrical relation involved in the human granting of rights to animals?

He's not that worried, because we grant rights in other asymmetrical relations (children, severely intellectually disabled). It's suffering that counts for Singer, not intellect.

What about the case of the great apes?

Singer is willing to grant them special rights bcs of their closeness to humans, in the hopes that it could lead to better treatment for all animals (158).

DE WAAL'S RESPONSE TO COMMENTATORS

What is the core concern of morality for de Waal?

Constraints on actions that could hurt or help others; “often places common good above individual interests.” The rest is just “social convention” (162).

What about loyalty and available resources?

This is the Humean challenge of expanding partiality.

Where does de Waal locate the discontinuity btw animals and humans?

In middle of second level of his “Tower of Morality.”

Where does he underplay intra-group hierarchy?

P. 173: “morality strengthens a cooperative society from which everyone benefits and to which most are prepared to contribute.” We’ve been over this point several times before. It’s simply not the case that most social systems after agriculture have been “cooperative society from which everyone benefits”! Most have condemned the vast majority to serfdom if not slavery. Some sort of religious world view justifying the hierarchy is scant consolation, no matter how deeply embodied these can be. The need to resort of violence, the need for the iron fist inside the glove of embodied culture (a horrible mixed metaphor, I’ll agree!), is all too evident in history.

Where do we see the key to the reality of “Veneer Theory”?

In the footnote to 176, where we see it’s not a “theory” so much as source of policy. De Waal writes: “even if all that was demonstrated was that one can create a situation in which chimpanzees consider the welfare of others secondary.” But that’s exactly all that neo-liberal policies do: they create the condition whereby RCT presuppositions are fulfilled, where rational individual utility maximization is the only way to survive.

What is de Waal’s final point?

Morality builds on nature; it doesn’t fight it (181).