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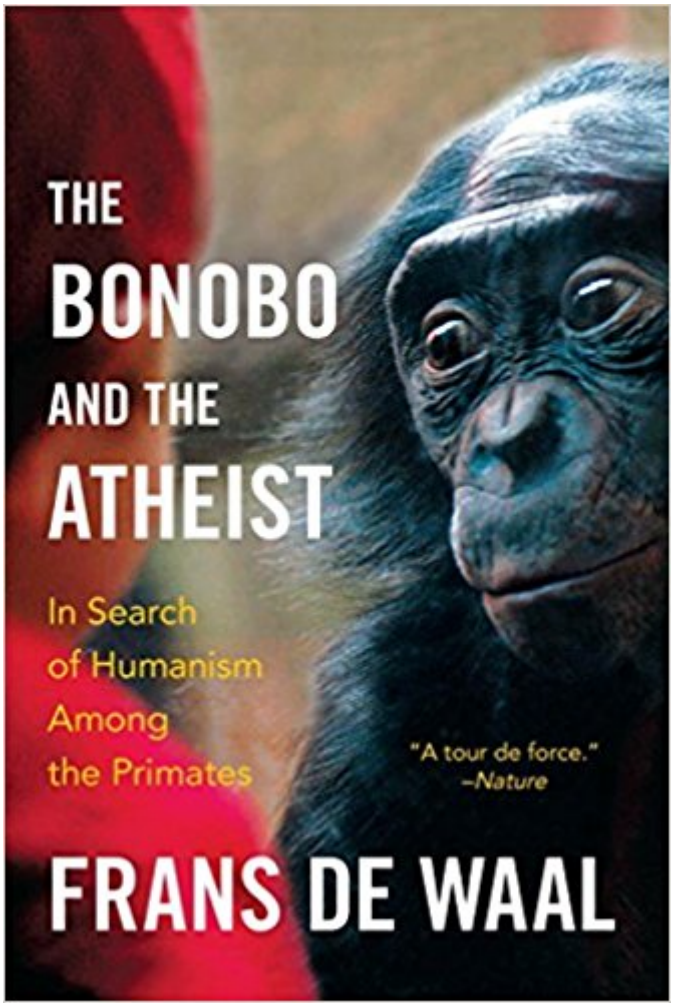
The Bonobo And The Atheist: In Search Of Humanism Among The Primates



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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 â œJohnny-come-latelyâ • role that emerged only as an addition to our natural instincts for cooperation and empathy. But unlike the dogmatic neo-atheist of his bookâ ™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 book about religion and morality from the hands of one of the foremost primatologists in the world. In this brilliant book, written in a lucid, essayistic style that is personal and even conversational, De Waal defends his thesis that morality is not an invention of religion, but that religion is a cultural scaffolding that builds upon and enhances biologically innate moral rules. Even more, De Waal acknowledges that religion is so deeply engrained in human nature that it has become one of the defining characteristics of humanity. Interestingly, De Waal's conclusions resonate deeply with the findings of the cognitive science of religion (De Waal hints to this resonance himself in the final chapter). I am curious to see where this will go in the future.Moreover, even though De Waal explicitly admits he is an atheist himself, he argues against the militant new atheists (whose behavior he slightly controversially but with reason describes as having a religious zealousness), that religion should perhaps not be done away with before atheists are able to come up with an equally solid and generally convincing scaffolding. Not surprisingly, some of these atheists, such as Sam Harris, have already responded to De Waal's view with ridicule. Such a response is unfair and does not do justice to the fact that De Waal is trying to bring into practice what he preaches throughout the book: that cooperation and mutual support ultimately serves the future better than polarisation and detachment.

Let me start with an admission: I didn't finish reading this book. Please take that into consideration when reading my comments...I love bonobos and I'm an atheist, so I expected to submerge myself into a great read, but I'm struggling with this one. Reading de Waal's book is uncomfortable. I feel like I've walked into a private argument between people who evidently have spent years sniping at each other from afar -- but now de Waal has decided to take it to his opponents, personally.I wanted de Waal's insights to help explain why people think they need religion to be moral, but I have no idea what the hell he's talking about. He'll write a bit about apes, and then take off into an argument with "theoreticians" or (gasp!) "scientists" who evidently have tried to make points with which he disagrees. Who are these people he is criticizing? Is this another one of those arguments between humanists, skeptics, free-thinkers, and atheists? And what did they say that has pissed him off so much?I get it that he doesn't agree with the strident "new" atheists. I understand that a segment of the atheist community finds Richards Dawkins a bit, well... a bit too much. And Christopher Hitchens is an acquired taste, especially when he's at his angry best. (Disclosure: I enjoy reading Hitchens,

and I value the time I saw him speak - a couple of days before he was told he had stage four cancer.) Are you with me, reader? If you don't know what I'm talking about, de Waal's book will make absolutely no sense to you. Even though I know some of the arguments of the popularized atheists Frans opposes, I still got lost when he started into people I don't know.De Waal has so much insight to add to the discussion of evolution, science, morals, and religion.

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