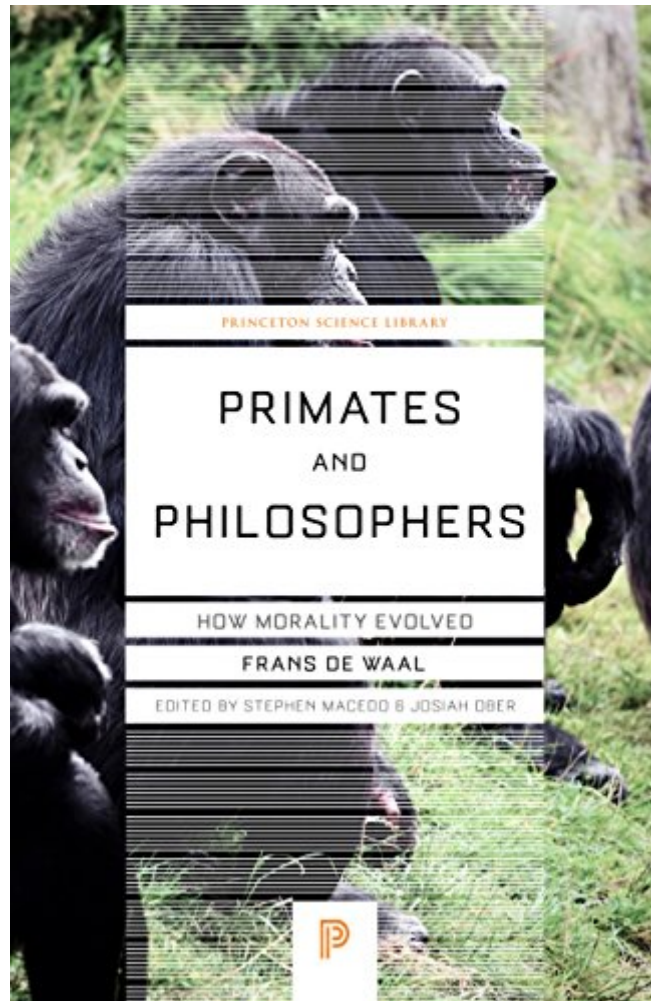


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# Primates And Philosophers: How Morality Evolved (Princeton Science Library)



## Synopsis

Can virtuous behavior be explained by nature, and not by human rational choice? "It's the animal in us," we often hear when we've been bad. But why not when we're good? *Primates and Philosophers* tackles this question by exploring the biological foundations of one of humanity's most valued traits: morality. In this provocative book, renowned primatologist Frans de Waal argues that modern-day evolutionary biology takes far too dim a view of the natural world, emphasizing our "selfish" genes and reinforcing our habit of labeling ethical behavior as humane and the less civilized as animalistic. Seeking the origin of human morality not in evolution but in human culture, science insists that we are moral by choice, not by nature. Citing remarkable evidence based on his extensive research of primate behavior, de Waal attacks "Veneer Theory," which posits morality as a thin overlay on an otherwise nasty nature. He explains how we evolved from a long line of animals that care for the weak and build cooperation with reciprocal transactions. Drawing on Darwin, recent scientific advances, and his extensive research of primate behavior, de Waal demonstrates a strong continuity between human and animal behavior. He probes issues such as anthropomorphism and human responsibilities toward animals. His compelling account of how human morality evolved out of mammalian society will fascinate anyone who has ever wondered about the origins and reach of human goodness. Based on the Tanner Lectures de Waal delivered at Princeton University's Center for Human Values in 2004, *Primates and Philosophers* includes responses by the philosophers Peter Singer, Christine M. Korsgaard, and Philip Kitcher and the science writer Robert Wright. They press de Waal to clarify the differences between humans and other animals, yielding a lively debate that will fascinate all those who wonder about the origins and reach of human goodness.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

When Charles Darwin published "The Origin of Species", it was greeted equally by widespread acceptance and outrage. The acceptance was due to the realisation that here, at last, was a mechanism explaining the workings of life. The outrage was expressed over what this meant about human beings. Could we be relegated to the status of "mere animals"? Frans de Waal has merged the two views to show that we indeed are closely related to other animals. As a social species we share behaviour traits with other creatures who live in groups. While most of today's objections to "Darwinism" centre on the loss of "morality", the author notes that instead we should rejoice in sharing something so fundamental. In these exquisitely written essays - the Tanner Lectures - de Waal shows how behaviour in various species, particularly our closest cousins the great apes, exhibits moral issues daily confronted and resolved. His research has led him to challenge one of Western society's most commonly held shibboleths - that morality is limited to human beings and that it lies as a thin layer over our animal instincts. Labelled by de Waal as the Veneer Theory, he attributes its source to Thomas Henry Huxley, also known as "Darwin's Bulldog" for his defence of natural selection. Huxley, along with Alfred Russel Wallace, thought that human reasoning was to ?? mechanism lifting us above the remainder of the animals. The author notes the irony of Darwin's most vocal defender countering the naturalist's own stance that morality in humans is reflected in ape behaviour. De Waal forcibly contests Huxley's view, arguing that moral decisions result from our being a social species. Survival meant cooperation from our earliest evolutionary state, and was strengthened by selection pressures over time.

Primates and Philosophers is not a comprehensive analysis of the origins of morality, but focuses on one minutia of the subject: whether human morality goes deep into our evolutionary past or is new with the arrival of our bulbous brains and cultures. The answer depends on how morality is defined. If moral behavior falls under the definition of morality, it seems clear that other primates such as chimps share at least rudimentary moral behavior. But if morality is defined as abstract

thinking about right and wrong and living by principles derived abstractly, then morality must be pretty recent in humans' evolutionary past. De Waal quotes Richard Dawkins as saying "we, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators" and "[we are] nicer than is good for our selfish genes." De Waal takes this as lending support of what he calls 'veneer theory', the position that morality is "a cultural overlay, a thin veneer hiding an otherwise selfish and brutish nature." Having read seven of Richard Dawkins' books, I feel like I understand his views pretty well, and I don't think he would agree with veneer theory at all. I think there is some ambiguity here between proper domain vs. actual domain. The proper domain is the conditions under which a behavior evolved, and the actual domain is the conditions under which the behavior is manifest. Sometimes they are the same, sometimes not. For example, the proper domain of a moth's light-sensitive navigation system is a light source in the dark that an ancient moth would have encountered, such as the moon. But today, the actual domain may be a light bulb, candle, or bug zapper.

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