



A personal tribute to Frans De Waal (1948–2024), who inspired the philosophy of animal minds

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Abstract

Frans de Waal (1948–2024) transformed our understanding of primate cognition and social behavior, shaping the perspectives of scientists, philosophers, and the general public through his groundbreaking research and engaging popular books.

Keywords Primatology · History of science · Chimpanzees · Monkeys · Empathy · Social cognition · Animal morality · Animal consciousness

Frans de Waal, primatologist and philosopher, helped us to see kindness amidst the strife, and similarity in the face of apparent difference. Trained as a biologist in the European tradition of ethology, he dedicated his life to studying the deep questions, such as the nature of morality, and the sources of political power. Rather than asking these questions while looking at humans, de Waal's genius was to ask them with non-human primates in mind. This methodology had the double effect of revealing great apes and monkeys on their own terms, while also offering insight into concepts that have long been of interest to philosophers. Though he started this research at a time when many were still debating whether chimpanzees are thinking, feeling beings, today we have moved past such questions, thanks in large part to de Waal's groundbreaking research, and to his flair for science communication.

de Waal's first major contribution emerged from his PhD research with chimpanzees at the Burgers' Zoo in Arnhem, Netherlands, looking at peace when many ethologists were excited about the evolution of aggression. de Waal found that chimpanzee societies are not all organized around despotic males with the greatest physical strength, but that leadership qualities include generosity, impartiality, and toleration. Sure, chimpanzees fight, but they also have systems to repair relationships—reconciliation and consolation. They reach out to one another, hugging and kissing after

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a fight. A loser might get an embrace, and a third party might help patch things up. That is, chimpanzees have practices of care. de Waal's first book, *Chimpanzee Politics* (1982), introduced us to these features of chimpanzee societies, and it launched a dynamic shadow career as a public intellectual.

I met Frans for the first time in Minneapolis where I had just started my doctoral studies, shortly after he published his second book, *Good Natured* (1996). I had already picked it up in a local bookshop because of the subtitle: *The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals*. How can a philosophy PhD student resist a title like that? The topic also attracted the attention of my local Unitarian church, who invited him to give a talk. Thanks to Minnesota Public Radio I found out about the talk the same day it was scheduled, and eagerly found my way to the church. During the introduction, we learned why the Unitarians had invited a primatologist to speak—the congregation was reading *Good Natured* “as an alternative to the Bible.” After his lecture, I joined the throng of people waiting to have a private word. I wanted to ask Frans his opinion of the unpublished reports of dolphin mirror self-recognition which I had seen during my time in Hawaii. I recall his answer was one of careful skepticism, worrying that since dolphins lack hands to touch the mark, the evidence might be less compelling than it was for the chimpanzees. That's when I first learned that before he accepted bold claims, Frans wanted to see strong evidence.

It wasn't until I had become a professor at York University in the early 2000s that we met again. We had invited Frans to Toronto to give a lecture at a fundraiser for the Borneo Orangutan Society Canada. He generously agreed to come and support our NGO, and gave a lecture about different political styles to a packed house, showing pictures of chimpanzee versions of current politicians. At dinner that night, I got the chance to talk to Frans about ape theory of mind, a topic I was writing a book on. I wanted to know whether he ever saw chimpanzees trying to explain behavior. He thought for a minute, and then told us the story of a young chimpanzee at Yerkes who was struggling and screaming after getting her finger caught in a wire fence. Frans freed her, and she ran off, but the older chimpanzees came over to the fence and poked their fingers through the mesh, “as if they were trying to figure out what the problem was”. Needless to say, that story made it into the book. Since then Frans has been incredibly generous to me, sharing stories, photos, papers, and ideas. His leadership style exemplified those positive properties he first saw in the Burgers Zoo. Kindness and care, as default positions.

With an office above the chimpanzee enclosure at the Yerkes field station at Emory University, Frans had daily knowledge of the moods and trends in the chimpanzee community. He didn't just know chimpanzees, but he knew the individuals he worked with. And this means he had a lot of stories. In his books Frans told us about the chimpanzees he knew so well, starting with the Arnhem chimpanzees. We meet Luit, who hid his fear grin behind his hand, and Jakie who retrieved the tire for Krom, whose disability made it difficult for her to do it herself. He named a recent book after Mama, continuing her story from when we first met her in *Chimpanzee Politics*. The stories are compelling and illustrative, but they are only a small part of a very rich research career. Frans wrote in the preface to the 25th anniversary edition of *Chimpanzee Politics* that “I have led a sort of double life,” conducting scientific research during the day, and writing his popular books in the evenings and weekends, where

he can “address larger issues, some of which can barely be mentioned in the scientific literature.” His scientific research included carefully controlled studies of learning, social cognition, fairness, empathy, cooperation, self-recognition, other-recognition, and communication. de Waal helped to promote the idea that great apes have cultures, demonstrating that conventionalized behaviors get passed on to other group members who observe high ranking individuals perform the behavior. And a video from his 2003 study with Sarah Brosnan on fairness in capuchin monkeys has become a greatest hit at philosophy conferences and in lectures on animal minds and the evolution of morality. If for some reason you haven’t seen it, you can find it in his Ted Talk “Moral behaviors in animals”.

Frans’ moonlighting included not just popular writings, but also works of philosophy. In 2003 he delivered the Tanner Lectures on Human Value at Princeton. Titled “Morality and the Social Instincts: Continuity with the Other Primates” de Waal argued against what he termed “vener theory,” the idea that humans (and other animals) are naturally selfish and that morality is a thin culturally-provided veneer painted on top. Instead, he quoted Mengzi approvingly, agreeing that fellow-feeling is a natural instinct of humans, but going further by arguing that care is a natural response that we see in other animals, too. These lectures, and four philosophical responses to them, were published in 2006 as the book *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (2006). Essays by Christine Korsgaard and Philip Kitcher criticized de Waal’s continuity view, taking issue with his underlying sentimentalism. Later de Waal’s arguments found both advocates and critics in the philosophical community, and there are few discussions of the evolution of morality that do not take up de Waal’s philosophical argument or empirical findings. His article “Natural normativity: The ‘is’ and ‘ought’ of animal behavior” (2014) placed much of his previous research into the philosophical context of animals having social norms, describing the rules that young chimpanzees have to learn, and how they are dramatically punished when they come of age and violate these new-to-them rules.

In addition to his philosophical contributions to questions about the nature of moral and social normativity, Frans thought deeply about methodology in his field, defending the mental continuity thesis, challenging the scientific virtue of simplicity, and deriding “anthropodenial” as a bias in his field which privileges incorrectly denying human traits to animals—an argument later taken up by Elliott Sober. Frans challenged most claims of human uniqueness, and when pushed on what makes us different from other animals, he would only point to language. With scientists hesitant to investigate animal consciousness, Frans introduced a distinction between emotions and feelings that would let them investigate the former without having to make claims about the later. Similarly, in his studies of empathy, he adopted the distinction between a cognitive empathy that requires having beliefs about others’ mental states, and an affective empathy that is embodied and grounded in feelings. Drawing these kinds of distinctions allows for a more fine-grained scientific study, and also helps to support a taxonomy for cognitive science showing the variety of mechanisms involved in behavior. By looking at how apes do the same kinds of things human do, we can reveal causes that we might not have noticed, and then ask whether human behavior can be explained in those terms, too. As Frans put it in 2014, “That’s how

you can sum up my career: I've brought apes a little closer to humans but I've also brought humans down a bit.”

Frans wasn't only a primatologist, but also a philosopher. I don't know if he saw himself that way, but I sure do. Frans was widely read in philosophy, he published in philosophy journals, and he contributed to conceptual work in ethics and philosophy of science. He is widely cited in philosophy (with at least 70 citations in this journal alone), and his arguments are taught in philosophy classes at all levels (I've taught his work in courses including *The Meaning of Life*, *Introduction to Ethics*, *Philosophy of Mind*, and, obviously, in *The Philosophy of Animal Minds*). The day I learned of his death, I was reviewing a conference paper submitted to the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology—and there was Frans, right on the first page.

Last fall, Frans told me he was working on a book that was engaging the question of invertebrate consciousness. Since the beginning, Frans didn't shy away from talking about what animals feel, starting with monkeys and apes, but later turning to other species as well. He studied empathy in prairie voles, and reported it in wolves, dogs, goats, dolphins, hyenas and elephants. More recently he turned his attention to invertebrate felt experience, as well as the moral implications of animal sentience. At the tail end of the pandemic, Frans wrote me with another generous offer—to coauthor a short piece on animal feeling for *Science*. We wrote about the philosophical and scientific evidence for felt emotion in crabs and lobsters, stress in bees, pain in octopuses, and argued that it is time for invertebrates to “become part of our species' moral landscape”. Frans was starting on a new path, and his untimely death is a tragedy that is both intellectual and personal. When we lost Frans de Waal, we lost an enormous presence in the world. He showed us just how natural it is to care for others, no matter how different they may be.

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