

# Non-human animals can be agents of morality

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Running head: Critical Essay Non-human Animals Can Be Agents of Morality

Insert Insert Grade Insert 20 July It has been verified through a string of experiments and studies that non human animals can be moral agents (De Waal, 2008, 282-83). Psychologists have taken great focus on the subject by evaluating the essence of morality and investigating whether animals have the capacity to practice morality demeanor and elucidates moral qualities like, cooperation, reciprocity along with fairness and that can be observed in social animals. From de Waal's account, it is evident that animals especially chimpanzees can actually be moral agents. The basic concept in understanding the ability of animals to be moral agents is the evaluation of how human morality is distinguished from chimpanzee "morality". De Waal envisages that human morality develops from the morality of our common ancestors. Morality emerges gradually, becoming more complex over time, but human morality is different in degree, not in kind, to the "morality" of other primates. Philip Kitcher, Christine Korsgaard, and Peter Singer in their book *Philosophers and Primates* opine that human morality is in some respects unique: it is different in kind. They suggest that morality is often a matter of overcoming our nature. Korsgaard maintains that "A form of life governed by principles and values is a very different thing from a form of life governed by instinct, desire, and emotion; even a very intelligent and sociable form of life governed by instinct, desire, and emotion. ... We have ideas about what we ought to do and to be like and we are constantly trying to live up to them, apes do not live that way," (Kitcher, Korsgaard & Singer, 2009, 117). She considers that morality requires a form of self-consciousness that allows us to inspect and assess our intentions. Correspondingly, Philip Kitcher asserts that "chimpanzees are ... vulnerable to whichever impulse <https://assignbuster.com/non-human-animals-can-be-agents-of-morality/>

happens to be dominant at a particular moment,” (Sager, 2012, 4-8).

Therefore, he hypothesizes that our ability to use language gave rise to cultural evolution that moves morality beyond its biological roots, in some respects opposing it. According to de Waal, morality arises from the distinction between ultimate causes and proximate causes. Morality can lead to reproduction (kin selection) and reciprocal altruism: animals that engage in altruistic behavior may be more successful reproductively or in terms of obtaining beneficial cooperation from other animals. The ultimate cause is “self-interested” (Kitcher, Korsgaard & Singer, 2009, 136). However, the proximate cause may not be: that is, the immediate motivation of an animal that has evolved altruistic psychological capacities may be the best interest of other animals independently of their self-interest. In his paper titled “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories,” Michael Stocker laments that modern ethical theories fail to provide the right sort of motivation for morality (Stocker, 1976). The central point in the article is that modern moral theories are particularly unsuited to deal with relationships of friendship and love because they impose external obligations that are actually self-defeating. De Waal endeavors to base morality on empathy and the social emotions. Many animals, including birds, display “emotional contagion” (De Waal, 2008, 282-83). They take on the emotional state of other animals nearby; consider babies who cry when they hear the cries of other babies. Empathy can give rise to sympathetic concern or personal distress. De Waal’s own research shows chimpanzees engaging in consolation, when chimpanzees comfort the loser of an aggressive encounter. This seems to require not only empathy, but also an ability to assess the other chimpanzee’s situation and react appropriately by providing comfort. Finally,

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there is “empathetic perspective-taking” in which animals enter the perspective of others and sometimes engage in “targeting helping ... fine-tuned to another’s specific situation and goals.” (de Waal, 2008, 285). Owing to the fact that we share common ancestors with other primates, it might be the case that our sense of morality is an outgrowth of earlier emotional processes. In de Waal’s perception, morality follows the “Russian Doll Model” (De Waal, 2008, 288). At the inner level, there is emotional contagion made possible by an automatic “Perception-Action Mechanism”: “When the subject attends to the object’s state, the subject’s neural representations of similar states are automatically and unconsciously activated.” (de Waal, 2008, 286). In conclusion, non-human animals can be moral agents because animals especially chimpanzees and other primates have the ability to express the emotions of empathy and consolation that are associated with morality. In spite of the fact that there are certain defining features of human morality that are different in kind from the psychological and social features of non-human social animals such as chimpanzees, the studies conducted by Frans de Waal are proof enough that animals could actually be agents of morality. References De Waal, F. (2008). Putting the Altruism Back Into Altruism: The Evolution of Empathy. *Annual Review of Psychology* 59, 2008: 279-300. Kitcher, P., Korsgaard, C. & Singer, P. (2009). *Philosophers and Primates*. Washington: Princeton, NJ. Pierce, J. & Bekoff, M. (2009). *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Sager, A. (2012). UNST 249: Morality (Lecture notes). 4-8. Stocker, M. (1976). The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories. *Journal of Philosophy*, 73(14), 1976: 453-466).