

Morality and the Distinctiveness of Human Action

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What is different about the way we *act* that makes us, and not any other species, moral beings?

- Frans de Waal¹

A moral being is one who is capable of comparing his past and future actions or motives, and of approving or disapproving of them. We have no reason to suppose that any of the lower animals have this capacity.

- Charles Darwin²

Two issues confront us. One concerns the truth or falsehood of what Frans de Waal calls “Veneer Theory.” This is the theory that morality is a thin veneer on an essentially amoral human nature. According to Veneer Theory, we are ruthlessly self-interested creatures, who conform to moral norms only to avoid punishment or disapproval, only when others are not watching us, or only when our commitment to these norms is not tested by strong temptation. The second concerns the question whether morality has its roots in our evolutionary past, or represents some sort of radical break with that past. De Waal proposes to address these two questions together, by adducing evidence that our closest relatives in the natural world exhibit tendencies that seem intimately related to morality – sympathy, empathy, sharing, conflict resolution, and so on. He concludes that the roots of

¹ In *Good-Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals*. Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 111

² In *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, pp. 88-89.

morality can be found in the essentially social nature we share with the other intelligent primates, and that therefore morality itself is deeply rooted in our nature.

I begin with the first issue. Veneer Theory is, in my view, not very tempting. In philosophy, it is most naturally associated with a certain view of practical rationality and of how practical rationality is related to morality. According to this view, what it is rational to do, as well as what we naturally do, is to maximize the satisfaction of our own personal interests. Morality then enters the scene as a set of rules that constrain this maximizing activity. These rules may be based on what promotes the common good, rather than the individual's good. Or they may, as in deontological theories, be based on other considerations – justice, fairness, rights, or what have you. In either case, Veneer Theory holds that these constraints, which oppose our natural and rational tendency to pursue what is best for ourselves, and which are therefore unnatural, are all too easily broken through. De Waal seems to accept the idea that it is rational to pursue your own best interests, but wants to reject the associated view that morality is unnatural, and therefore he tends to favor an emotion-based or sentimentalist theory of morality.

There are a number of problems with Veneer Theory. In the first place, despite its popularity in the social sciences, the credentials of the principle of pursuing your own best interests as a principle of practical reason have never been established. To show that this is a principle of practical reason one would have to demonstrate its normative foundation. I can think of only a few philosophers – Joseph Butler, Henry Sidgwick, Thomas Nagel, and Derek Parfit among them – who have even attempted anything along these lines.³ And the

³ Butler, in *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (1726), partly reprinted in *Five Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel and A Dissertation Upon the Nature of Virtue*, edited by Stephen Darwall, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983; Sidgwick, in *The Methods of Ethics* (1st edition, 1874, 7th edition 1907). Indianapolis: Hackett

idea that what people actually do is pursue their own best interests is, as Butler pointed out long ago, rather laughable.⁴

In the second place, it is not even clear that the idea of self-interest is a well-formed concept when applied to an animal as richly social as a human being. Unquestionably, we have some irreducibly private interests – in the satisfaction of our appetites, in food and a certain kind of sex, say. But our personal interests are not limited to *having* things. We also have interests in *doing* things and *being* things. Many of these interests cannot set us wholly against the interests of society, simply because they are unintelligible outside of society and the cultural traditions that society supports. You could intelligibly want to be the world's greatest ballerina, but you could not intelligibly want to be the world's only ballerina, since, at least arguably, if there were only one, there wouldn't be any. Even for having things there is a limit to the coherent pursuit of self-interest. If you had all the money in the world, you would not be rich. And of course we also have genuine interests in certain other people, from whom our own interests cannot be separated. So the idea that we can clearly identify our own interests as something set apart from or over against the interests of others is strained to say the least.

And yet even this is not the deepest thing wrong with Veneer Theory. Morality is not just a set of obstructions to the pursuit of our interests. Moral standards define ways of

Publishing Company, 1981); Nagel, in *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); and Parfit, in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). For a discussion of the problems with providing a normative foundation for this supposed rational principle see my "The Myth of Egoism" published by the University of Kansas as the Lindley Lecture for 1999.

⁴ "Men daily, hourly sacrifice the greatest known interest to fancy, inquisitiveness, love, or hatred, any vagrant inclination. The thing to be lamented is not that men have so great a regard to their own good or interest in the present world, for they have not enough, but that they have so little to the good of others." Butler, *Five Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel and A Dissertation Upon the Nature of Virtue*, p. 21.

relating to people that most of us, most of the time, find natural and welcome. According to Kant, morality demands that we treat other people as ends in themselves, never merely as means to our own ends. Certainly we do not manage to treat all other people at all times in accordance with this standard. But the image of someone who never treated *anyone* else as an end in himself and never expected to be treated that way in return is even more unrecognizable than that of someone who always does so. For what we are then imagining is someone who always treats *everyone else* as a tool or an obstacle and always expects to be treated that way in return. What we are imagining is someone who never spontaneously and unthinkingly tells the truth in ordinary conversation, but constantly calculates the effects of what he says to others on the promotion of his projects. What we are imagining is someone who doesn't resent it (though he dislikes it) when he himself is lied to, trampled on, and disregarded, because deep down he thinks that is all that one human being really has any reason to expect from any other. What we are imagining, then, is a creature who lives in a state of deep internal solitude, essentially regarding himself as the only person in a world of potentially useful things – although some of those things have mental and emotional lives and can talk or fight back.⁵ It is absurd to suggest that this is what most human beings are like, or long to be like, beneath a thin veneer of restraint.

But it is also absurd to think that non-human animals are motivated by self-interest. The concept of what is in your own best interests, if it makes any sense at all, requires a kind of grip on the future and an ability to calculate that do not seem available to a non-human animal. Just as importantly, *acting* for the sake of your best interests requires the capacity to be *motivated* by the abstract conception of your overall or long-term good. The idea of self-

⁵ I owe some of these points to Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, pp. 82ff. Nagel characterizes the

interest seems simply out of place when thinking about non-human action. I am not at all inclined to deny that the other intelligent animals do things on purpose, but I would expect these purposes to be local and concrete – to eat something, mate with someone, avoid punishment, have some fun, stop the fight – but not to do what is best for themselves on the whole. Non-human animals are not self-interested. It seems more likely that they are, in Harry Frankfurt’s phrase, wanton: they act on the instinct or desire or emotion that comes uppermost. Learning and experience may change the order of their desires so that different ones come uppermost: the prospect of punishment may dampen an animal’s ardor to the point where the animal will refrain from satisfying its appetite, but that is a different matter than calculating what is in your best interests and being motivated by a conception of your long term good. For all of these reasons Veneer Theory seems to me to be rather silly. I therefore want to set it aside, and talk about de Waal’s more central and interesting question, the question of the roots of morality in our evolved nature, where they are located and how deep they go.

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If someone asked me whether I personally believe that the other animals are more like human beings than most people suppose, or whether I believe there is some form of deep discontinuity between humans and the other animals, I would have to say yes to both alternatives. In thinking about this issue it is important to remember that human beings have a vested interest in what de Waal calls “anthropodenial.” We eat non-human animals, wear them, perform painful experiments on them, hold them captive for purposes of our own - sometimes in unhealthy conditions - we make them work, and we kill them at will.

condition as one of “practical solipsism.”

Without even taking up the urgent moral questions to which these practices give rise, I think it is fair to say that we are more likely to be comfortable in our treatment of our fellow creatures if we think that being eaten, worn, experimented on, held captive, made to work, and killed, cannot mean anything like the same thing to them that it would to us. And that in turn seems more likely to the extent they are unlike us in their emotional and cognitive lives. Of course the fact that we have a vested interest in denying the similarities between ourselves and the other animals does nothing to show that there are such similarities. But once you correct for that vested interest there seems little reason to doubt that observations and experiments of the sort de Waal does and describes, as well as our own everyday interactions with our animal companions, show exactly what they seem to show: that many animals are intelligent, curious, loving, playful, bossy, belligerent creatures in many ways very much like ourselves.

But I don't find a total gradualism very tempting either. To me human beings seem clearly set apart by our elaborate cultures, historical memory, languages with enormously complex grammars and refined expressive power, the practices of art, literature, science, philosophy, and of course of telling jokes. I would also add to this list something that doesn't often appear on it but should – our startling capacity to make friends across the boundaries between species, and to induce the other animals who live with us to do so as well. I am also inclined to agree with Freud and Nietzsche – whose rather gaudier explanations of the evolution of morality don't seem to tempt de Waal very much – that human beings seem psychologically damaged, in ways that suggest some deep break with nature. An old-fashioned philosophical project, dating back to Aristotle, attempts to locate the central difference that accounts for all these other differences between human beings

and the other animals. As a very old-fashioned philosopher, I am tempted by that project. What I'd like to do now is talk about one piece of that project that bears on the question of the extent to which morality represents a break with our animal past.

Moral standards are standards governing the way we act, and the question of the extent to which animals are moral or proto-moral beings arises because they unquestionably do act. De Waal's conclusions are largely derived from considering what animals *do*. In his books, de Waal often canvases different possible intentional interpretations of animal behavior and actions, and describes experiments designed to find out which is correct. A capuchin rejects a cucumber when her partner is offered a grape – is she protesting the unfairness, or is she just holding out for a grape? Do the chimps share food because they are grateful to those who have groomed them, or is it just that the grooming has put them in a relaxed and beneficent mood? Sometimes what appear to be evolutionary explanations of animal behavior seem to bleed over into intentional interpretations of their actions, as when de Waal suggests in *Good Natured* that chimpanzees “strive for the kind of community that is in their own best interest.”⁶ For reasons I have already mentioned, it seems to me difficult to believe a chimpanzee has anything like this on his mind. But in other places de Waal carefully separates the question of the extent to which monkeys and apes do the things he talks about intentionally or deliberately from the question of what explains their tendency to do them. De Waal himself chastises Veneer Theorists for inferring the selfishness of our intentions from the “selfishness” of our genes.

The question of intention is a question about how an episode in which an animal does something looks from the acting animal's own point of view, whether it is plausible to

⁶ *Good Natured*, p. 205.

think that the animal acts with a certain kind of purpose in mind. I think there is a temptation to think that the question whether we can see the origins of morality in animal behavior depends on how exactly we interpret their intentions, whether their intentions are ‘good’ or not. I think that, at least taken in the most obvious way, this is a mistake. It seems to make some sense if you hold the kind of sentimentalist moral theory favored by Hutcheson and Hume, since according to these thinkers an action gets its moral character from the fact that onlookers or spectators would approve or disapprove of it. At least in the case of what Hume called “the natural virtues,” these thinkers believed that the agent who does a morally good thing need not be motivated by expressly moral considerations. In fact for this reason, some of the sentimentalists of the eighteenth century and their critics explicitly discussed the question whether according to their theories the other animals could be thought of as virtuous. Hutcheson’s immediate predecessor, Shaftesbury, had asserted that you could not count as virtuous unless you were capable of moral judgment, and that therefore we would not call a good horse virtuous.⁷ But since according to this sort of theory moral judgment need not play a role in moral motivation, it is not clear why not. Hutcheson therefore boldly asserted that it is not an absurdity to suppose that “creatures void of reflection” have some “low virtues.”⁸ Although de Waal praises sentimentalist

⁷ In *An Inquiry concerning Virtue or Merit* (1699). I am quoting from D.D. Raphael’s *British Moralists*, Volume I, pp. 173-174.

⁸ In *An Inquiry Concerning the Original of our Ideas of Virtue or Moral Good* (1726). I am quoting from *British Moralists*, edited by D. D. Raphael. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991, Volume I p. 295. In a later work, Hutcheson argued that it was confused to think that we can be motivated by moral considerations. (*Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (1728) ed. By Bernard Peach. Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 1971, pp. 139-140.) The primary source for Hume’s view is the Book III of *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740. 2nd edition edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978. The primary discussion of the role of moral motivation in moral thought is Book III, Part II, Section One, pp. 477-484.

theories, he denies that his case rests simply on the existence of animals with intentions we approve of: “Whether animals are nice to each other is not the issue, nor does it matter much whether their behavior fits our moral preferences or not. The relevant question rather is whether they possess capacities for reciprocity and revenge, for the enforcement of social rules, for the settlements of disputes and for sympathy and empathy.” (p. 14 of the ms). But he seems to share an assumption with these early sentimentalists, which is that the morality of an action is a matter of content of the intention with which it is done.

I think this is wrong, and to explain why, I want to take a closer look at the concept of acting intentionally or on purpose. This concept, I believe, does not mark off a single phenomenon, but a number of things that can be ranged on a scale. It is only at a certain point on the scale that the question whether actions have a moral character can arise.

At the bottom of the scale, there is the idea of intentionally or functionally describable movement. The concept of intention in this form applies to any object whatever that has some sort of functional organization, including not only human beings and animals but also plants and machines. Within the economy of a functionally organized object, certain movements can be described as having certain purposes. The heart beats to pump the blood, the alarm rings to wake you up, your computer warns you against a misspelling, the plant’s leaves reach out towards the sun to collect its rays. There is no implication that the purposes served by these movements are before the minds of the objects that move, or even before the minds of someone who created those objects. Attributing purposes to these movements just reflects the fact that the object is functionally organized.

In the case of living things, especially animals, including the so-called “lower” animals, some of these purposive or intentional movements are guided by the animal’s

perception. A fish swims upwards towards a surface disturbance that may mean an insect; a cockroach runs under cover as you try to swat him with the newspaper; a spider crawls towards the moth that is caught in the middle of her web. Here we begin to be tempted to use the language of action, and it is clear enough why: when an animal's movements are guided by her perceptions, they are under the control of her mind, and when they are under control of her mind, we are tempted to say that they are under the animal's own control. And this, after all, is what makes the difference between an action and a mere movement – that an action can be attributed to the agent, that it is done under the agent's own control. At this level, should we say that the animal acts intentionally, or on purpose? It depends how you understand the question. The animal is directing her movements and her movement are intentional movements – *the movements* have a purpose. In that sense the animal acts with a purpose, but at this stage there is no need to say that this purpose is somehow before the animal's mind. Admittedly, when we try to look at the situation from the animal's point of view, when we ask ourselves what exactly it is that the animal perceives that determines her movements, it is almost irresistible to describe it purposively. Why does the spider go towards the moth caught in her web unless there is some sense in which the spider sees the moth *as* food and therefore some sense in which she is trying to get food? But however exactly we understand the spider's intention, we need not understand it as a matter of the spider's entertaining thoughts about what she is trying to achieve.

On the other hand, once we are dealing with an intelligent animal, there is no reason *not* to suppose that her purpose is before her mind. Furthermore, I see no reason why we should not suppose that there is a gradual continuum between whatever is going on when a spider's perceptions direct it towards the moth and straightforward cognitive awareness of

something as *what you want*. And when such cognitive awareness is in place, presumably the possibility of learning from experience about how to get what you want and avoid what you don't is greatly enhanced. One can always learn from experience by conditioning, but when you are aware of your purpose you can also begin to learn from experience by thinking and remembering.

But even if there is a gradual continuum, it seems right to say that an animal that can entertain his purposes before his mind, and perhaps even entertain thoughts about how to achieve those purposes, is exerting a greater degree of conscious control over his own movements than, say, the spider, and is therefore in a deeper sense an agent. There is now, as in some of de Waal's cases, room for disagreement about what the proper intentional description of an action is, for it is at this level we become committed to keying the intentional description of the action to what is going on from the agent's own point of view. (Freudian slips pose a problem for the claim I just made, but I want to leave that aside for now.) This is a difference from the earlier stage: when we do describe the spider as "trying to get food," we don't care whether that's what the spider thinks she's doing. At the level of the spider, it is natural for the intentional description of the movement and the explanation of it to run together in this way. But once purposes are consciously entertained, the intentional description of the action must capture something about the way it seems to the agent. It's because at this level we key intentional description to the agent's perspective that it makes sense to ask whether the capuchin is protesting the unfairness or merely angling for the grape. So all of this represents a deeper way in which an action may be said to be "intentional."

But some philosophers do not believe that this is the deepest level of intentionality. At the level of intentionality I have just been describing, the animal is aware of his purposes, and thinks about how to pursue them. But he does not choose to pursue those purposes. The animal's purposes are given to him by his affective states: his emotions and his instinctual or learned desires. Even in a case where the animal must choose between two purposes – say a male wants to mate a female but a larger male is coming and he wants to avoid a fight – the choice is made for him by the strength of his affective states. He has learned to fear the larger male more strongly than he desires to mate. The end that the animal pursues is determined for him by his desires and emotions.

Kantians are among the philosophers who believe that a deeper level of assessment and therefore choice is possible. Besides asking yourself how to get what you want most, you can ask yourself whether your wanting this end is a good reason for taking this particular action. The question is not merely about whether the act is an effective way to achieve your end, but whether, even given that it is, your wanting this end *justifies* you in taking this action. Kant of course famously thinks that raising this question about a proposed action takes a particular form: you formulate what he called a maxim - I will do this act in order to achieve this end - and you subject that maxim to the categorical imperative test. You ask whether you can will it as a universal law that everyone who wishes to achieve this sort of end should do this sort of act. In effect you are asking whether your maxim can serve as a rational principle. In some cases, Kant believed, you find you cannot will your maxim as a universal law, and then you have to reject the action described by that maxim as wrong. Even if you do judge the action to be justified and act, you are acting not merely from your desire but from your judgment that the action is justified.

Why do I say this represents a deeper level of intentionality? In the first place, an agent who is capable of this form of assessment is capable of rejecting an action along with its purpose, not because there is something else she wants (or fears) even more, but simply because she judges that doing that sort of act for that purpose is wrong. In a famous passage in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant argued that we are *capable* of setting aside even our most urgent natural desires – the desire to preserve our own lives and to secure the welfare of our loved ones – to avoid performing a wrong action. Kant gives the example of a man who is ordered by his king, on pain of death for himself and suffering for his family, to bear false witness against an innocent person the king wants to get rid of. While no one can say for sure how he would act in such a situation, Kant argues, each of us must admit to himself that he is capable of doing the right thing.⁹ Now if we are capable of setting aside our purposes when we cannot pursue them by any decent means, then there is also a sense in which when we *do* decide to pursue a purpose, we can be seen as having *adopted* that purpose. Our purposes may be suggested to us by our desires and emotions, but they are not determined for us by our affective states, for if we had judged it wrong to pursue them, we could have laid them aside. Since we choose not only the means to our ends but also the ends themselves, this is intentionality at a deeper level. For we exert a deeper level of control over our own movements when we choose our ends as well as the means to them than that exhibited by an animal that pursues ends that are given to her by her affective states, even if she pursues them consciously and intelligently. Another way to put the point is to say that we do not merely *have* intentions, good or bad. We assess and adopt them. We have the capacity for normative self-government, or, as Kant called it, “autonomy.” It is at this

⁹ *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), translated by Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

level that morality emerges. The morality of your action is not a function of the content of your intentions. It is a function of the exercise of normative self-government.¹⁰

I propose this as an answer to a question de Waal raises in *Good Natured*: “What is different about the way we *act* that makes us, and not any other species, moral beings?” But although I believe the capacity for autonomy is characteristic of human beings and probably unique to human beings, the question how far in the animal kingdom that capacity extends is certainly an empirical one. There is nothing unnatural, non-natural, or mystical about the capacity for normative self-government. What it requires is a certain form of self-consciousness: namely, consciousness of the grounds on which you propose to act *as grounds*. What I mean is this: a non-human agent may be conscious of the object of his fear or desire, and conscious of it *as fearful* or *desirable*, and so as something to be avoided or to be sought. That is the ground of his action. But a rational animal is, in addition, conscious *that* she fears or desires the object, and *that* she is inclined to act in a certain way as a result.¹¹ That’s what I mean by being conscious of the ground *as a ground*. She does not just think about the object that she fears or even about its fearfulness but about her fears and desires themselves. Once you are aware that you are being moved in a certain way, you have a certain reflective distance from the motive, and you are in a position to ask yourself “but should I be moved in that way? Wanting that end inclines me to do that act, but does it

1997, p. 27.

¹⁰ Although it may not seem at all obvious, the argument I have just given is a version of the argument that leads Kant, in the first section of *the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), to the conclusion that “an action from duty has its moral worth not in the purpose to be attained by it but in the maxim in accordance with which in accordance with which it is decided upon.” I am quoting from the translation by Mary Gregor. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 13.

¹¹ Being conscious of the ground of your beliefs and actions as grounds is a form of *self-consciousness* because it involves identifying *yourself* as the *subject* of certain of your own mental representations.

really give me a reason to do that act?” You are now in a position to raise a normative question about what you *ought* to do.

I believe that, in general, this form of self-consciousness – consciousness of the grounds of our beliefs and actions – is the source of reason, a capacity that is distinct from intelligence. Intelligence is the ability to learn about the world, to learn from experience, to make new connections of cause and effect, and put that knowledge to work in pursuing your ends. Reason by contrast looks inward, and focuses on the connections between mental states and activities: whether our actions are justified by our motives or our inferences are justified by our beliefs. I think we could say things about the beliefs of intelligent non-human animals that parallel what I am now saying about their actions. Non-human animals may have beliefs and may arrive at those beliefs under the influence of evidence, but it is a further step to be the sort of animal that can ask oneself whether the evidence really justifies the belief, and can adjust one’s conclusions accordingly.¹²

Both Adam Smith and, following him, Charles Darwin, believed that giving an account of the capacity for normative self-government is essential to explaining the development of morality, because it is essential to explaining what Darwin describes as “that short but imperious word *ought*, so full of high significance.”¹³ And interestingly, both of them explained it by appeal to our social nature.¹⁴ In Smith’s account, it is sympathy with

¹² I pursue this argument in *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

¹³ *The Descent of Man*, p. 70.

¹⁴ Freud and Nietzsche also appeal to our social nature to explain the origin of morality. They think that our ability to command ourselves is the result of our internalizing our dominance instincts and turning them against ourselves. Psychologically, the phenomenon of dominance seems to me a promising place to look for the evolutionary origin of the ability to be motivated by an ought, as I proposed in *The Sources of Normativity*, pp. 157-160. For Freud’s account see *Civilization and Its Discontents* (translated by James Strachey. New York: W.

the responses of others to ourselves that first turns our attention inward, creating a consciousness of our own motives and characters as objects to be judged. Sympathy, for Smith, is a tendency to put ourselves in the shoes of others and think about the way we would react if we were in their circumstances. We judge another's feelings and the resulting actions to be *proper* if they are what we suppose we would feel in his place. If human beings were solitary, Smith argues, our attention would be focused outward: a human afraid of a lion would think about the lion, not about his own fear. Because we are social animals, sympathy leads us to consider how we ourselves appear from the point of view of others, and to enter into their feelings about us. Through the eyes of others we become the spectators of our own conduct, dividing internally, as Smith described it, into an actor and a spectator, and forming judgments about the propriety of our own feelings and motives. The internal spectator transforms our natural desire to be thought well of and praised into something deeper, a desire to be worthy of praise. For to judge that we are worthy of praise is to judge that it would be *proper* for others to praise us, and the internal spectator, who knows our inner motives, is in a position to make a judgment about that. In this way we develop the capacity to be motivated by thoughts about what we ought to do and what we ought to be like.¹⁵

Darwin speculates that the capacity for normative self-government arose from a difference in the way we are affected by our social instincts and our appetites. The effect of the social instincts on the mind is constant and calm, while that of the appetites is episodic and sharp. Social animals will therefore be under frequent temptations to violate their social

W. Norton, 1961), especially chapter VII. For Nietzsche's, see *The Genealogy of Morals* (translated by Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Random House, 1967), especially essay II.

¹⁵ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1982.

instincts for the sake of their appetites, as say when an animal neglects her offspring while mating. But it is a familiar experience that satisfying an appetite seems more important when you are actually in its grip than after you have satisfied it. So once a social animal's mental faculties develop to the point where she can remember giving way to such temptations, they will seem to her not have been worth it, and she will eventually learn to control such impulses. Our capacity to be motivated by the imperious word "ought," Darwin suggests, has its origins in this kind of experience.¹⁶

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In an essay called "Conjectures on the Beginnings of Human History," Kant speculated that the form of self-consciousness that underlies our autonomy may also play a role in the explanation of some of the other distinctively human attributes – including culture, romantic love, and the capacity to act from self-interest. Other philosophers have noticed the connection of self-consciousness of this sort with the capacity for language. I can't go into those arguments here, but if they are correct they would provide evidence that only human beings have this form of self-consciousness.¹⁷

If that is right then the capacity for normative self-government and the deeper level of intentional control that goes with it is probably unique to human beings. And it is in the proper use of this capacity – the ability to form and act on judgments of what we ought to do - that the essence of morality lies, not in altruism or the pursuit of the greater good. So I do not agree with de Waal when he says, "Instead of merely ameliorating relations around us, as apes do, we have explicit teachings about the value of the community and the

¹⁶ *The Descent of Man*, pp. 87-93.

¹⁷ "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History" (1786) can be found in *Kant: Political Writings*, 2nd edition edited by Hans Reiss and translated by H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

precedence it takes, or ought to take, over individual interests. Humans go much further in all of this than the apes, which is why we have moral systems and apes do not.” (p. 47 in the ms). The difference here is not a mere matter of degree.

And it isn't a small difference, that ability to be motivated by an ought. It does represent what de Waal calls a saltatory change. 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. Kant's story about the man deciding to face death rather than bear false witness is the stuff of high moral drama, but it has its constant analog in our everyday lives. 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 in that way. We struggle to be honest and courteous and responsible and brave in circumstances where it is difficult. Even if apes are sometimes courteous, responsible, and brave, it is not because they think they should be. Even as primitive a phenomenon as a teenager's efforts to be “cool” is a manifestation of the human tendency to live a life guided by ideals rather than merely driven by impulses and desires. We also suffer deeply from our self-evaluations and act in sick and evil ways as a result. This is part of what I had in mind earlier when I said that human beings seem psychologically damaged in a way that suggests a break with nature. But none of this is a way of saying that morality is a thin veneer on our animal nature. It's the exactly contrary: the distinctive character of human action gives us a whole different way of being in the world.

My point is not that human beings live lives of principle and value and so are very noble while the other animals don't and so are ignoble. The distinctiveness of human action is as much a source of our capacity for evil as of our capacity for good. An animal cannot be

judged or held responsible for following its strongest impulse. Animals are not ignoble; they are beyond moral judgment. I agree with de Waal that saying that a person who acts badly acts “like an animal” (“man is wolf to man”) can be very misleading in one way. But in another way it is no more an insult to non-human animals than saying of a brain-damaged person that he has become a vegetable is an insult to plants. Just as the second remark means that the person has fallen away from his animate nature, the first means that he has fallen away from his human nature. In following his strongest impulse without question or reflection he has failed to exercise his capacity for the kind of intentional control over his movements that makes us human. That is not the only form of wrongdoing, but it is one.

Earlier I said that we are likely to feel more comfortable about the various ways in which we use the other animals if we think they are very different from ourselves. So it is important for me to say that I do not think the difference that I have been describing should provide that comfort. Exactly the opposite is true. In *Good Natured*, de Waal tells a story about an angry capuchin hurling objects at a human observer. When he ran out of other things to throw, the capuchin picked up a squirrel monkey and threw her at the human. De Waal remarks, “Animals often seem to regard those who belong to another kind as merely ambulant objects.”¹⁸ But no species is more guilty of treating those who belong to other kinds as ambulant objects than we are, and we are the only species that knows it is wrong. As beings who are capable of doing what we ought and holding ourselves responsible for what we do, and as beings who are capable of caring about what we *are* and not just about what we can *get* for ourselves, we are under a strong obligation to treat the other animals decently, even at cost to ourselves.

¹⁸ *Good Natured*, p. 84.

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@inproceedings{Korsgaard2006MoralityAT, title={Morality and the Distinctiveness of Human Action}, author={Christine M. Korsgaard}, year={2006} }. Christine M. Korsgaard. Two issues confront us. One concerns the truth or falsehood of what Frans de Waal calls – Veneer Theory. –