

Morality Without Religion: Empathy, Fairness and Prosocial Primates

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Homo homini lupus – “man is wolf to man” – is an old Roman proverb popularized by Thomas Hobbes. Even though it permeates large parts of law, economics and political science, the proverb fails to do justice to our species’ thoroughly social nature as well as to canids, which are among the most gregarious and cooperative animals. For the past quarter century, this cynical view has also been promoted by an influential school of biology, but Charles Darwin himself saw things differently. He believed in continuity between animals’ social instincts and human morality. Modern psychology and neuroscience support Darwin’s view of the moral emotions.

This lecture will review how empathy comes naturally to a great variety of animals, including humans. Dr. de Waal has found many cases of one individual coming to another’s rescue in a fight, putting an arm around a previous victim of attack or other emotional responses to the distress of others. By studying social behaviors in animals, such as bonding, the herd instinct, the forming of trusting alliances, expressions of consolation, and conflict resolution, de Waal demonstrates that animals and humans - are preprogrammed to reach out and questions the assumption that humans are inherently selfish. He argues that understanding empathy’s survival value in evolution can help to build a more just society based on a more accurate view of human nature.