

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

April 12, 2013 at 10:37am

Are we hard-wired to be moral beings?

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NCR Today

This week for "Interfaith Voices," I did one of the most fascinating interviews I've done in months. I talked to Frans de Waal, author of a new book called *The Bonobo and the Atheist*. His central thesis is that many species in the world of mammals -- especially primates -- regularly display signs of what we would call ethical or moral behavior.

He told stories of chimpanzees soothing and kissing one of their number who is distressed or ill and caring for the infirm and elderly among them by bringing them water and offering them a cushioning material to make them comfortable. He also relates stories of fairness. If one monkey gets cucumbers for doing a task and another also receives cucumbers, all is fine. But if one gets grapes (much preferred if you are a monkey) and the other gets cucumbers, protest erupts. (A primate's demand for "equal pay for equal work," perhaps?) Dogs, de Waal noted, behave the same way when faced with inequalities in "treats" for, say, offering a pawshake.

De Waal believes a sense of ethics or morality evolved as mammals became communal beings and began to sense their dependence on one another. We -- like other mammals -- are hard-wired to be moral beings, he believes, and what the world's religions have done is codify and bless these instincts, these preferred behaviors, and given them a theological and/or philosophical rationale. (De Waal is an atheist himself, but not the kind of atheist who scorns religion: He values its role in the world. He simply does not partake himself).

In the end, we definitely agreed on one thing: cat behavior. I told him I have three cats, and I would be hard-pressed to call their typical behavior "moral." Turns out, he, too, knows cats, and said he would not accuse the typical cat of "moral behavior." There are exceptions to everything!

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