

# Frans de Waal (1948–2024)

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The Dutch-American primatologist and ethologist Frans de Waal died of stomach cancer on 14 March 2024. His research was of interest to anarchists for it centred on primate social behaviour, including conflict resolution, cooperation, inequity aversion and empathy. In other words, subjects which Peter Kropotkin pioneered in *Mutual Aid* and *Ethics*.

Unusually, de Waal was well aware of Kropotkin's work and mentioned it in his writings, noting repeatedly how Kropotkin "rightly noted that many animals survive not through struggle, but through mutual aid".<sup>1</sup> With Jessica C. Flack, he argued that Kropotkin is part of a wider tradition "in which the view has been that animals assist each other precisely because by doing so they achieve long term, collective benefits of greater value than the short term benefits derived from straightforward competition. Kropotkin specifically adhered to a view in which organisms struggle not necessarily against each other, but collectively against their environments." They summarise that the "basic tenet of [Kropotkin's] ideas was on the mark. Almost seventy years later, in an article entitled 'The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism', [Robert] Trivers refined the concepts Kropotkin advanced and explained how co-operation and, more importantly, a system of reciprocity (called 'reciprocal altruism' by Trivers) could have evolved."<sup>2</sup>

As such, de Waal's work is of interest to anarchists. It also points to a wider issue, namely that a problem for mainstream evolutionary theory. This has difficulty explaining a large part of animal behaviour, namely co-operation (not to be confused with altruism, which it also has difficulty explaining). This was the case in Kropotkin's time (in spite of Darwin's own comments on the matter in *The Descent of Man*) and it is still the case now.

Take, as an example, Ant Super-colonies. These are formed of ants with different genetic backgrounds, which led a Professor from the Department of Biology in the University of Copenhagen publicly stating that "it looks as if the ants defy evolution, and we're eager to figure out how that's even possible" for "according to the laws of evolution, you only need to help out your relatives. But we're seeing ant colonies so big that all the ants cannot possibly be related. So why are they helping one another? That's what we're trying to figure out." Ignoring the all-too-common confusion of a theory which seeks to describe reality with reality itself, it is useful to compare the two ant experiences. Normal ant colonies spend a lot of time fighting each other, with the ants

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<sup>1</sup> *The ape and the sushi master: cultural reflections by a primatologist* (Basic Books, 2001), 122.

<sup>2</sup> Jessica C. Flack and Frans de Waal, "'Any Animal Whatever': Darwinian Building Blocks of Morality in Monkeys and Apes", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1–2, 4.

facing the distinct possibility of having their internal organs dissolved fighting for their Queen. The super-colony ants do not have to fight the others, so they spend more time finding food and doing other, more pleasant, activities. So, obviously, it is a complete mystery as to why such super-colonies developed.

The fact is that science is pursued by scientists who are products of a given society and all too often reflects its cultural assumptions. De Waal recounted how euphemisms for friendly, co-operative or altruistic behaviour are often utilised as using those terms is considered “overly anthropomorphic. Whereas terms related to aggression, violence, and competition never posed the slightest problem.” He notes that he was expected to “switch to dehumanised language as soon as the affectionate aftermath of a fight was the issue” rather than the fight itself.<sup>3</sup> This is to be expected, as the notion we are “competitive” is just “common-sense” as we live in such a society.

Yet de Waal’s research challenges those assumptions. He investigated the innate capacity for empathy among primates which led him to the conclusion that non-human great apes and humans are simply different types of apes, and that empathic and cooperative tendencies are continuous between these species. This was no isolated case for he viewed empathy and sympathy as universal mammalian characteristics, a view that over the past decade has gained support from studies on rodents and other mammals, such as dogs. In terms of apes and monkeys, recent work on their prosocial tendencies by other scientists supports de Waal’s position. So co-operation, empathy and preference for equitable outcomes are all part of nature and, as Kropotkin showed, there are clear evolutionary advantages for such behaviour.

As de Waal argued, the “fairness principle” in humans has evolved and is “part of our background as co-operative primates.” It has reached the point of “declaring inequity a bad thing in general ... If the goal is to maintain co-operative relationships by ensuring payoffs for everybody, hence a widespread motivation to participate in joint efforts, the evolution of the fairness principle is really not that hard to explain. The parallels between human and animal responses to inequity seem to tell this story.”<sup>4</sup>

Like Kropotkin, de Waal moved on from animal sociability to the evolution of ethics. He noted, as had Kropotkin decades before, that T. H. Huxley, mainstream Darwinism most famous exponent in Kropotkin’s time, “proposed ethics as humanity’s cultural victory over the evolutionary process” and so “was in effect saying that what makes us human is too big for the evolutionary framework.” This meant “that people are fit for society only by education, not nature.” Huxley, though, “offered no hint whatsoever where humanity could possibly have unearthed the will and strength to go against its own nature.”<sup>5</sup>

This was Kropotkin’s position as articulated in works like *Justice and Morality* (1893).<sup>6</sup> Yet mainstream evolutionary theory fails to integrate the insights on co-operative behaviour – usually based on Robert Trivers’ “reciprocal altruism” in spite of Kropotkin’s earlier “mutual aid” – into their writings. Richard Dawkins, despite correcting certain clumsy phrasing in the first edition of his *The Selfish Gene* in subsequent editions still writes that “we should not derive our values from Darwinism, unless it is with a negative sign.” De Waal, rightly, criticised Dawkins

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<sup>3</sup> *Good natured: the origins of right and wrong in humans and other animals* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Frans B. M. de Waal, “Joint Ventures Require Joint Payoffs: Fairness among Primates”, *Social Research*, Vol. 73, No. 2, 363.

<sup>5</sup> *The ape and the sushi master*, 344.

<sup>6</sup> Translated into English for the first time in *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Vol. 3 No. 3 (Autumn 2023)

for this quoting him as follows: “What I am saying, along with many other people, among them T. H. Huxley, is that in our political and social life we are entitled to throw out Darwinism, to say we don’t want to live in a Darwinian world.” However, co-operation and altruism are as “Darwinian” as competition and selfishness, as Dawkins himself has shown. That suggests, de Waal argued, “that calls to reject Darwinism in our daily lives so as to build a moral society are based on a profound misreading of Darwin. Since Darwin saw morality as an evolutionary product, he envisioned an eminently more liveable world than the one proposed by Huxley and his followers, who believe in a culturally imposed, artificial morality that receives no helping hand from human nature. Huxley’s world is by far the colder, more terrifying place.” Thus the likes of Kropotkin “pondered the origins of a cooperative, and ultimately moral, society without invoking false pretence, Freudian denial schemes, or cultural indoctrination. In this they proved the true followers of Darwin.”<sup>7</sup>

As de Waal showed, biologists have acknowledged that animals, including humans, evolved co-operative behaviour within groups to increase their chances of survival (and so increase their chances to pass on their genes to subsequent generations). In fact, the Hobbesian assumptions of Huxley have been proven as bankrupt as Kropotkin argued at the time as de Waal summarises: “For the biologist, this imaginary history is as wide of the mark as can be. We descend from a long line of group-living primates, meaning that we are naturally equipped with a strong desire to fit in and find partners to live and work with.”<sup>8</sup>

So, regardless of the assertions of the likes of Huxley or his modern-day followers, there was never a point at which we decided to become social. We are descended from highly social ancestors and, as with most other creatures, our ancestors lived in groups. This was not an option but an essential survival strategy and from this mutual aid ethics arose. Simply put, humans are not born as loners – our bodies and minds only flourish in social life and the absence of others results in depression and deteriorating health. Thus notions of social contracts (i.e., “the underlying assumption of a rational decision by inherently asocial creatures”) are “untenable in light of what we know about the evolution of our species.” In fact, “[o]ur social makeup is so obvious that there would be no need to belabour this point were it not for its conspicuous absence from origin stories within the disciplines of law, economics, and political science.”<sup>9</sup> This, of course, reflects long-argued anarchist ideas as well as Kropotkin’s analysis of cooperative behaviour and its implications – an analysis de Waal shows has been confirmed by subsequent research even if Kropotkin’s pioneering writings go unmentioned.

De Waal was not an anarchist and his political views – and how he interpreted the evidence – reflected centre-left European middle-class views (as such, seeing a role for both co-operation and competition, some inequality and so on). However, this should not detract from his writings which are of interest to anarchists for they confirm – as other research has – that Kropotkin was right on both the importance of co-operation in evolution and its implications, not least the evolutionary roots of our ethical perspectives. Anyone interested in Kropotkin’s work will find de Waal’s writings worth reading.

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<sup>7</sup> *Primates and Philosophers: how morality evolved* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 9, 16–7, 12.

<sup>8</sup> de Waal, “Joint Ventures Require Joint Payoffs: Fairness among Primates”, 350

<sup>9</sup> de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*, 4, 5.

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