Primates and Philosophers

I. “Morality Evolved,” Frans de Waal (3-58)

A. What does de Waal mean by “Veneer Theory”? Why does de Waal reject it? (3-12)

B. Darwinian Ethics

1. How does de Waal argue that impulses toward cooperation and sympathy could have survival value in nature? Note: in this section de Waal begins referencing the concepts of kin selection and reciprocal altruism, two concepts which will repeatedly arise in the book, without adequately explaining them. It’s important to understand what these concepts mean. I’ll fill in the background in class. (13-16)

2. What, for Westermarck, makes a moral emotion really moral? (20-21)

C. “Animal Empathy” (21-42)

1. What is “emotional contagion” and why does de Waal believe it constitutes the basis of empathy proper? How does emotional contagion lead to helping behavior through the motivation to alleviate personal distress? How does sympathy involve more than this? What evidence is there for the existence of either emotional contagion or sympathy in nature? (25-29)

2. What is “targeted helping” and how does it demonstrate a capacity to adopt the point of view of another? What evidence does de Waal give of the existence of targeted helping in apes? How is “consolation” a form of targeted helping? (29-36)

3. What is “cognitive empathy” and why does it appear to require the ability to distinguish self from other? How does de Waal suggest that a kind of emotional contagion may lie at the basis of cognitive empathy with his Perception-Action Mechanism (PAM) theory? (36-42)

D. “Reciprocity and Fairness” (42-49)

1. What evidence does de Waal present for the existence of something like gratitude in chimpanzees? (42-44)

2. What evidence does de Waal present for the existence of something like a
sense of fairness in capuchin monkeys? How does he stress its difference from a full blown human sense of fairness? (44-49)

E. “Community Concern” (52-58)

1. What does de Waal mean when he says that “morality is very much an in group phenomenon” and that “the profound irony is that our noblest achievement - morality - has evolutionary ties to our basest behavior - warfare”? (52-55)

2. What final evidence does de Waal provide for his view that when we make moral judgements “we are making decisions that flow from social instincts older than our species”? (55-58)

II. Comments: Kitcher and Singer (120-158 & de Waal’s Appendix C, 75-80)

A. “Ethics and Evolution,” Philip Kitcher (120-139)

1. What does Kitcher mean by “psychological altruism” and why does he believe it’s a more complicated notion than de Waal recognizes in his work? (126-130)

2. After granting that de Waal has made a compelling case for some kind of psychological altruism in the nonhuman world, how does Kitcher argue that this is insufficient for morality? (130-133)

3. How does Kitcher argue that the limited forms of psychological altruism de Waal documents in chimpanzees suggest the lack of (and need of) “a little chimp in the breast” (135)? What does he mean when he says that “chimpanzees are wantons”? (133-136)

4. How does Kitcher speculate our capacity for disinterested judgement (“a psychological device for overcoming wantonness” 136) might have evolved? (136-139)

B. “Morality, Reason, and the Rights of Animals” (140-158)

1. What does Singer mean when he says that “Reason is like an escalator - once we step on it, we cannot get off until we have gone where it takes us”? (146) How does Singer argue for a greater role for reason in moral judgement than de Waal does, in particular, in reference to the “trolley problems”? (145-151)
2. Animal Rights (de Waal, Appendix C 75-80 and Singer, 151-158)

a. What is de Waal’s view on animal rights? In particular how does he argue that, despite the fact that “our first moral obligation is to members of our own species,” it is still the case that “apes deserve special status” and should only be used for research when it is “the sort of research we wouldn’t mind doing on human volunteers”? What does he mean when he stresses that he believes “in the emotional basis of moral decision” (79)? (75-80)

b. How does Singer respond to de Waal’s position on animal rights? How does Singer argue that we are not justified in giving less weight to the interests of nonhuman animals simply because they are not members of our own species and yet still conclude, with de Waal, that “apes deserve special status”? Why does he stress, in opposition to de Waal, that this conclusion should not be based on apes’ ability to “mobilize more guilty feelings about hurting them”? (157) (151-158)


A. How does de Waal argue in favor of the claim that “It is not just that we are biased in favor of the innermost circles (ourselves, our family, our community, our species), we ought to be”? (163-166)

B. While granting the importance of reason in morality, how does de Waal argue that “social interaction must be at the root of moral reasoning.” (174-175)

C. What does de Waal mean when he answers the question of whether other animals besides ourselves are moral by stating that “they occupy several floors of the tower of morality”? (181)