

OBITUARY: FRANS DE WAAL (1948 - 2024)

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Frans de Waal *1948 †2024

He was ranked among the 100 most influential people by *Time Magazine*. On March 14, Frans de Waal has died, aged 75. A scholar, admirable in all respects, has left the scene. His work in primatology was based on careful, long-term observation. The foundation of his first book, published in the United Kingdom as *Chimpanzee Politics* (1982), was 6,000 hours of classic ethology at Arnhem Zoo. It followed in the tradition of his teacher, Jan van Hooff, who, in turn, was influenced by Niko Tinbergen, a Dutch compatriot, and Konrad Lorenz, Tinbergen's friend and colleague, both Nobel prize laureates in 1973, for their very influential research on animal behaviour. 'Study the animal in as natural conditions as possible', this

became, in contrast to the then wide-spread Skinnerian method of controlled laboratory experiments, the European tradition. For human ethology, founded by Irenaeus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, a student of Konrad Lorenz, this naturalistic approach is still our hallmark.

In several other respects, Frans' work was remarkable as well. At a time when the sociobiological paradigm of adaptive egoism, in the most extreme form, Dawkin's *The Selfish Gene* (1976), was dominating the evolutionary discourse, he discovered and described behaviours as *Peacemaking among Primates* (1989), the ability and readiness of our cousins to reconcile, even to console, as a third party, a member of the group who had been attacked or wronged, e.g. by embracing or grooming her or him. These findings contrasted starkly to the conviction of many behavioural researchers, some well-known and in high positions. To them, granting human-like emotions to animals was a naive, anthropomorphic and thereby unscientific mistake. Frans extended the early work of the father of evolutionary biology, Charles Darwin, who had, in 1872, published facts concerning the similarity of emotions of "... Man and Animals". Throughout his long career, Frans kept a convincing balance between the research traditions on both sides of the Atlantic, between sociobiology and ethology.

He received his PhD at the University of Utrecht in 1977 for his research on agonistic behaviour of *Macaca fascicularis* in the Arnhem Zoo. His initial work on chimpanzees was carried out in Arnhem between 1975 and 1980, then carried on at the University of Wisconsin and Emory University, where bonobos and other primate species were included in the research programmes. This work opened new perspectives, not only regarding the behaviour of non-human primate species, but also, and especially, their cognitive performances and abilities to transmit behavioural patterns socially to the next generation. These proofs of culture, termed proto-culture by some, which also had been recorded before him, by fellow primatologists, revolutionised the view of what had been thought to be a big hiatus, separating humans and their nearest relatives in the animal kingdom. In a statement Frans said: "I have brought animals closer to humans, but also humans closer to animals". He reared individuals of two species of macaque together and showed that social learning happens even between different species and can alter basic behaviours.

Frans's last book, *Different* (2022) took him further than ever before to the realm of *Homo sapiens*. He tackled the thorny problem of sex vs. gender, in a clear and even-handed way, giving due attention accordingly. This final effort deserves to be on the book shelf of every human ethologist.

Frans spent, together with his wife Catherine, many months in Munich, as a fellow of the highly prestigious Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung. When he gave his public lecture in the foundation, located at Nymphenburg Castle, he did it, surprisingly, in German. The moderator of the evening thanked him particularly for

that, remarking that his mother tongue was Dutch, his language during working hours English, and French during conversation with his wife. All languages mastered perfectly well, a rare feat among modern scientists.

With his dry, always friendly, non-aggressive humour he won many friends and defused even the tensest situations. For human ethology, a sister discipline of primatology, which offers highly important behavioural parallels and phylogenetic clues for the study of our species, his insights are of tremendous relevance.

We have lost a great colleague and good friend.

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EDITORIAL NOTE

This obituary was slightly amended since first being published to correct some biographical details.