Simian Virtue

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I

In this paper I would like to ask whether animals other than human beings may have virtue or not. One might think at first that other animals could not have any virtue because virtue is a distinctly human quality. Only humans would appear to possess an intellect with the capacity for practical understanding, deliberation, and choice. And consequently only humans would have the capacity to perform good actions and to acquire good habits.

Yet if one reflects even for a moment, one cannot help but realize that other animals do indeed possess a practical intellect of some kind. These animals have some practical knowledge, and they deliberate about their activities and choose them. Philosophers have long recognized these facts. Even Aristotle thought that animals have practical wisdom, for example (*Nicomachean Ethics* 6. 7.). Hobbes had no doubt that some animals are more prudent than children (*Leviathan* 1. 3.). And Hume argued that animals reason in the same way that humans do (*Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* 9.).

But if they have a practical intellect, do other animals also possess the capacity to develop intellectual and

moral virtue? I believe that we have yet to ask the question.¹ We have yet to ask it despite the fact that this question could yield an answer of some importance for animal and environmental ethics. If animals prove to have intellectual and moral virtue of their own, we may well have a new ground on which to base a teleological ethics for animals.² And of course if animal virtue differs from our own, we may by comparison gain new insights into human virtue.

In this essay I wish to argue that some animals other than human beings do possess intellectual and moral virtue of a sort. I shall focus our discussion on intellectual as well as moral virtue, for not only is intellectual virtue itself a virtue, but also virtue of this type is a prerequisite for moral virtue. And I shall limit our present discussion to other primates of only one species. What we shall see is not that these primates possess intellectual and moral virtue with the full panoply of human virtue but that they possess what we might call rudimentary virtue akin to human virtue in significant respects.

II

To show that other animals possess it, we probably ought to begin with a definition of virtue. We might do well to look for our definition in the works of the classical philosophers, for these philosophers developed

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rather sophisticated virtue ethics. Aristotle especially presents a clear and concise definition of moral virtue. He argues that virtue of this sort is a habit giving a capacity for choice, lying on a relative mean, which is defined by a principle of practical wisdom (*Eth.* 2. 6. 1106b36-1107a2).

With the last clause of his definition, Aristotle indicates that an intellectual virtue is a prerequisite for moral virtue. Practical wisdom he defines as a habit yielding a practical capacity, following from a principle, and concerned with good and evil (*Eth.* 6. 5. 1140b4-6). Wisdom of this kind concerns good and evil and follows from principle because it includes two intellectual virtues itself. With practical intuition one can intuit practical facts, most likely including means and ends (*Eth.* 6. 7. 1141b14-21 and 11. 1143a35-1143b5). An intuition of a practical end is of course a principle concerned with good or evil.³ And with deliberation one can determine what means are appropriate for attaining an end. These means follow from our intuition of an end, for we assume an end when we deliberate (*Eth.* 3. 3. 1112b11-24).

Practical wisdom also yields a practical capacity because it gives one the ability to control desire and to perform good actions (*Eth.* 1.13. 1102b25-28 and 1102b29-1103a1). By repeatedly performing them one can also use good actions to develop good moral habits (*Eth.* 2. 1. 1103a26-1103b25).

Aristotle's first clause in his definition indicates that moral virtue influences our choice. Any habit of course inclines us to an action of some sort (*Eth.* 2. 2. 1104a27-1104b3). But a good habit would incline us to good action. Virtue is indeed a capacity to engage in good action, and good action is an end in itself. An action of such sort itself is what constitutes our happiness (*Eth.* 1. 7. 1097b22-1098a18).

The second clause indicates that moral virtue is a habit which is moderate. A habit of this sort inclines us to choose moderation in our actions. Moderate actions are those which are themselves means and not extremes. Actions which are moderate tend to preserve our nature, for actions which are excessive or defective tend to destroy us (*Eth.* 2. 2. 1104a11-27). The mean is also relative to the one who possesses it (*Eth.* 2. 6. 1106a24-1106b7).

Now, many philosophers would probably be reluctant to argue that animals other than humans possess virtue in this classical sense. But contemporary ethologists have found evidence to indicate that some

other primates do in fact possess a capacity, if only a minimal one, to develop virtue akin to classical virtue. The evidence suggests that other animals possess practical knowledge and that they can use their knowledge to control some instincts and to develop them into habits. But the evidence does not suggest that these animals have a conception similar to that of a relative mean.

We shall consider what Jane Goodall has recently discovered about chimpanzees living in the wild. Goodall has studied these primates in their natural habitat longer than anyone else. Her observations cover a continuous period of over twenty-five years (Goodall, ch. 1, pp. 9 and 10).⁴ We shall not consider chimpanzees raised and trained in a household or a laboratory. These animals may indeed possess virtue, but their virtue need not be entirely of their own making. Many habits acquired by them are probably due not solely to their own intelligence but also to the intelligence of those who train them.⁵

Chimpanzees of course are well known to possess social knowledge which is rather acute. But what is not so well known is that chimpanzees also exhibit intentionality and deliberation in their social interactions. Consider an illustrative observation of a minor conflict. A young female who has low social rank approaches an adult female who has high social rank. The juvenile tries to take a banana from the adult. The adult threatens and the juvenile retreats. After a short time, the juvenile returns and threatens the adult, and the adult retreats. Following the juvenile is an old adult male who outranks the adult female. This adult male also has an alliance of long standing with the juvenile female (Goodall, ch. 19, pp. 566-7).

These animals surely have practical intuitions about the individual identities of one another, for they know their relative positions and other relationships within an hierarchy. They are aware not only of the relationships between themselves and other individuals but also of the relationships between other individuals. For the juvenile female understands the hierarchic relationship between the adult male and the adult female, and the adult female understands the alliance between the adult male and the juvenile female. (Goodall, ch. 19, p. 570).

These animals also use their social knowledge to form intentions and to deliberate about their actions. The juvenile female intends to take a banana from the adult female, and she uses the adult male as a means to

fulfilling her intention. After defending it, the adult female abandons her original intention to retain the banana. She fails to find a means to fulfill this end (Goodall, ch. 19, pp. 566-7). And both animals appear to use their knowledge to control their instincts. The juvenile female uses her social awareness to enhance her aggressive impulse; the adult female uses her social awareness to inhibit her aggressive impulse.

But chimpanzees have social knowledge which is habitual, too. A dominant male may maintain his status for a time even after he is no longer able to defend it (Goodall, ch. 15, pp. 410 and 429-30). And their social interactions are habitual. Their hierarchies are usually stable, though they do change over time (p. 410). Their alliances are often very stable, especially between siblings and other kin (pp 409-10 and 418-24).

We thus see that chimpanzees have both intellectual and moral virtues of some kind. They have a habitual knowledge of social relationships, and they use their knowledge to control their instincts and to form social habits. We cannot of course say with absolute certainty that these animals use their intellect to perform any action. But Kant reminds us that we cannot be entirely certain that humans use their intellect to perform any action. He argues that the grounds of our actions are ultimately hidden even from ourselves (*Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* 2. 406-9).

Chimpanzees also use their social knowledge in other ways. They form coalitions to maintain or to challenge their social hierarchy. Of course, their awareness of an hierarchy itself serves to inhibit aggression. For individuals who know their status can calculate the probable outcome of conflicts and inhibit their aggressive instincts (Goodall, ch. 12, p. 356; ch. 15, pp. 409-12). But coalitions between individuals of high rank can help them maintain their status in a hierarchy, and coalitions between individuals of low rank can help them improve their status. Such arrangements are very frequent among chimpanzees (Goodall, ch. 12, p. 318-9; ch. 15, pp. 418-24).

These animals can form coalitions and make attacks on members of neighboring communities, too. These attacks can be well coordinated and very brutal (Goodall, ch. 12, p. 317; ch. 17, pp. 503-14). They also cooperate when they hunt other animals. While other chimpanzees position themselves to block off escape routes, one chimpanzee may climb a tree in pursuit of a baboon or monkey, for example, especially a juvenile (Goodall, ch. 11, pp. 285-90).

Chimpanzees control not only aggressive instincts but also some appetites. They have social preferences regarding food selection. Adults often discourage infants from eating novel food items by snatching the food and throwing it away, though infants do appear to be responsible for some innovations in diet (Goodall, ch. 10, pp. 263-6). Sexual relationships are, however, opportunistic. Even if they form an exclusive relationship, chimpanzees do not remain together for more than a few days (Goodall, ch. 16).

We thus see that wild chimpanzees possess some practical knowledge and use this knowledge to control their instincts. They can enhance and inhibit their aggressive instincts and their appetites. And they do so habitually.

III

Wild chimpanzees possess another intellectual virtue of significance. They have a communicative art of a very rudimentary sort. To show that they do, let us return to Aristotle for a definition of an art of communication. Aristotle does not present as explicit a definition of this art as we might wish. But I believe that we can piece his definition together without much difficulty.

Aristotle defines an art in general as a habit constituting a capacity for production and following from a principle (*Eth.* 6. 4. 1140a3-5). The first phrase of his definition indicates what differentiates practical wisdom and art. As intellectual virtues, both practical wisdom and art are mental habits. But wisdom of the practical sort gives one the capacity to act, and an art of any sort gives one the capacity to make (*Eth.* 6. 4. 1140a1-3 and 1140a5-6). Though action does not, production results in something being made (1140a10-17).

Though he does not discuss it, Aristotle indicates with the second phrase what general similarities practical wisdom and art have. Both practical wisdom and art include virtues of intuition and deliberation. At least, Aristotle implies that an art of communication includes these virtues. Consider what he says about rhetoric. What this art produces are speeches which contain persuasive arguments (*Rhetoric* 1. 1. 1354a11-1355a18). But he also asserts that this art concerns ends and means. For rhetoricians do make speeches with an intention of some kind. Their general intention is, of course, to persuade us to act or not to act, but their specific intentions allow us to divide speeches into different kinds (*Rhet.* 1. 3. 1358a36-1359a5). And their

speeches themselves are means to fulfilling their intentions; these speeches especially constitute persuasive arguments, though not always (*Rhet.* 1. 2. 1355b25-1356a20).

Now wild chimpanzees appear to possess an ability, even if a minimal one, to develop an art of communication. These animals have practical knowledge not only of their social environment but also of their natural environment. And they use their knowledge of these environments to regulate crude vocal communication. They are not in any way able to make a persuasive argument, of course.

Chimpanzees have in fact a vocal repertoire of over thirty different sounds. But their vocalizations are rather inarticulate, for they include only grunts, squeaks, screams, barks, pants, and hoots (Goodall, ch. 6, pp. 127, 129-31, and 134-6). Their vocalizations do, however, serve them for communication. At least, these sounds alter the behavior of those who hear them in very predictable ways (p. 125).

We shall consider a distance call known as the inquiring pant-hoot. Chimpanzees, usually males, make this pant-hoot during travel. They particularly like to make it from high ridge tops. A call of this type has a rise in pitch at the end of a series, and it is often accompanied by tree drumming. The call itself provides information about who a caller is and where he is. For all pant-hoots reliably indicate the identity of a caller, even to humans, and any pant-hoot indicates location simply by being made. Of course, the call also provides information about who an answerer is and where he is.

But do chimpanzees exhibit intentionality and deliberation when they make an inquiring pant-hoot? They appear to do so. They make this call with the intention of finding out who else is nearby and where they are. For a caller almost always engages in intent listening or looking after making his call. A caller also appears to use the information gained as a means to an end. After receiving an answer, he then joins or avoids an answerer (Goodall, ch. 6, p. 134).

These animals even more probably use their knowledge of a situation to suppress their vocalization. Consider the inquiring pant-hoot again. Chimpanzees do not make any inquiring pant-hoots when they travel along their territorial borders, where they are in danger of attack. Though they may drum on trees, they maintain almost total vocal silence in these areas. And they sometimes embrace noisy individuals until they become silent, or they strike individuals who do not maintain silence. They

even threaten human observers who are too noisy (Goodall, ch. 17, pp. 490-1; ch. 19, pp. 579-80).

Chimpanzees also make their productions and suppressions of inquiring pant-hoots habitual. They make these pant-hoots not only when reaching a ridge top but also at intervals when traveling and when lost (Goodall, ch. 6, p. 134). And their silence along their borders is quite typical. They have been observed to maintain silence for more than three hours (Goodall, ch. 17, pp. 490-1).

We thus see that chimpanzees very probably make some vocalizations as means to ends. But again we cannot say with absolute certainty that these animals use their intellect to make any call. In fact, they produce their vocalizations only in association with an emotion, and they are able to produce them only with great difficulty without an appropriate emotion (Goodall, ch. 6, p. 125).

We concede that chimpanzees utter other vocalizations merely from impulse. They make another distance call, dubbed the spontaneous pant-hoot, without any apparent purpose, for example. They make this pant-hoot during quiet feeding or resting, and they do not at all listen for a response (Goodall, ch. 6, pp. 134-5). We also concede that they do not produce other calls with an intention. One exception might be the arrival pant-hoot, which males usually make when arriving in camp (Goodall, ch. 6, p. 134). But apparently these animals do intentionally inhibit other calls, such as aggressive screams, copulation screams, and food barks (ch. 6, p. 125; ch. 17, p. 490; ch. 19, pp. 579-80).

In addition to a communicative art, chimpanzees possess a more mundane art of making tools. Indeed, they are probably best known for the fact that they make and use objects as tools. For example, they make wands and use them to fish for termites. They have the ability to make their wands of different materials, such as grass, vines, fronds, twigs, or bark. They must select what material is available for length, and they often must remove leaves or fibers from it. They also use these wands intentionally. Twisting and turning it, they must then insert the wand into a passage of a termite mound. And, finally, they can extract and eat soldier termites which attack the wand by biting it and clinging to it (Goodall, ch. 18, pp. 536-9).

Chimpanzees, of course, possess a very keen ability to manipulate objects even when they have not made them. They also can direct their manipulations to attain

goals, albeit immediate ones (Goodall, ch. 18, p. 536). Male chimpanzees drag, wave, or hurl branches and roll or throw rocks to enhance their aggressive displays (pp. 549-50). Both males and females swing tree branches up and down to whip others with them. They also break off branches from trees and brandish them, throw them, or club others with them (pp. 550-7).

They use sticks to enlarge openings in trees where bird nests or bee hives might be. They crumple up leaves and use them as sponges to drink water collected in hollows of trees (Goodall, ch. 18, p. 539-2). And they use leaves as napkins to wipe blood, fruit juice, urine, or feces from their bodies (Goodall, ch. 18, pp. 545-8).

We see then that chimpanzees more likely than not exhibit a communicative art. For they utter some vocalizations with intentionality and deliberation, and they do so from habit. We also see that they very likely inhibit some vocalizations in the same way. And these animals make tools for attaining ends and manipulate objects to attain ends.

We might note that chimpanzees from different communities exhibit variations in their production of tools and in their use of tools and objects. Instead of wands, some animals select and modify sticks to fish for termites. And they push their stick into a termite nest and pound it up and down. They then extract the stick and eat crushed termites stuck to its end. These animals also dip uncrumpled leaves into water and lick the water off them. Chimpanzees in some communities even use stones to crack open nuts (Goodall, ch. 18, pp. 542-5).

IV

Now, someone might object that our conclusions go too far. One could concede that chimpanzees have some conception of means and ends and that these animals can probably use these conceptions to control some behavior. Perhaps, they can even develop habits. But one might still object that to act as someone who has virtue acts is not necessarily to act virtuously. Aristotle himself might raise this objection. He points out that we may perform actions which accord with justice merely by chance. Or we may by chance speak in accordance with good grammar. He explains that though production does not, virtuous action rests on three conditions. An action of this sort must follow from knowledge, it must be chosen for its own sake, and it must result from habit (*Eth.* 2. 4.).

We would answer that chimpanzees do perform their actions from habit. They have rather stable knowledge of their hierarchy, and their hierarchy itself is also stable. Their production and suppression of some vocalizations is quite consistent. And so is their tool making.

But we do have to be more cautious about the knowledge possessed by chimpanzees. We of course concede that human beings and chimpanzees obviously do not have knowledge of the same kind. We make no attempt to argue that other animals possess theoretical wisdom of any kind. To possess and exercise theoretical wisdom would be well beyond these animals and their capacities, for knowledge of this sort is knowledge of eternal truth (*Eth.* 6. 3. and 6-7.).

More specifically, humans have theoretical conceptions of intellectual and moral virtue and of happiness. At least, we are capable of these conceptions. But chimpanzees in all probability do not have a very sophisticated conception of self. They appear at best to have only a very particular conception of their individual identities, their social relationships, and their immediate surroundings.⁶

Neither can we assert that these animals have other practical intuitions of great sophistication, nor can we say that they conduct sophisticated deliberations. But they do have intuitions about their actions, and they also deliberate about means to ends. We might ask the ethologists if they could provide evidence to show more clearly what kinds of truths these animals grasp and what kinds of deliberations they perform (but see Goodall, ch. 2).⁷

Do chimpanzees choose their actions? If they act after deliberation, they do. Aristotle, Hobbes, and other philosophers define choice simply as action taken after deliberation (see *Eth.* 3. 2.; and *Lev.* 1. 6.). Their range of choice is, however, not very wide because their knowledge is so limited. But we might again ask the ethologists what kinds of control they have over their impulses. Do they have complete control over any impulse? And what sort of impulse can they control?

But, clearly, these animals do not choose their action for its own sake. They most likely act for the sake of the consequences of their action. For example, they do not maintain their hierarchy for its own sake. Dominant males and females seek their status for the sake of psychological and physiological advantages (Goodall, ch. 15, p. 442).

We see, then, that chimpanzees possess mental and moral habits with apparent similarities and

dissimilarities to human virtue. But perhaps we also ought to ask ourselves how well we measure up to classical virtue ethics. How many of us have a good grasp of the classical conceptions of virtue and happiness? And if we understand them, how often are we able to embody these conceptions in our actions? How much control are we able to exhibit over our emotions? And how often do we choose our actions for their own sakes?⁸

V

We have discovered, then, that other primates have some rudimentary virtues of their own. At least, they clearly develop some mental and moral habits of their own. We have, however, attempted to analyze their virtue only in a general sense and not in any special sense. In future inquiries we might accordingly wish to ask what specific virtues other primates may possess. One especially important virtue to consider would be justice.⁹

But our discovery also entails some ethical implications for our relationships with other animals. Very probably other primates besides chimpanzees have virtues of some sort, and other mammals may have them, too. If so, we may have uncovered a general basis for an ethics of animal virtue. A virtue ethics for animals would, of course, serve to bolster attempts to advance a teleological ethics for animals, for a virtue of any kind has an end in its activity.¹⁰ A virtue ethics would also override some objections to a utilitarian ethics for animals. For an ethics of this kind need not rest on the mere ability to feel pleasure and pain.¹¹

We may consequently find that we have higher obligations than we thought to animals other than humans. These animals appear to be intellectually and morally better than we might have imagined. They can develop intellectual and moral virtue not entirely dissimilar to our own. We would thus appear to have an obligation to respect their capacity to form these habits and to exercise them. Merely to respect their capacity to feel pleasure and pain would not be sufficient.

But our discovery of animal virtue also tells us something about ourselves. Indeed, Goodall made her study of chimpanzees for this very purpose (Goodall, intro., p. 3). If they do not measure up to our highest aspirations, these animals do appear to come rather close to our quotidian virtues. Perhaps our aspirations have prevented us from noting their achievements.

Notes

¹ Contemporary philosophers who dispute about our obligations to other animals tend to neglect the conception of virtue because they concern themselves almost exclusively with the ability of an animal to reason or to feel pleasure and pain. For example, see R.G. Frey, *Interests and Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) or Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Avon Books, 1975). A noteworthy exception is Sapontzis. See S. F. Sapontzis, *Morals, Reason, and Animals* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), esp. ch. 3.

² Rollin advocates a teleological ethics for animals, for example. See Bernard E. Rollin, *Animal Rights and Human Morality* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1981).

³ Exactly what facts practical wisdom grasps is a bone of contention among classical scholars. For a discussion of this issue, one might consult Norman Dahl, *Practical Reason, Aristotle, and Weakness of the Will* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), esp. app. 1.

⁴ Jane Goodall, *The Chimpanzees of Gombe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). Also see Frans de Waal, *Chimpanzee Politics* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1982).

⁵ Goodall also provides a good synopsis of the literature on these chimpanzees (Goodall, ch. 2).

⁶ Frey would appear to assume that other animals would have to have a moral theory in order to be rational. For he argues that they would have to possess a language in order to have any beliefs. See Frey, ch. 7. And Frey is not alone. For example, see Donald Davidson, "Rational Animals," *Dialectica* 36 (1982) 317-28; or Jonathan Bennett, "Thoughtful Brutes," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 62 (1988-89) 197-210. We may trace this view back at least to Descartes (*Discourse on Method* 5.). But language is surely a prerequisite of theoretical reason rather than of practical reason. Hobbes made this point (*Leviathan* 1. 5.). Other philosophers reach conclusions similar to ours. See, for example, Rollin, pt. 1; Sapontzis, chs. 3 and 7; Stephen R. L. Clark, *The Nature of the Beast* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), ch. 3; Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), chs. 1-2. On this topic one might also consider Robert J. McLaughlin, "Language and Man," *Thomist* 45 (1981) 541-70.

⁷ Clark, Regan, Rollin, and Sapontzis all reach conclusions similar to ours.

⁸ Compare Sapontzis, ch. 3, pp. 41-6.

⁹ Sociobiologists of course study other primate communities and their structures. But they do so with the

intention of discovering not how much these primates resemble humans but rather how much we resemble them. See Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), for example.

¹⁰ Rollin advocates a teleological ethics based primarily if not exclusively on biological functions. He would thus appear to overlook any role animal rationality might play in modifying these functions. See Rollin, pt. 1.

¹¹ Singer of course presents the utilitarian argument that the ability to feel pleasure and pain is what gives animals a right to equal moral consideration. This argument would be more appropriate for animals which exhibit little or no rationality. See Singer, ch. 1.

Announcement

**A summer course on
Ethical Issues of Animal Research
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The course is open to college faculty and others who would like to improve their skills in teaching about ethical issues surrounding the use of animals as research subjects. Emphasis will be on how to use this course material in classroom instruction.

Topics include the moral status of nonhuman animals, the justification for using animals as experimental subjects, ethical concerns about vulnerable subjects, student objections, the use of alternatives, animal harms and pain, legal issues, and the importance of species. Varying points of view will be presented in a well-balanced fashion.

The course directors are F. Barbara Orlans, Ph.D., and Tom L. Beauchamp, Ph.D., both of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics, Georgetown University.

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