



The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Evolution of Cooperation

By Matt Ridley

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If, as Darwin suggests, evolution relentlessly encourages the survival of the fittest, why are humans compelled to live in cooperative, complex societies? In this fascinating examination of the roots of human trust and virtue, a zoologist and former American editor of the **Economist** reveals the results of recent studies that suggest that self-interest and mutual aid are not at all incompatible. In fact, he points out, our cooperative instincts may have evolved as part of mankind's natural selfish behavior--by exchanging favors we can benefit ourselves as well as others. Brilliantly orchestrating the newest findings of geneticists, psychologists, and anthropologists, **The Origins of Virtue** re-examines the everyday assumptions upon which we base our actions towards others, whether in our roles as parents, siblings, or trade partners. With the wit and brilliance of **The Red Queen**, his acclaimed study of human and animal sexuality, **Matt Ridley** shows us how breakthroughs in computer programming, microbiology, and economics have given us a new perspective on how and why we relate to each other.

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Editorial Review

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Human life, scientific journalist Matt Ridley suggests, is a complex balancing act: we behave with self-interest foremost in mind, but also in ways that do not harm, and sometimes even benefit, others. This behavior, in a strange way, makes us good. It also makes us unique in the animal world, where self-interest is far more pronounced. "The essential virtuousness of human beings is proved not by parallels in the animal kingdom, but by the very lack of convincing animal parallels," Ridley writes. How we got to be so virtuous over millions of years of evolution is the theme of this entertaining book of popular science, which will be of interest to any student of human nature.

From Library Journal

Relying heavily on game theory, zoologist and science writer Ridley focuses on how cooperation evolved in the generally selfish world of humankind. The result is a fascinating tale incorporating studies in theoretical and evolutionary biology, ecology, economics, ethology, sociology, and anthropology. Ridley details many complex behaviors, such as altruism in animals and humans, and reviews many anthropological investigations to show how these behaviors manifest themselves in differing groups. He also develops some absorbing ideas regarding extinct civilizations. Unfortunately, his conclusions are sometimes at odds with his claim that individual property rights are the key to conservation and that environmentalists are misguided. His criticisms of conservation efforts and of the concept of the "noble savage" can be one-sided, and his sources are limited. Still, the material will captivate a wide audience, including scholars who appreciate the original literature cited. Highly recommended. Constance A. Rinaldo, Dartmouth Coll. Biomedical Lib., Hanover, N.H.

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From [Booklist](#)

Since Darwin taught us to view nature as a brutal competition among species, few philosophers have regarded virtue as a natural impulse. Yet it is to evolutionary biology, not ethical theory, that Ridley turns for an explanation of why people often sacrifice self-interest for the common good. With evidence from the latest research, he demonstrates that the hidden maneuvering of the genes punishes the egotist and rewards the saint. But don't expect the dance of the genes to follow a politically correct choreography: Ridley advances highly controversial arguments on the sexual division of labor, on the politics of environmentalism, and on the causes of war. Certainly, no one should look to these pages for a genetic formula for universal harmony and peace. But Ridley concludes with a compelling appeal for a renewal of natural communities in which our best instincts can flourish. At a time of rising fears about bioscience, Ridley still inspires hope that biology may be an ally, not a foe, in the fight for a moral world. *Bryce Christensen*

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