



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

*Matt Ridley*

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## **The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Evolution of Cooperation** Matt Ridley

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.

## **The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Evolution of Cooperation Details**

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## From Reader Review The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Evolution of Cooperation for online ebook

### B.J. Richardson says

This book sets out to demonstrate that "there was morality before the church, trade before the state, exchange before money, social contracts before Hobbes, welfare before the Rights of Man, culture before Babylon, society before Greece, self-interest before Adam Smith, and greed before capitalism." By the title, you would think this is a book about the origins of virtue, but really the primary focus is on only two virtues he focuses on are altruism and cooperation.

When he is doing so, Matt Ridley is excellent. He pieces together the fields of biology, game theory, the animal kingdom, and some history and sociology to demonstrate why and how from a behavioral evolutionary standpoint, we act the way we do. I understand that such a large task there is no way to include all the facts, details and theories that are out there, but Ridley does tend to use a selective inclusion of facts that make his case seem much stronger than it really is. For example, he demonstrates how and why fashions and fads can come into being, but by his logic, there would be no reason for those fads to ever change. I wonder what Malcolm Gladwell would have to say to that. Things are a bit more complicated than Ridley would like.

Another example that jumped right out at me because theology is my strong point was when he was talking about how early Judaism was an exclusive religion. He states that "The Ten Commandments apply to the Israelites but not to heathen people." He then gives an example of Joshua winning a battle in Ai and celebrating by making a stone copy of the Ten Commandments that include "Thou shalt not kill." Matt Ridley should have read to the end of the chapter before trying to paint Judaism as an affair exclusively of adult Hebrew men. In Joshua 8:35 it specifically says that all the women, children, and foreigners were included in this celebratory reading of the Law.

A few different times, I caught subtle hints at racism or, at least, an air of Western superiority. One such example I noted was: "A South African crowd making a political demonstration and jogging in place is much closer to its evolutionary roots than a ballroom of Viennese waltzing the night away." No explanation or reason is given. It is simply assumed his readers will immediately, unquestioningly agree. The same idea also comes out when talking about cultures and people groups that have only recently come into contact with the West. It is assumed that they have not evolved or changed in any way for thousands, or tens of thousands of years and that we can understand from their 19th or 20th century behavior how Homo Erectus must have acted.

Anyways, I am still giving this book four stars because there is a lot of great information here and this would be a good introductory book on behavioral evolution. I would just strongly recommend that you read it with both eyes open.

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### Tigran Ghardashyan says

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### Ryan says

It was hard for me to get through the first couple of chapters mainly because I don't agree with the basic premise of the book: that we have evolved from nothing into something. I actually underlined all the times Ridley used the language of intelligent design (accidentally, I assume) to describe some evolutionary process.

But starting with Chapter 3 -- The Prisoner's Dilemma -- the book gets much better. It's about game theory and how humans make decisions when placed under various cost/benefit parameters. Human behavior is what it is regardless of our origins.

The end of the book is especially good. This is where Ridley explains "the tragedy of the commons" and how government produces less-than-ideal outcomes when compared to communities that lack an autocratic government.

Stylistically, Ridley is a great writer, so reading this book is pleasurable -- even if you disagree with some (or many) of the author's viewpoints.

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### Paul says

A fascinating and wide-ranging exploration of human nature, and how it has evolved biologically and culturally. It's mostly a happy story – as a species we are cooperative, social, sharing, trading and we divide the labor so that we all have more. There's a darker side too: we are fiercely and often irrationally (and violently) tribal. And underlying it all is the unpleasant (to many) truth that self-interest drives the whole thing – probably at the level of our genes, but certainly at the level of individual and family. The good news is that successful societies have evolved structures that channel the basic self-interest into cooperative, win-win outcomes, and generally without the direction of a sovereign or state. As Ridley shows, "...there was morality before the Church; trade before the state; exchange before money; social contracts before Hobbes; welfare before the rights of man; culture before Babylon; society before Greece; self-interest before Adam Smith; and greed before capitalism." Indeed, most of the conclusions are the same as Smith's – from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as well as *Wealth of Nations* – but with the benefit of an additional 250 years of history and science to support them. Ridley is a great pleasure to read.?

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### John Vibber says

This book poses a puzzle: Is virtue an instinctual property built into our selfish genes? And if so, how do we reconcile our tribal tendencies with the trust we extend to others? You might think such thorny questions best explained by anthropologists, but Matt Ridley the biologist/economist wouldn't agree.

His thesis is based on several lines of research which weigh traditional and emerging beliefs about human nature. Traditionally he asks if we are noble savages constrained by society or distrustful savages constrained by government. In other words, are we the intellectual decedents of Rousseau or Hobbs? And if neither, what has modern science taught us about evolution and human goodness?

I found this a somewhat technical read, but worth the effort. I like how Ridley addresses difficult questions. In the end, his perspective increased my optimism about human nature.

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## Nicholas says

Read it awhile ago. I remember it being really good. Pretty simple to grasp. Fun. Interesting. All that.

Attempts to answer the question "Why are people nice?"

Quotes:

"Animals are designed to do things not for their species, or for themselves, but for their genes."

"There had come the realization that the genome wasn't the monolithic data bank plus executive team devoted to one project - keeping oneself alive, having babies - that I had hitherto imagined it to be. Instead, it was beginning to seem more a company boardroom, a theatre for a power struggle of egotists and factions . . . I was an ambassador ordered abroad by some fragile coalition, a bearer of conflicting orders from the uneasy masters of a divided empire."

"The deed is what counts."

"Think of it: zillions and zillions of organisms running around, each under the hypnotic spell of a single truth, all these truths identical, and all logically incompatible with one another: 'My hereditary material is the most important material on earth; its survival justifies your frustration, pain, even death'. And you are one of these organisms, living your life in the thrall of a logical absurdity."

"Social benefits derive from individual vices. The cooperation and progress inherent in human society are the result not of benevolence, but of the pursuit of self-interest. Selfish ambition leads to industry; resentment discourages aggression; vanity can be the cause of acts of kindness."

"To reduce the complexity of life to a silly game is the kind of thing that gets economists a bad name. But the point is not to try squeeze every real-life problem into a box called 'prisoner's dilemma', but to create an idealized version of what happens when collective and individual interests are in conflict. You can then experiment with the ideal until you discover something surprising and then return to the real world to see if it sheds light on what really happens."

"The Western Front was 'plagued' by unofficial truces between Allied and German units that had been facing each other for some time. Elaborate systems of communication developed to agree terms, apologize for accidental infractions and ensure relative peace - all without the knowledge of the high commands on each side."

"The bigger the society in which the individual lives, the bigger its neocortex relative to the rest of the brain."

To thrive in a complex society, you need a big brain. To acquire a big brain, you need to live in a complex society."

"Gift giving in a tribal society, where the object is to put somebody else under an obligation, is not gift giving at all; it is exploiting a reciprocal instinct."

"Moral sentiments are problem-solving devices designed to make highly social creatures effective at using social relations to their genes' long-term advantage. They are a way of settling the conflict between short-term expediency and long-term prudence in favour of the latter."

"The virtuous are virtuous for no other reason than that it enables them to join forces with others who are virtuous, to mutual benefit."

"The neighbouring or rival group, however defined, is automatically an enemy. Argentinians and Chileans hate each other because there is nobody else nearby to hate."

"There was morality before the Church; trade before the state; exchange before money; social contracts before Hobbes; welfare before the rights of man; culture before Babylon; society before Greece; self-interest before Adam Smith; and greed before capitalism."

"So let us examine the individualists' case: that government is the problem, not the solution. The collapse of community spirit in the last few decades, and the erosion of civic virtue, is caused in this analysis not by the spread and encouragement of greed but by the dead hand of Leviathan. The state makes no bargain with the citizen to take joint responsibility for civic order, engenders in him no obligation, duty or pride, and imposes obedience instead. Little wonder that, treated like a naughty child, he behaves like one."

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### **Anthony says**

This book should definitely be on your short list of books to read if you are at all interested in what makes us humans behave as we do. It is one among many recently published books on evolutionary psychology -- and it's one of the very best. What distinguishes Ridley's book from the pack is his explicit grappling with the question: What does the fact that human moral sentiments are crafted by natural selection imply about the appropriate political order?

I definitely want and need to read it again.

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### **Nikki says**

Hmmm, The Origins of Virtue is an interesting examination of the possible evolutionary causes of virtue, mostly defined here as altruism. It works quite well as a supplement that falls somewhere in between three of my current classes on Coursera: one with an anthropological bent, one largely genetic, and one about morality. It draws some of those themes together quite well, for me, and explains some of the studies -- and some of the pitfalls of the studies, and wishful thinking.

It's also pretty well written: it's divided into both chapters and sections, which makes it easy to digest and keeps the argument focused.

On the other hand, it's a little old now (1996), and Ridley's ideology is very obvious to the attentive reader, although camouflaged by his scientific tone. At least the last chapter unveils his ethical principles: anti-government, anti-socialism (including such familiar institutions to Brits as the NHS), pro-small collectives and curated communal living. To be fair, he does analyse some of the ways this falls down, but he mostly focuses on why government-run things doesn't work.

I mean, I love the NHS unashamedly. I went from the diagnosis of gallstones to medication to having my gallbladder removed in the process of a couple of months, without paying for anything at the point of use, at a time when I couldn't support myself and was in agonising pain. Throughout my life I'll pay back into that system with my taxes, and I don't begrudge it at all, whatever Ridley's conclusions told him.

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### **Mark Colenutt says**

Matt Ridley was educated at Oxford and is a journalistic scientist, which means he is able to translate the more complicated scientific breakthroughs and understandings to the wider public in a clear and succinct manner.

Almost anything he has written, including his Guardian articles, are worthy of a reader's time. This particular publication is a brave attempt to explain why we are nice to each other. Is it from some altruistic human capacity or is it more a genetic survival technique? We are taught not to look a gifted horse in the mouth and yet that is the first thing a tribal nomad will do, well aware that if he is being given something then his friend will expect something in return.

His hypotheses are tested against a plethora of animal studies from ants to dolphins who all collaborate for different gains.

For those who fell asleep during all those afternoon wildlife documentaries then this publication is a masterclass in animal behaviourism with an array of surprising facts that few documentaries would dare publish. A must then, for those interested in evolutionary biology.

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### **notgettingenough says**

Bit tempted to put this one in science fiction.

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### **Steven Peterson says**

The book opens with a daring jail break. The story notes that the person escaping the grim Russian prison is, in fact, a member of the nobility, one of the Czar's favorites when the escapee was much younger. The person breaking out, of course, is Peter Kropotkin, the anarchist prince. However, it is not his philosophy so much as his work in natural history that drew Matt Ridley's attention.

Kropotkin, on an exploration of Siberia, observed what he saw was cooperation among multitudinous animal species. He drew from that the conclusion that Huxley, who had described nature as "red in tooth and claw," was missing an important part of the evolution picture--the evolution of cooperation. And this leads to Ridley's thesis in this well written volume (page 5): "Society works not because we have consciously

invented it, but because it is an ancient product of our evolved predispositions. It is literally in our nature." He goes on to note that (page 5): "This is a book about human nature, and in particular the surprisingly social nature of the human animal."

The volume proceeds by reviewing theories and research on cooperation, evolution, and so on, a wide ranging review of the human condition and of our evolutionary impulses. He notes that our primate relatives set the stage for understanding the evolution of human cooperation. He notes the importance of a game, adopting game theory, developed by political scientist Robert Axelrod, in which humans will cooperate unless double crossed, at which point individuals will respond in negative kind. But, according to some theorists, as long as individuals are willing to cooperate with one another, they will get cooperation in return.

His conclusion is intriguing (page 264): "If we are to recover social harmony and virtue, if we are to build back into society the virtues that made it work for us, it is vital that we reduce the power and scope of the state." He calls for (page 265) ". . .social and material exchange between equals for that is the raw material of trust, and trust is the basis for virtue."

All in all, an intriguing and interesting volume. Not all, of course, will be convinced of the thesis. But it is a well written effort to integrate many different bodies of work to make his point.

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## **Ohr says**

Solid in parts, sadly Ridley once again Allows his scientific reasoning and conclusions to be the servants of his a priori political beliefs

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## **Vasha7 says**

*The Origins of Virtue* is a non-technical discussion of the evolutionary aspects of cooperation and altruism. That being an extremely complex subject (and still very much an active area of research), a short book like this can only skim the surface. Although I've read other books, magazine articles, and blog posts, there were some things here that were new to me. For example, the pair of chapters introducing game theory are better than other introductory articles I've seen, which (surprisingly) generally don't go beyond the point in the history of computer simulations where the Tit-for-Tat strategy came to prominence: Ridley describes how, as simulations became more realistic, Tit-for-Tat turned out not to be the single most stable strategy after all. But then, a single simple solution is easier to present in a short article, whereas here he has thirty pages to develop the point that will be repeatedly made throughout the book: that a (temporarily) stable solution is a delicate balance of competing interests, adjusted by natural selection and highly dependent on ecological circumstances.

As the subtitle indicates, Ridley is constantly returning to the subject of "human instincts". People who doubt that instincts can be directly selected for reproductive strategizing, or who want methodological caution, will be dissatisfied here: Ridley pretty much takes evolutionary psychology for granted. He starts off the book by invoking nineteenth-century social theorists Peter Kropotkin and Adam Smith, but mostly he cites famous twentieth century work in economics and anthropology; psychological research is brought in to a much lesser extent. The references in the endnotes are a mixture of academic works and other semi-popular books.

At several points Ridley argues against a "noble savage" idea, pointing out that people aren't virtuous

because virtue is directly built into them, but because they're (selected to be) able to recognize that living in a virtuous society where you can usually trust strangers is good for them (it seems that humans are the only species that can go that far, not only making fair deals, but using general virtue to promote a far larger cooperative society). Cheating is short-sighted, cooperation allows greater gains. There are discussions of what social circumstances promote and undermine this; it's always a balance. Ridley is somewhat pessimistic about the possibility of ecological virtue, which is not an inborn love of the land but rather a much more difficult problem in far-sightedness. However, it has not proved impossible to solve some problems of destructive self-interest, perhaps this one is not impossible either.

Ridley gets into politics somewhat, with a recurring theme being an argument against coercive institutions, whether they be monarchs or large bureaucratic governments. He is attempting to demonstrate that fluid agreements between individuals or small collectives are far more likely to work to everyone's advantage. This goes for property ownership too: he argues that people can't properly care for land or resources that are nobody's, or held by a very large collective ownership. These themes, like everything else in this short work, are not developed in much detail.

This book covers all the main aspects of its topic, and lays out the basis that beginners will need in order to go further in the field. Ridley writes well and explains his points very comprehensibly, though at the cost of simplification. His greatest flaw is that he takes an excessively confident tone, often presenting a disputed issue as if it was settled. Let me not be excessively negative. I hope that people who finish this good but incomplete book will go on, if not to read some primary sources, at least to seek out other popular works with different perspectives.

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### **Scott says**

This book extends the arguments about the genetic basis of behavior from the rest of the animal kingdom (familiar to readers of Dawkins' "The Selfish Gene") into human behavior, the appearance of cooperation and altruistic actions, and the unique nature of human society. The author, Matt Ridley, is good at engaging the reader, with many examples drawn not only from biology, but from diverse fields, including opera (the "Prisoner's Dilemma" chapter begins with the plot story for Puccini's "Tosca"). Ridley argues that human society is best when government and social structures tap into the genetic understanding of human behaviors to encourage the best from us. Perhaps not surprisingly from an author who wrote the science and technology column for the Economist, Ridley resolves that government is best when it is small - although I think this conclusion to be the weakest section of the book. There is much of interest to learn within these pages, and Ridley makes the experience enjoyable and worthwhile.

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### **Evan Dossey says**

Matt Ridley, a former journalist, continues to provide evolutionary-psychology and zoology grounded insights into human behavior. An old book, but good groundwork for more recently published material.

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