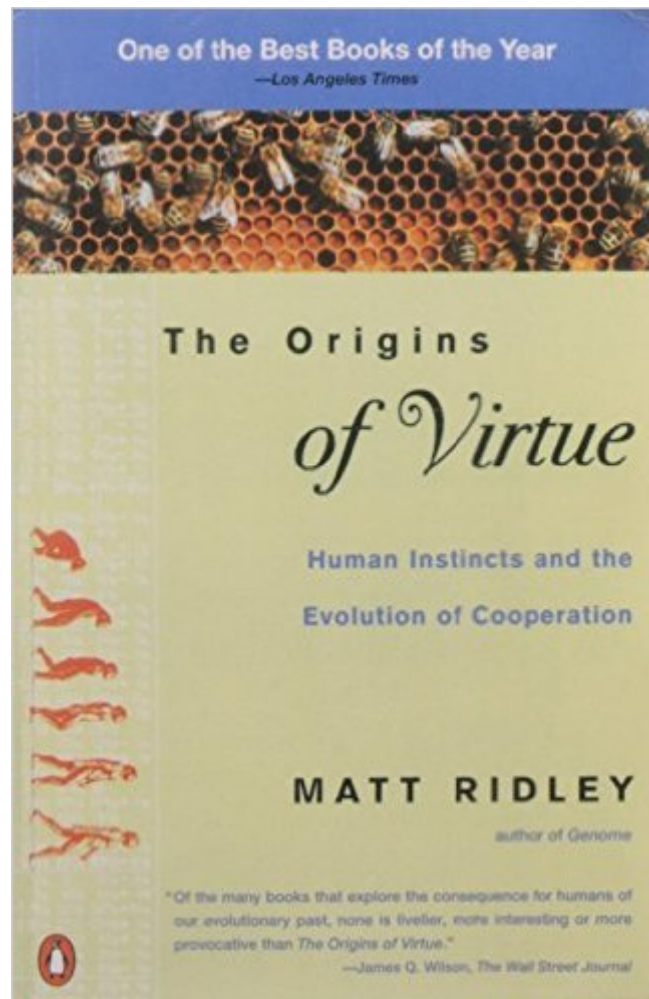


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The Origins Of Virtue: Human Instincts And The Evolution Of Cooperation



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

Matt Ridley is a British science journalist who has the estimable quality of relying on facts rather than opinions to make his case. In this short, highly readable book he puts forward the evolutionary biologist's theory for the existence of human cooperation and altruism, and he does it brilliantly. The depth and breadth of material covered is extraordinary, and this book well rewards repeated readings (always the sign of good science writing). From an introductory description of the ideas of Kropotkin, through game theory and Evolutionarily Stable Strategies, to a discussion of free market

economics as the 'best fit' to human models of social cooperation, Ridley introduces a wealth of meticulously researched material with sufficient digs at current bien-pensant wisdom on the acquisition of culture to make the average sociologist's hair stand on end. Matt Ridley writes a weekly column (Acid Test) in the UK broadsheet newspaper The Daily Telegraph, and his customary penetrating analysis of accepted cultural and environmental theory is always a joy to read. He brings this penetrating style to bear on some of the shibboleths of modern sociology (there is a particularly devastating broadside reserved for the egregious Margaret Mead and her band of fellow travelers in the 'Culture Makes Mind' school). The book concludes (rashly, as even the author acknowledges) with a defense of economic libertarianism.

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. The prior review by David Gillies sums up the books nicely. I would just like to add one further detail. The modern intelligentsia and media have portrayed Native Americans and other Aboriginal peoples as conservationists and environmentalists who were stewards of the earth's resources and were 'at one with nature'. If this is true, then it largely refutes Ridley's whole argument. Ridley devotes a whole chapter to this (Chapter 11 - Ecology as Religion) and shows that it is a complete myth. Some of the facts he adduces: Shortly after 'Native Americans' arrived in North America, 73% of the large mammals were exterminated and became extinct. Shortly after man arrived in South America, 80% of the large mammals were exterminated and became extinct. As the Polynesians colonized the Pacific, they extinguished 20% of all the bird species on earth. At Olsen-Chubbock, the site of ancient bison massacres in Colorado, where people regularly stampeded herds over a cliff, the animals lay in such heaps after a successful stampede that only the ones on the top were butchered, and only the best joints were taken from them. If you are incredulous - read the book, all the sources are there. Ridley's final conclusion is that the limitations of technology or demand, rather than a culture of self-restraint or religious respect, is what kept tribal people from overexploiting their environment. One nice touch is Ridley's quote of Chief Seattle's speech which Al Gore includes in his book 'Earth in the Balance'. "How can you buy or sell the sky? The Land?...Every part of this earth is sacred to my people...

Ridley's purpose is not to be the ethicist, but to provide an interdisciplinary account of our constitutional foundations as homo sapiens, in order for a moral theory to reflect these innate foundations. He succeeds masterfully. Indeed, Ridley's "The Origin of Virtue" succeeds in a way that Robert Wright's "The Moral Animal" fails. Whereas Wright focuses only on the Modern

Synthesis of evolutionary biology and molecular genetics, Ridley incorporates both and adds ethology, comparative psychology, sociology, politics, economics, game theory, and paleontology. Wright's scope is myopic, whereas Ridley's scope is expansive. The outcomes could not be more radically different. I dismissed Wright's book - not because it failed to explain Darwinism (it does so very well) - but because it failed to provide any moral insight from the Modern Synthesis. Ridley does not make this mistake: He takes homo sapiens as we are, both one with Nature, yet tellingly distinct and unique as a social and rational species. Ridley does this by using a broader armamentarium from which to analyze the origins of human virtue. Consequently, Ridley accomplishes far more than Wright in half the space and time..Ridley's territory is too sophisticated and nuanced to be summarized into several single propositions. But he leaves no stone unturned, examining a plethora of human dynamics, i.e., the innate characteristics with which we are born, the usual pattern of development after our birth, and what is factual about the real, rather than the metaphysical, world.

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