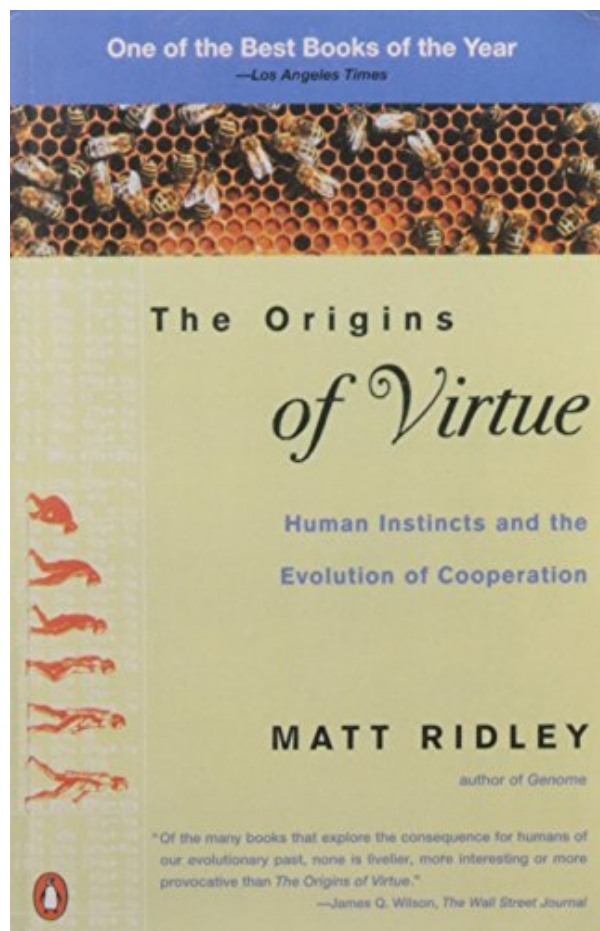
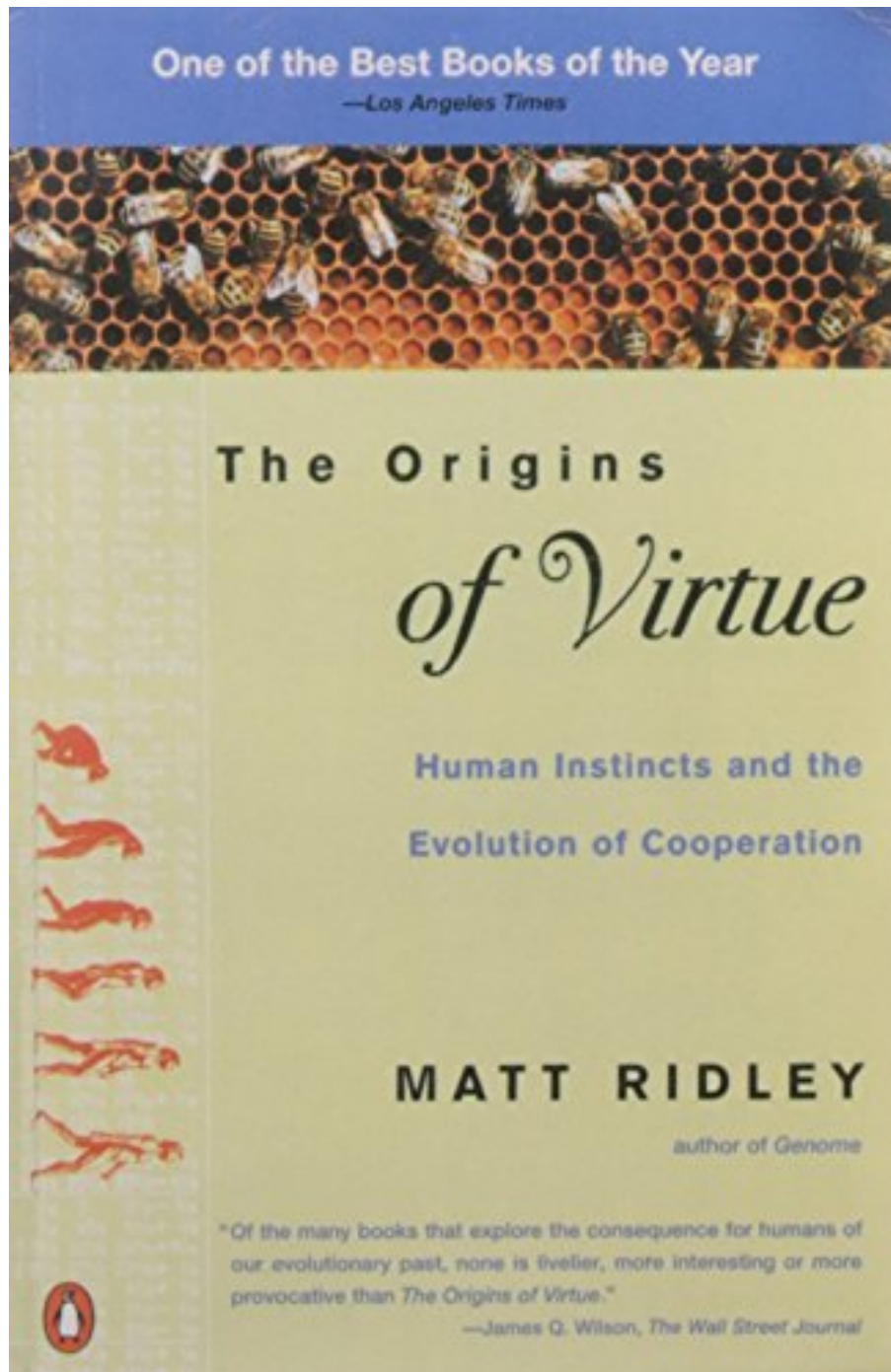


THE ORIGINS OF VIRTUE: HUMAN INSTINCTS AND THE EVOLUTION OF COOPERATION BY MATT RIDLEY



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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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A Slender, Focused Treatment of an Important Topic

By James R. Mccall

This is a well-written book, larded with intellectual plums, so even if you don't follow the main line of argument, you will enjoy its details. However, following the main argument is not terribly difficult. Ridley really makes a single point and draws an important conclusion: whatever else we are we are by nature cooperators, yet key forms of cooperation are thwarted by the conditions of modern life.

We are 'groupish'; we form teams and do our part, and disapprove of those who don't do their parts. We form friendships based on mutual favors, and our accounting of who owes whom what and how much is exquisitely honed and compulsively indulged. We have first-class cheat-detectors, and we use our miraculous language abilities mostly to gossip about others, and whether they are holding up their ends, are free-riders, or perhaps do more than their share, blaming and praising and so keeping everyone more or less in line.

These behaviors were 'designed' by evolution to aid us; those who got along with others by being generous, friendly, and trusting, yet also firmly punishing betrayal, tended to do better in life and to leave more offspring of the same ilk. These behaviors do not always translate into being 'nice', and certainly hardly ever translate into a universal love of mankind. But they do lead us to get along with those we feel are a part of our group of the moment.

Anyway, given this constellation of reciprocal altruism/cheat detection along with our always-vigilant looking out for Number One, it seems that we do have within us the makings of a workable social mechanism that can deliver benefit to everyone without requiring lots of police. We can, it turns out, avoid The Tragedy of the Commons and the 'war of each with each'. Most people are willing to give the benefit of the doubt in dealing with strangers -- to trust them and be honorable towards them -- if the social climate encourages this. So people all over the world have always been able to deal with common resources in the only way that really assures they can be profitably and sustainably exploited: by making them private properties.

Much of the first part of this book was adequately covered in Robert Wright's book "The Moral Animal". I don't think Ridley adds anything new there, but his discussion of the consequences of reciprocity, or

reciprocal altruism, is much more extensive than Wright's. He discusses groupishness, our tendency to operate in groups, which to him is not the same thing as submerging ourselves into some group identity. We cooperate, we trade, we work together by means of groupishness and reciprocity: they explain trust, retribution, gifts, and sharing; they allow us to gain greatly from trading with each other.

He notes, amusingly, that we seem to have a built-in dislike of hoarding, and that this sits uncomfortably with the vast possibilities for hoarding of property that modern societies provide. At the same time, private ownership is the engine that has ramped up our prosperity so spectacularly. People work for themselves directly and also for things that they can own. At the same time, people sort themselves into groups of similar levels of resources [that is, of wealth] so as to not have to deal with the hoarding taboo.

I think this book makes an important political point in a novel way. And its conclusions can be applied to other than the economic sphere. For example, laws enforcing political correctness often have the unintended consequence of reducing the tacit cooperation that would otherwise enforce community morals.

Anyway, Ridley basically is saying that we should use some aspects of our innate nature to control other aspects and get to the good society. Cooperation and trust, properly employed, can do more than squadrons of police to keep people in line. It's an uplifting message. I wonder how many will believe it?

30 of 31 people found the following review helpful.

A Materialist Case for Ethics

By D. S. Heersink

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. Suffice it to say that reciprocal altruism, kin selection, unit cohesion, symbiotic collaboration, ostracism, imitation, contextualism, emotion, trade, personal property, and mutual trust all dovetail along with reason to produce a distinctive human reality.

While homo sapiens may be grounded in nature and motivated by self-interest, accepting these facts does not condemn us to a Hobbesian state of affairs. As Ridley poignantly observes, individual and collective interests break apart only when we are coercively removed from our finer instincts. We are not a blank slate, after all, but born and nurtured to do remarkably virtuous things. Ridley advocates no particular ethical theory, but shows what a theory must provide in order for it to be commensurate with our being human and to be compatible with our original innate predispositions. Wright [supra.] advocates a utilitarian ethic, not because of some intrinsic feature of utilitarianism, but, well, just because. It's no surprise then that the ethical theory Ridley most respects is the theory of moral sentiments espoused by David Hume, Adam Smith, and Francis Hutcheson in the eighteenth century. The link could not be more obvious: The theory of moral sentiments

reflects on our empirical selves and how we are disposed to act towards others based on our own self-interests with benevolence.

Just because humans are genetically, physically, and biologically predisposed to act one way rather than another doesn't make such a predisposition ethically normative. Ridley avoids the naturalistic fallacy. His interdisciplinary account is intellectually and emotionally satisfying, because it draws on a plurality of disciplines to sort out our ethical origins and intuitions. Even though one does not get a complete ethical, political, or economic theory from Ridley, the implications are clear. For a fuller explication of his ideas, the reader will need to consult David Hume's "Treatise on Human Nature," Part III, or his "Enquiry into the Principles of Morals;" or Adam Smith's "Theory of Moral Sentiments;" or else Francis Hutcheson's numerous ethical essays. The political and economic implications of Ridley's account favors the writings of F.A. Hayek's "Constitution of Liberty," and other classical liberals.

At least Ridley opens the door between the Modern Synthesis and ethical, political, and economic theories. He does not have an overriding agenda (as in the Sociobiology debates), but clearly and articulately examines human nature from manifold perspectives - all grounded in empirical evidence. The result is refreshingly honest and candid; now it's up to us to decide what to do with this evidence. Highly recommended.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Pretty Good

By William

I bought this book for less than the list price, seriously around 5 bucks. That being considered I'm happy with it. It's a pretty well thought out book, and with good info. Really, the only problem I had, which I've had with a few books, is how short it was. When a book doesn't go on enough about certain things or into enough depth, it just sometimes feels half written to me. It could have said more, but it's cheap and I'm happy with it.

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