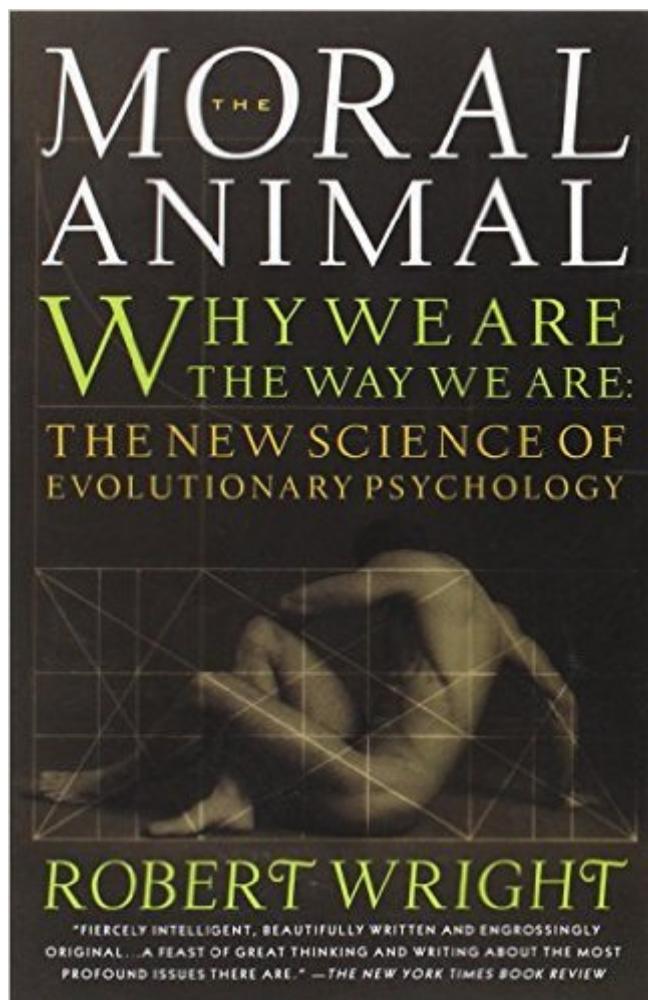


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The Moral Animal: Why We Are, The Way We Are: The New Science Of Evolutionary Psychology



Synopsis

Are men literally born to cheat? Does monogamy actually serve women's interests? These are among the questions that have made *The Moral Animal* one of the most provocative science books in recent years. Wright unveils the genetic strategies behind everything from our sexual preferences to our office politics--as well as their implications for our moral codes and public policies. Illustrations.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Although first published in 1994, a long time ago in the rapidly developing science of evolutionary psychology, Robert Wright's seminal book remains an excellent introduction to the subject. The text crackles with an incisive wit that says, yes we're animals, but we can live with that. The discussion is thorough, ranging from a rather intense focus on Charles Darwin and his life through the sexist and morality debate occasioned by the publication of Edward O. Wilson's *Sociobiology* in 1975, to the rise of the use of primate comparisons fueled by Jane Goodall's instant classic, *The Chimpanzees of Gombe: Patterns of Behavior* (1986). Wright has some rather serious fun with human sexual behavior as seen from the perspective of evolutionary psychology, but he spends even more time worrying (to no good effect, in my opinion) about altruism and the shaky concept of kin selection. The title is partly ironic, since much of the material suggests that we are something less than "moral." The "Everyday Life" in the title is an allusion to Freud (*The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 1904) who makes a dual appearance in the text, first as a kind of not-yet-illuminated precursor to modern Darwinian thought, and second as the reigning champ of psychology that

evolutionary psychology is out to dethrone. (See especially page 314.) What's exciting about evolutionary psychology is that for the first time psychology has a firm scientific foundation upon which to build. But it's a tough subject for some people, I think, mainly because they confuse "is" with "ought."

I read the celebrated "Moral Animal" some 10 years ago, then re-read and underlined it at least twice. Finally I had found a theory of human nature and psychology I could wholeheartedly believe in. I was looking for a great quote from that book last week but found I had loaned out both copies - so I bought a new one and ended up re-reading the whole thing. The quote is: "...humans are a species splendid in their array of moral equipment, tragic in their propensity to misuse it, and pathetic in their constitutional ignorance of the misuse." Science journalist Robert Wright compiled these findings of evolutionary psychology (EP) for the lay reader in 1994 and "Moral Animal" is still a timely treatise. Matt Ridley introduced his excellent "Red Queen" about the same topic around the same year. Wright writes in an engaging manner, intertwining his pearls with biographical sketches of Charles Darwin. Disclaimer: For those who are offended by the very suggestion that our behavior evolved from apes - and that our behavior is an elaborate, sophisticated manifestation of language and socialization which evolved by natural selection along with a huge brain - you won't like this book. I realize the following assessment of mine is anecdotal, but here goes: I have seen step-children treated differently than genetic children. I have seen how men and women preen, peacock-like, showing off their best (?) sides during courtships and how they pair off in society according to commonly accepted determinants of status, differing depending on sex. I have read about and subsequently observed how people (unconsciously?) score each other during their social interactions, rating relationship values for the future.

"The theory of natural selection is so elegant and powerful as to inspire a kind of faith in it [...]; there is a point after which one no longer entertains the possibility of encountering some fact that would call the whole theory into question." I fully subscribe this quotation from the Appendix of The moral animal, and there resides the beauty of this theory and the study of evolution, animal behavior, evolutionary psychology, and so on. Things look rather easy under this prism. The first part of the book is dedicated to the man-woman relationship: to the nature of the reproductive, sexual and romantic relationships. Kin selection is at the core of the argument, which goes all around the differential parental investment between human males and females, and its consequences. Humans, as a slightly polygynous species (high MPI: male parental investment), show different

strategies between sexes about how to maximize their contribution to the next generation. While reading it I was feeling that Wright's review of sexual strategies fits too well to a male's mind (at least mine) and I wondered what would happen if the book was written by Ms Roberta Wright, instead of the author, would she use the same tone? Maybe slight differences would arise. However, real or not, I like what he says (sorry, it is too long to explain here in detail, so you better read it). When you, male-reader, read these chapters you might feel a strong desire to increase your number of wives or sexual partners. Don't worry, it is a transitory side-effect. It passes. Sorry, I ignore how you, female-reader, feel about. Sometimes Wright's position seems to be too conservative, he seems to praise in excess the moral of English Victorian society. This is also transitory, since he is only playing.

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