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## **The Evolution of Morality and Religion**

Pre-publication copy of Introduction to book.

### **Introduction**

The principal arguments presented in this book are: firstly, that morality has a biological foundation and has evolved as a consequence of natural selection acting in various species and, secondly, that religions are essentially structures underpinning morality. It is argued that morality and the central components of religion are of great value.

Many philosophers and theologians write about morality and its origins without any reference to biological processes such as evolution. Many biologists discuss phenomena which are of great importance to human morality and religion without taking account of the ideas of those who theorise about these subjects. I find both of these omissions very disturbing. How can anyone believe that they can adequately discuss a system without any consideration of how it works or of factors which affect its functioning? How can a scientist ignore substantial and relevant areas of intellectual deliberation?

In some books and papers about morality and religion, confusion has arisen because arguments are narrowly focused according to the academic discipline perceived to be involved. An awareness of other disciplines would reduce some of that confusion. Hence it is important to attempt to integrate different approaches and sources of information. Many important gaps in human knowledge exist because there is pressure on academics and others to put most of their effort into studies considered to be central in their discipline. This has the consequence that those areas which cannot be adequately understood without reference to ideas from more than one discipline are neglected or are treated less rigorously than those which are perceived to be mainstream in the discipline. The writings of those who would consider themselves to be biologists, philosophers or theologians are referred to when introducing the general ideas in the book. My training is in biology but I have tried to explain ideas from each discipline and to present balanced judgements about them. Following this attempt at an interdisciplinary study, I hope that experts in each area will be stimulated to comment and take the arguments further.

General ideas about the concepts of morality, religion and relevant biological science, especially the origins of social living and behaviour, are discussed in Chapter 1. Morality is distinguished from sexual and other customs and the role of moral codes as a basis for religion is explained briefly.

In Chapter 2 the extent to which animals of various species, including man, cooperate and show altruistic behaviour towards kin and non-kin is described. When behaviour with each kind of function is discussed, the possibilities for it being cooperative or just competitive are considered. The genetic basis of some of the mechanisms underlying cooperative and altruistic behaviour is explained and possible ways in which such behaviour might have evolved are explained.

Since the importance of the key concept of reciprocal altruism has been emphasised in Chapter 3 there is a review of the level of sophistication of brain functioning which is necessary for vertebrate animals to be able to show it. Ideas about awareness, consciousness, feelings and cognitive responses are presented with reference to morality in humans and other species.

The first part of Chapter 4 concerns the range of views about what is right or wrong, what people should do and how they should decide what to do. Problems associated with the concept of rights are presented and the idea of conscience is discussed. Questions about the inter-relationships between morality and sexual, developmental and legal matters are then explored in detail. At the end of the chapter, one of the central propositions of this book, that morality has evolved is presented.

Religion of some kind is ubiquitous in human society. It is argued in Chapter 5 that the common aspect of religions is a moral code which in each of them is largely the same. This central aspect of religion, and some other aspects, have evolved. There are problems associated with certain divisive aspects of religions but the core of religion is of great value and will persist. Suggestions for future conduct of religions are presented.

In Chapter 6, views contrary to those expressed in the previous chapters are presented and discussed. These range from diatribes against evolution by theologians to diatribes against religion by some sociobiologists.

The final chapter, Chapter 7, concerns the social and political consequences of this biological view of morality and religion. The way in which individuals should act and the way in which governments should act is discussed. What should be our view of "us" and "them" in relation to other humans and individuals of other species? To what extent is there morality and religion in other species?