

WHY GOOD IS GOOD
THE SOURCES OF MORALITY



ROBERT A. HINDE

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WHY GOOD IS GOOD

'A wonderful addition to the literature on morality ... that will force theologians, philosophers and social scientists to seriously consider the contributions natural science can make to moral discourse.'

Ralph Hood, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

'This book is thoroughly researched, engagingly written, and logically and persuasively argued. I do not know of any other book that attempts what Hinde has accomplished in this one.'

David Wulff, Wheaton College, Massachusetts

What can science tell us about morality? It is often said that science – because it tells us about the way the world is and not how it ought to be – can have nothing to say about ethical matters; yet scientists increasingly tell us that evolutionary biology has much to tell us about our values. This ground-breaking new book argues that only a multidisciplinary approach will enable us to understand morality.

The author draws on psychology, philosophy, biology and social anthropology to explore the origins of our moral systems. He discusses the ethical views of different cultures and different eras, looking at attitudes towards infidelity, acts of revenge and human rights. The result is not only a compelling insight into the history and development of the world's moral systems: Robert Hinde argues that an understanding of morality's origins can clarify and inform contemporary ethical debates over topics such as abortion and the treatment of terminally ill patients.

By using fascinating examples ranging from the nature of socio-political power to the moralities of Argentine football, Robert Hinde demonstrates that moral systems are derived from human nature in interaction with the social, cultural and physical experiences of individuals. On this view of morality, moral codes are neither fixed nor freely unconstrained but a balancing act between what people do and what they are supposed to do.

The multidisciplinary nature of this book makes it accessible to anyone interested in the relation of ethics to biology, social science and the humanities.

Robert A. Hinde is a Professor at St. John's College, Cambridge, a Fellow of the Royal Society and Foreign Associate of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA. His most recent book, *Why Gods Persist* (Routledge, 1999), applied a similar multidisciplinary approach to the ubiquity of religious systems.

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PREFACE

It is not always easy to tell good from bad, or right from wrong. We may have been brought up with fairly clear perceptions of the differences between them, but clear-cut solutions to real-life situations are not always apparent. We have to decide between conflicting ‘oughts’, balance obligations against abstract values, and assess conflicting ‘rights’. Any one decision may have many consequences – on oneself, on others, on one’s family, even consequences on society as a whole. What are the criteria by which right and wrong can be, should be, or are distinguished? Beyond that, is it just a matter of criteria rationally considered, or of what one feels about the issue, or both? Do all right actions share some distinguishing characteristics? And where do the criteria come from? Such problems, having been the subject of debate for generations, are now becoming both increasingly difficult and increasingly acute for two reasons.

First, in the past, religions were the principal purveyors of moral codes, which in many societies were portrayed as bestowed by a transcendental being.¹ Moral codes and social codes were closely interwoven, and an individual faced with a dilemma could usually obtain an answer, or at least advice, from a priest or other religious specialist. In European societies at least, adherence to the moral code was encouraged by the churches in two ways. First, directly, by the promise of divine reward or the threat of divine retribution in this life or another; second, and indirectly, by the gossip that even a slight departure from the churches’ definitions of ‘respectability’ would elicit.² To-day, the more traditional churches are losing their power to influence individuals in the increasingly secular worlds of Europe and North America. Such religious institutions as are in part replacing them focus either on beliefs unacceptable to many twenty-first-century minds, or on ritual and religious experience. Many feel that the moral codes of the society in which they grew up lack both authority and sanctions. And even leading members of some of the great world religions are suggesting that it is possible to live a moral life without religious faith,³ or to distinguish faith in a religious tradition from ‘spirituality’, defined as those qualities which bring happiness to others.⁴ This is not to underestimate the importance of