



# The Evolution of Morality

*Richard Joyce*

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Moral thinking pervades our practical lives, but where did this way of thinking come from, and what purpose does it serve? Is it to be explained by environmental pressures on our ancestors a million years ago, or is it a cultural invention of more recent origin? In *The Evolution of Morality*, Richard Joyce takes up these controversial questions, finding that the evidence supports an innate basis to human morality. As a moral philosopher, Joyce is interested in whether any implications follow from this hypothesis. Might the fact that the human brain has been biologically prepared by natural selection to engage in moral judgment serve in some sense to vindicate this way of thinking -- staving off the threat of moral skepticism, or even undergirding some version of moral realism? Or if morality has an adaptive explanation in genetic terms -- if it is, as Joyce writes, "just something that helped our ancestors make more babies" -- might such an explanation actually undermine morality's central role in our lives? He carefully examines both the evolutionary "vindication of morality" and the evolutionary "debunking of morality," considering the skeptical view more seriously than have others who have treated the subject.

Interdisciplinary and combining the latest results from the empirical sciences with philosophical discussion, *The Evolution of Morality* is one of the few books in this area written from the perspective of moral philosophy. Concise and without technical jargon, the arguments are rigorous but accessible to readers from different academic backgrounds. Joyce discusses complex issues in plain language while advocating subtle and sometimes radical views. *The Evolution of Morality* lays the philosophical foundations for further research into the biological understanding of human morality.

## The Evolution of Morality Details

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### Kevin says

Joyce's argument, in brief, is that recognizing that our moral sense evolved does NOTHING to show that morality is in any way objective or to show that moral facts are real. In fact, Joyce argues that there is evolutionary reasons to suppose error theory correct, the idea that even though our moral instincts are subjective preferences, there may be evolutionary advantages when organisms experience them as expressing facts about the world. A brilliant analogy Joyce uses is with the way we see color: I see my walls as red, even though the 'redness' is actually not as much in the wall as in the way lightwaves from the wall interact with my eye, and how my eye interprets that qualia. Our senses, for whatever reason, evolved to see the redness 'in' the wall (probably for the sake of simplicity) even though we know the redness is in how we experience the wall. Not that this analogy proves morality to be subjective, but using arguments from fellow error theorists like Mackie (and some of his own), Joyce suggests that error theory is the much more probable result of evolution than any form of moral realism.

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### Nate says

This would be the philosophical companion to Marc Hauser's \*Moral Minds\*. Hauser is a psychologist who tries to explain how our moral psychological machinery could be universal. Joyce takes this into account, along with other natural explanations of how we have become moral animals, and provides a cogent argument for moral skepticism. Persuasive and thorough (a lot is packed into 230 pages, yet it doesn't seem dense)—Joyce's book is an excellent model for philosophical writing.

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### Zedder says

A good read all around.

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