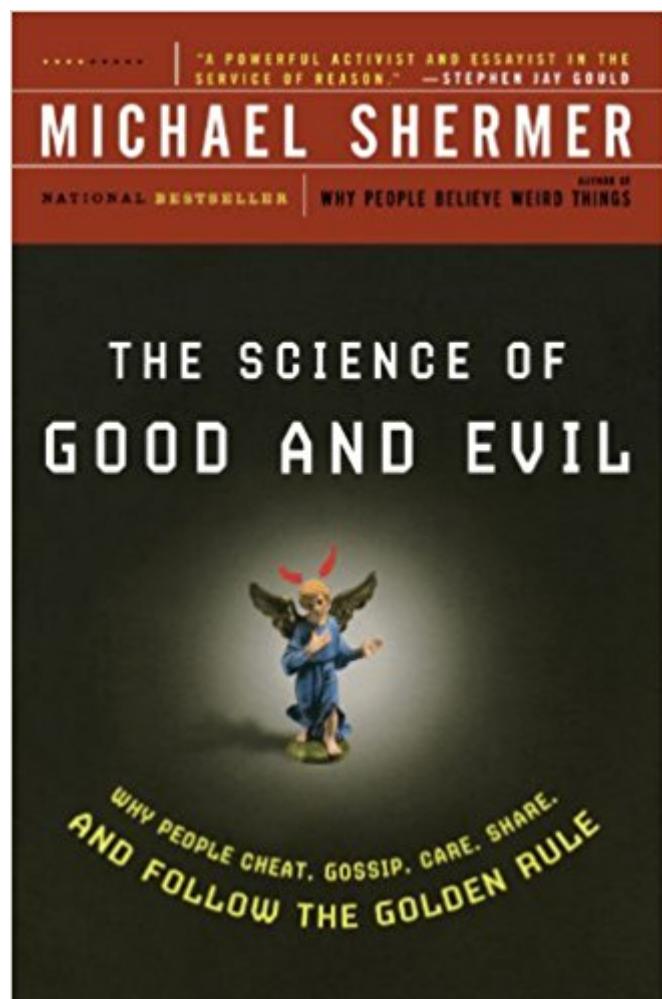


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The Science Of Good And Evil: Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, And Follow The Golden Rule (Holt Paperback)



Synopsis

From bestselling author Michael Shermer, an investigation of the evolution of morality that is "a paragon of popularized science and philosophy" The Sun (Baltimore)A century and a half after Darwin first proposed an "evolutionary ethics," science has begun to tackle the roots of morality. Just as evolutionary biologists study why we are hungry (to motivate us to eat) or why sex is enjoyable (to motivate us to procreate), they are now searching for the very nature of humanity. In The Science of Good and Evil, science historian Michael Shermer explores how humans evolved from social primates to moral primates; how and why morality motivates the human animal; and how the foundation of moral principles can be built upon empirical evidence. Along the way he explains the implications of scientific findings for fate and free will, the existence of pure good and pure evil, and the development of early moral sentiments among the first humans. As he closes the divide between science and morality, Shermer draws on stories from the Yanamamá, infamously known as the "fierce people" of the tropical rain forest, to the Stanford studies on jailers' behavior in prisons. The Science of Good and Evil is ultimately a profound look at the moral animal, belief, and the scientific pursuit of truth.

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Customer Reviews

I'm torn between the naysayers and the wide-eyed on this one. First, I am a naturalist who believes, like Shermer, that ethics doesn't need god. Unlike Shermer, though, I don't think that this is anything close to a 'science'. Seeing people conflate 'it's a naturalistic explanation' with 'it's a scientific

explanation' forgets that science is a process, not an ideology. Yes, Shermer gives us a naturalistic explanation, but just like most evolutionary psych, it is simply naturalistic "puzzle filling" of what MIGHT have happened, not experimental and falsifiable conjecture that makes for science. For his part, Shermer does a decent job (so long as we see his as that of a philosopher, not a scientist; Shermer, I think, would protest this). He presents a case for a naturalistic ethic and goes into a fair amount of detail. Here's the problem: not only has everything here been proposed before by those more apt than Shermer (Mary Midgley, JL Mackie, Steven Pinker, William James) but the things he says here are quite common, and really in need of little defence. Shermer's point is that moral 'rules' are naturally endowed by evolution (or so it seems) and are provisional - they hold for most people, in most situations; they are more like guidelines for action. Okay, I believe it (just as I believed it when the said authors wrote it). But he really doesn't follow this up with what exactly that means. What are 'most people' and what are 'most situations'? Most troublingly, does merely saying 'evolution did it' and showing that homo erectus shared food (thus enforcing altruism by passing along their genes) really mean that the theory is 'scientific' (even though it is non-empirical albeit good conjecture?) I am giving the book a three-star rating, though.

In my own studies I have often come across those who believe, for there exists no other term, that religion and a belief in some supreme being are the root, the very foundation of moral behavior. As a student of evolutionary psychology, Ecclesiastical History and later of Divinity, I feel certain I can address this concept. It is, as history has proven time and again, simply incorrect. A better understanding of the Golden Rule as it has come to be known can be seen in Shermers latest book, as in the white papers of John Nash (especially Bargaining, Zero Sum Games and Economics), in the work of Charles Darwin, (most specifically his later ideas on an evolutionary ethics); the writings of Edward O. Wilson, (especially The Ants), and finally with even a meager observation of nature itself. We do bargain, we do make social deals. This is observable in Chimpanzee groups, and so far as I know, they have no religion as we might recognize it. That we have to make golden rules, not out of a religious ideal but for the survival of our species seems obvious to anyone. Shermers time line indicates that morality and a social ethic were in development some 100,000 years ago. This seems about right, as ample social anthropological evidence indicates a turn toward large group hunting, and social cooperation far before this period. That some form of norm is required for an understanding of allowable and un-allowable actions within the group seems at most apparent from simian studies. This seems to me common sense, despite some reviewers inability to follow it. That a divine figure is necessary to explain morality, especially a very human-like human deity,

seems to me silly at best. In the fine tradition of Darwin, Wallace, Dawkins and Sagan, Shermer points out that, which once read, seems obvious.

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