

# The Moral Animal Summary



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**1-Sentence-Summary:** *[The Moral Animal](#) introduces the world to the fascinating world of evolutionary psychology and uncovers the genetic strategies that explain why we do everything we do.*

**Read in:** 4 minutes

**Favorite quote from the author:**



Why do we have morals? Is it because we are taught to do what's right from a very young age? Or are we conditioned? If you ask an evolutionary psychologist, they'll say it's nothing more than a result of our [evolution](#). Humans behave in a moral way because it serves an instrumental end. Specifically, it helps us fulfill the most important Darwinian urges of all-survival and propagation of our species.

When this version of psychology began in the 1990s, it was controversial. After all, we'd like to believe we're more than just animals doing things instinctually. And let's be honest, we don't like to explain altruism by saying we are just looking out for ourselves. But with his groundbreaking and provocative book [The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Biology](#), author Robert Wright showed the world the science proving we are still very much driven by instinct.

Wright reveals the scientific proof that everyday things like jealousy, [altruism](#), and sibling rivalry can be explained by the evolution of our species. You'll be surprised to discover that much of what you do and feel is because of your ever-present urge to survive and to pass on your genes.

Here are the 3 biggest lessons I've learned from this book:

1. Experiencing jealousy is a natural thing, though men and women will feel it differently
2. Social class and wealth dictate which gender of the child a family prefers to have.
3. Altruism is more egocentric than you think and morality is mostly about appearances.

Are you ready to dig deep into the past and discover how evolution has shaped you? Let's learn!

## Lesson 1: Jealousy is natural, and men and women experience it differently.

Jealousy is historically thought of as a negative, ugly characteristic. But though we might try to hide it, jealousy is an entirely natural emotion for human beings. All of us feel it from time to time. But interestingly, men and women experience jealousy very differently

In a 1982 [experiment](#) researching sexual jealousy, scientists attached electrodes to both male and female participants to measure physiological responses. They asked participants to either picture their partner having [sex](#) with another person or to picture their partner forming an emotional bond with a person of the opposite gender.

Surprisingly, [men and women responded very differently](#) to both scenarios. For the men, picturing their significant other having sex with another person led to signs of distress and anger. The idea of their partner being close friends with another male left them unmoved. Women, on the other hand, showed a much more distressed response to the idea of their partner forming an emotional attachment with another woman than the idea of sexual infidelity.

Why is this? **Evolutionary psychologists explain that a male's unconscious desire to propagate their genes drives their sexual jealousy.** Picturing their partner in a sexual relationship with another man stung so much because the idea that another man could impregnate their partner and they could end up rearing a child without their own DNA is enraging. Nowadays with contraceptives, sex and pregnancy aren't automatically mutually exclusive. An affair is far less likely to result in pregnancy. However, the reason it remains so enraging to men is because of an evolutionary reflex.

## Lesson 2: What gender a family prefers to have depends on social class and wealth.

Have you ever felt your [parents](#) favored another sibling over you? Remarkably, Wright uncovers that evolution can even influence child the family prefers, and specifically, which gender. **Evolutionary psychologists explain parents favor the gender that has the greater potential to carry on the family's genes.**

This ability to pass on genes historically differed based on what social class the family comes from. In a poor family of low status, it was usually the girl. Girls had more of a chance to marry "up" into a family that is wealthier. In the wealthier family, the boys were favorites. This is because boys could spread their genes because of their power to find any woman or even multiple partners.

A [study](#) of medieval Europe and nineteenth-century Asia, anthropologist Mildred Dickeman says that killing females before their first birthday, or infanticide, was staggeringly more common among the aristocratic families than the poor. And even when there wasn't the extreme action of infanticide, they much more frequently gave inheritances to the eldest son than the eldest daughter.

This evolutionary influence still carries on today. In a 1986 [study](#), scientists looked at island families in Micronesia. They found that low-status families spent more time with their daughters while higher status one spent much more time with their sons.

## Lesson 3: What people think of us drives morality and altruism

## is too self-serving.

Why might we try to return that wallet we see left on the bus? An evolutionary psychologist would tell you our moral behavior it's only to serve ourselves and protect our image. **They believe the reason we do things for other people is that it is to our advantage because it establishes a debt in our favor.**

If you give food to someone who is desperately hungry, they are much more likely to help you out if you find yourself in need of something later on. This makes a lot more sense in small communities that we evolved from, where you would cross paths with the person again. But in the larger communities we now inhabit? Not so much. It's an evolutionary instinct that we got from our past.

We also do good things because, naturally, we care a lot about what other people think about us. In a 1966 [experiment](#), researchers led participants to believe that they had broken an expensive piece of equipment during the experiment.

In some of the cases, the scientist reacted and pretended to be upset about it, in others, they pretended nothing was wrong. They then asked if they would be willing to participate in another potentially painful follow-up experiment. The participants who had been “caught” were far more likely to agree. This was just one example of our preoccupation with how others perceive us that is leftover from our evolution.

## The Moral Animal Review

When [The Moral Animal](#) was first published, it was a landmark for evolutionary psychology. Today it still remains a provocative must-read for anyone interested in [biology](#) or social sciences. You'll be shocked to learn that so much of what we do is only because of our urge to pass on our genes.

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## Who would I recommend The Moral Animal Summary summary to?

The 26-year-old psychology student interested in human behavior, the 44-year-old biology teacher, anyone fascinated with evolution.