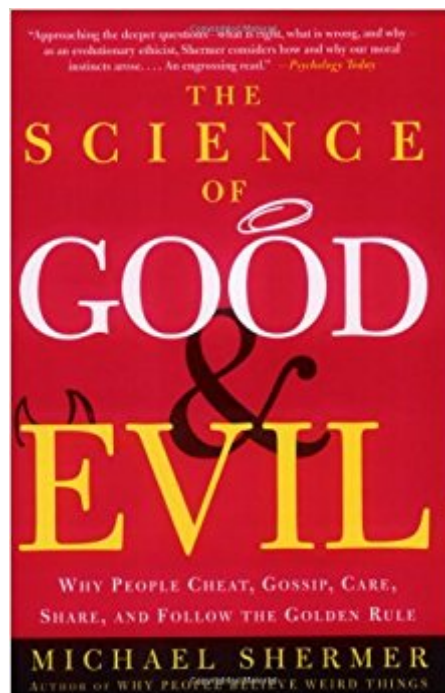




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# The Science Of Good And Evil: Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, And Follow The Golden Rule



## 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 Yanomamö, 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Drawing on evolutionary psychology, *Skeptic* publisher and *Scientific American* contributor Shermer (*Why People Believe Weird Things*) argues that the sources of moral behavior can be traced scientifically to humanity's evolutionary origins. He contends that human morality evolved as first an

individual and then a species-wide mechanism for survival. As society evolved, humans needed rules governing behavior-e.g., altruism, sympathy, reciprocity and community concern-in order to ensure survival. Shermer says that some form of the Golden Rule-"Do unto others as you would have others do unto you"-provides the foundation of morality in human societies. Out of this, he develops the principles of what he calls a "provisional ethics" that "is neither absolute nor relative," that applies to most people most of the time, while allowing for "tolerance and diversity." According to the "ask-first" principle, for instance, the performer of an act simply asks its intended receiver whether the act is right or wrong. Other principles include the "happiness" principle ("always seek happiness with someone else's happiness in mind"), the liberty principle ("always seek liberty with someone else's liberty in mind") and the moderation principle ("when innocent people die, extremism in the defense of anything is no virtue, and moderation in the protection of everything is no vice"). Shermer's provisional ethics might reflect the messy ways that human moral behavior developed, but his simplistic principles establish a utilitarian calculus that not everyone will find acceptable. 35 b&w illus. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Audible Audio Edition edition.

The source of morality is the topic under discussion in Shermer's latest book to champion rationalism. Religion received a critique in *How We Believe: The Search for God in an Age of Science* (1999) and does so again as Shermer offers propositions on the origin of our ordinary, innate sense of right and wrong. Disposing of religion's rival, moral relativism, Shermer dedicates his effort to convincing readers that his thesis, labeled "provisional morality," makes more sense. What that means is that ethical rules are accepted conditionally and are as falsifiable as any scientific theory. Shermer takes this precept into the realm of evolutionary psychology, drawing applied ethics from such drastically different sources as anthropological field studies in India and the TV show *The Honeymooners*. Contending that the source of ethics is solely evolutionary, Sherman conducts his argument in an assertive but not gratuitously aggressive fashion. This stance as well as his populist bent should earn him the hearing that he clearly hopes believers in God will give him. Gilbert Taylor Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to the Audible Audio Edition edition.

I bought this as a gift for my father, he like it a lot and he's a pretty intelligent guy so that's good enough for me

Wonderful reading. Thought-provoking. I have underlined passages on every page!

I bought this as assigned reading for a college class and have enjoyed it so much that I'm reading his other books in my free time!

The Science of Good and Evil is the third book of a series by Michael Shermer. The first book was *Why People Believe Weird Things*, and the second book was *How We Believe: Science, Skepticism, and the Search for God*. The substance of this book is discussion of morality and ethics, with view towards science to give some guidance on the origins (evolution) and function of morality. Shermer does not promote moral relativism, but something close to that in some people's minds. His main premise is that there is a general morality on almost any subject that most people would agree upon. That is, it would apply to most people, most of the time, in most circumstances. Of course, that does mean that the desire of many people to have an absolute standard of morality may go unfulfilled, but that is expected by anyone that has given this much thought. An example is in the case of lying. Is it always bad to lie? Certainly it is for most people, most of the time, in most circumstances. However, could there be exceptions? One of the standard examples of how it is okay to lie is when a greater harm can be avoided by lying, such as a case in World War II: Jews were hid in people's houses, so they would not be discovered and destroyed in whatever imaginative way the Nazis were using at the time. When the Nazis knocked on the door, would it have been morally right to tell the truth and reveal the presence of the Jews hidden inside? Another example like that is the woman that is being beaten by her husband, and flees her own house, coming to yours begging for shelter. Would you allow her entry? Most of us would. What about when her husband knocks at your door asking if you'd seen her? Would you tell the truth? These are just two examples from the questions of morality regarding truth telling (not necessarily given in the book, but the ideas behind both are in the book). The idea is that sometimes circumstances preclude the norms of morality because of a greater moral need. It would be okay to lie if the potential for harm is greater if the truth were told. This applies to many things in our lives. Shermer does discuss the principles behind "The Golden Rule," and shows the lineage of the rule, far predating Jesus and the New Testament. It is a simple common sense way of evaluating whether something is moral or not. Shermer mentions the "ask first" policy - ask someone else how they would feel if you did a certain action, and it will help you decide whether it is moral or not. Sometimes, just thinking about asking another person will help you get the answer you are seeking (a thought experiment). The ideas in the book, you can see, promote a morality that takes into account the human being: "The false choice of either all bad or all

good does not depict the subtleties and nuances of human behavior." - pg 82. "One bad act does not an immoral person make." - pg 83. In other words, there is not simply an evil person or good person, any more than there is an evil essence or good essence. Humans are just humans, and sometimes we do things that are judged as good, and sometimes we do things that are judged as evil. As far as being good without God or gods, "would you commit robbery, rape, and murder, or would you continue being a good and moral person" if it were proven beyond any reasonable doubt there were no god? "If the answer is that you would soon turn to robbery, rape, or murder, then this is a moral indictment of your character, indicating you are not to be trusted because if, for any reason, you were to turn away from your belief in God (and most people do, at some point in their lives), your true immoral nature would emerge and we would be well advised to steer a wide course around you. If the answer is that you would continue being good and moral, then apparently you can be good without God. QED." -- pp 154, 155.

In Nietzsche's masterpiece 'On the Genealogy of Morals' he simply takes a good step back from The Argument and holds up a clean mirror on which he reflects the origins of opinion, thought and moral judgements. By removing himself from the emotions attached to topics such as a theology, morality and ethics Shermer, somewhat like Nietzsche attempts to frame these often 'hot' topics in something altogether more transparent than is usually the case. As a rationalist and a logicist I invariably find the unwelcome addition of emotion and emotionally driven cognition to any serious argument or discourse to be utterly unnecessary, very distracting and wholly unwelcome. In 'The Science of Good and Evil', Dr. Shermer does his utmost to use Nietzsche's mirror and for the most part does an admirable job in examining the source of opinion, conjecture and belief. Although the matter dealt with in this treatise is not really new ('Morals' was written in 1887). It is probably time the debate was dusted off and reopened - especially with the current state of discourse which seems to be based on 'he who shouts loudest wins' - never mind a clear and precise thesis... Whilst not everyone will agree with either Dr. Shermer's presentation of the facts nor his take on the issues to hand I think anyone with a keen mind and an enquiring nature will appreciate that at the very least his is adding a dose of objectivity and clarity to the debate; his is wiping his sleeve over the bathroom mirror of discourse and debate, which, ever since Nixon, has been steamed up. Steam that has risen, not from hot water of fervoured argument, rather, from that which has spewn from the mouths of politicians, lobbyists and the laughably objective media ever since the as-kicking in Vietnam; to create an environment a la 'Swift boater', where 'yes' has become 'probably in June' and 'no' has become 'a small Mexican dog'.

Some reviewers claimed that this book was difficult to get through, and seemed like a text book... i disagree. Maybe it is because I find this topic very interesting, but I had no trouble getting through this book. It was incredibly interesting and well worth the buy. I kept expecting to hit "the boring and difficult" parts, but they never came. This is a great book if you are interested in hearing a scientific explanation for morality (that is, if "God did it" doesn't satisfy you). I highly recommend The Science of Good and Evil, along with How We Believe and Why People Believe Weird Things.

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