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Society Needs Morality

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Morality must be resurrected in our societies. It must be a morality whose nature and sources are understood and are in keeping with current reality. Hitherto, morality has been seen as closely related to religion. That religious belief is helpful to many is indisputable, but religious narratives, treated literally, are unacceptable to modern minds, and the supposed nature of God, as discussed by sophisticated theologians, is inaccessible to everyman. Morality, based on an understanding of human nature as shaped by culture, offers hope for the future.

We do not need a financial crisis to tell us that things are going badly wrong in society. The excessive competitiveness of the market-place spreading into everyday life, the duplicity of many politicians, the increasing gap between rich and poor – not everything is bad, but the rot is widespread. How could we have created such a society? In this article I take what could be seen as an old-fashioned view: we need to resurrect morality. But the morality we need is not just a set of rules: we must understand morality within the context of human nature. Only then can we find standards that will be effective in influencing values and behaviour in society.

Pro- and anti-sociality

It is no good looking for scapegoats, our first step must be to understand ourselves. We know, only too well, that we can be selfish, aggressive, anti-social. But we also have the potential to be pro-social, kind, cooperative and loving to each other. This is easily forgotten: the media report scandals, violence and robbery, but not the pro-social acts most of us encounter every day.

We are what we are in part because we have been shaped by natural and cultural selection over the millennia, and it is necessary to consider how anti- and pro-sociality evolved in early humans. It is easy enough to see how our selfishness evolved: those who looked after their own interests were more likely to survive to leave offspring than the do-gooders. The evolution of pro-sociality is

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not so obvious, for why should individuals help others with whom they are likely to be in competition for scarce resources? Yet pro-sociality to strangers is widespread: in many Middle Eastern countries hospitality to the traveller at the door is one of the first requirements of society.

The probability is that several processes have been involved in the evolution of morality. Selection to look after one's own offspring, who carry a high proportion of the same genes, is ubiquitous in mammals including humans and, if extended to more distant relatives, could be an important issue in small groups[1,2]. However genetic selection for pro-sociality on this basis could operate only in small groups consisting largely of relatives.

In addition, early humans lived in small groups that competed with each other: those groups in which individuals traditionally helped other members of their own group would be more likely to win out over groups with mostly selfish individuals. Thus, it would have been advantageous to belong to a group in which pro-sociality (including cooperation with other group members) predominated over selfishness. Cultural selection for a tradition of in-group pro-sociality could operate, though not for outsiders, who were seen as potentially dangerous – hence xenophobia.[3]

So-called reciprocal altruism (I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine), seems to be unimportant as a source of morality in non-human animals, but may have been crucial in humans where reciprocity is central to social and personal relationships.[4] Secondary mechanisms that serve to maintain pro-sociality are mentioned later.

What matters most to each individual is that other group members should be pro-social, not that he or she should be.[5,6] To maintain the group as one in which individuals thrive because other group members tend to be pro-social and cooperative, it is therefore advantageous for each individual to punish selfishness in others even though it was not their own immediate concern, unless doing so were unduly costly.[3] Delivering punishment need not be physical or costly: even in children's groups ostracism brings those who do not conform into line and works equally well amongst adults. Thus, while individual needs prompt individuals to be as selfishly assertive as they can get away with, it also pays them to contribute to the pro-sociality of the group in competition with other groups and to punish anti-social behaviour by in-group peers if costs are not too great.

This implies mechanisms whereby individuals can recognise members of their own group. Amongst the most powerful of these mechanisms are language, religion and patriotic symbols. Human groups isolated from each other soon develop dialect differences, and groups often differ in religion. Dialects are difficult to imitate and religious adherence often requires much effort and so is difficult to fake. The stricter the religion, the more difficult it is to fake, and thus the more reliable is performance of its rituals as a marker of genuine religious adherence. Patriotism may involve linguistic and religious characteristics, and

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groups develop additional markers (flags, national anthems, etc) that become even more prominent with real or impending inter-group conflict.

The relative strength of these tendencies in an individual will depend on how he/she was treated by his/her parents as well as on other aspects of (especially early) experience.[7] And these in turn will both depend on, and in the long-term affect, the norms of pro-sociality and anti-sociality in the society in which they live, for norms both influence and are influenced by the values and behaviour of the group's members (see below). Furthermore, how people behave is influenced by their circumstances: parents living in extreme poverty may find it difficult to be adequate parents, and so, for other reasons, may the very rich, but it is unnecessary to describe the many complicating influences on individual behaviour here.

Within each group, a balance between anti-social and pro-social behaviour must be preserved. If the anti-social propensities predominated, the group would break apart. If group members were mostly pro-social, they could easily be exploited by free-riders, who would eventually take over the group. Thus, individuals, whilst predominantly pro-social, must be sufficiently assertive to defend their own interests and punish those who do not conform to group values.[5,6]

Morality

Achieving balance is where morality comes in.[5,6] Moral rules and values influence how people 'ought to' behave. A scientist who talks about morality exposes himself to accusations of both hypocrisy and idealistic mushiness. But never mind the critics, the fact is we need standards by which to live our lives, and all cultures have such standards, even though there are differences between the rules to which different societies subscribe.

Although it is often claimed that morality is a matter for theologians and philosophers, the nature of morality and of the differences between the rules of different societies, are proper subjects for scientific enquiry.[5,8]

Members of pre-industrial societies shared understandings about how individuals ought to behave, with the threat of tit-for-tat revenge ensuring that they did.[9] Later, punishment for misbehaviour was taken over by the individual in authority, often supported by the religious authorities. In the Germanic tribes, punishment came to include an element for 'breaking the king's peace' as well as appropriate reparation.[10] Norms of reciprocity for both pro-social and anti-social behaviour exist in all human societies – not only tit-for-tat, but also I'll-scratch-your-back-if-you-will-scratch-mine. And we feel righteous indignation, and may intervene, if we see others being treated unfairly. Computer models indicate that, if the costs of punishing offenders are not too great, this can be an effective mechanism for maintaining order in the group.[3]

Most important, perhaps, is the Golden Rule of Reciprocity – some variant of Do-as-you-would-wish-that-others-should-do-to-you. At a meeting of over

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400 churches in 1992, the main point of agreement was this Golden Rule.[11] Indeed it is difficult to see how a society could exist without it. The belief that parents *should* look after their children (an inevitable consequence of natural selection) is also universal. Most other rules stem from these – do not steal from other group members because you do not want them to steal from you. Personal relationships depend largely on reciprocal exchange, and the values associated with trust and honesty follow from that. Other rules are specific to one or more societies: for instance, the Judaeo-Christian commandment not to covet your neighbour's wife would be incomprehensible in societies that do not recognise the institution of marriage, like the Aché of South America who think the foetus is fed on semen that need not all come from the same male.[12] And rules to revere the deity and/or religious specialists are specific to the religious community in question.

The display of many positive virtues, like cooperation and honesty, if witnessed by third parties, marks out the individual as one with whom it would be good to do business, or as one who is so well-endowed that he/she can afford to be generous. Society promotes these values by rewarding those who display them (although this, of course, provides opportunities for dissimulation).[3,6]

This brief summary implies that morality, although purveyed by religion, has independent roots in human nature. Nevertheless, until recent times, the church, with the threat of eternal punishment, was the principal purveyor of the rules of behaviour in our society. It is necessary, therefore, to examine briefly the relation of morality to religious belief.

Religion

Religions comprise beliefs (that are outside time, like the Christian Trinity), narratives (myths), ritual, morality, religious experience and a social element. The relative prominence of these differs between cultures. In Christianity, although not in all religions, *belief* has been primary: 'Believe, and you shall be saved'.[6] Recently, criticisms by Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens,[13–15] and others have led more and more people to see that the Judaeo-Christian narratives, if taken literally, are untenable. The Earth was not made in six days, and you cannot feed five thousand on a loaf and a few fishes. The implication of such critics is that we would be better off without religion.

To this, theists have replied that the religious myths should not be taken literally, but convey important truths. ('Truth', of course, is always an elusive concept, and in religion one person's truth may be another's poison. My use of it is to be taken as acknowledging its potentially subjective nature.) In particular, for sophisticated theists, God is a more subtle concept than the anthropomorphic being that many anti-theists suppose. Many theologians simply assume God, and their argument reduces to 'God is not like that, but like this', although it is hard to

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grasp the nature of 'this'. A common theme is that God is not an entity, and cannot be described. While some anti-theists regard this as a cop-out, sophisticated theists hold that God has to be *experienced* through behaviour or practice, even though this may mean some logical circularity.[16–18] The experience may involve consistent morality and a dismantling of egotism and be facilitated by prayer, yoga, meditation and so on that cultivate a different form of consciousness. In the view of many theists, faith is not belief in a deity, but a commitment and allegiance to something that might make a difference. God is thus a matter of individual subjective experience, and not an entity.

Critics of anti-theists often seem to forget that most believers have quite a simple conception of God as a being with many human characteristics, who created the world and may interfere in its functioning. Differences between the more and less sophisticated believers were present from the start of Christianity. A simple reading of the Bible and the prayers used in Christian services do little to correct the simple view.

The nature of religious visions (which may or may not be a different matter) seems to be influenced by preceding belief: Christians see Jesus or Mary, not Buddha. This raises the possibility, too little explored, that religious experience is related to the feelings experienced by music-lovers, the feelings of wonder experienced by the scientist, or the feelings of 'otherness' inspired by natural beauty in 'everyman'.[6]

I suggest that the question of whether God exists does not matter too much so far as world problems go, for both the non-theists (including myself at times) and the theists who rise to their bait miss the point that the discussion can only be about people's *conceptions* (creations?) of God, not any actuality. And the key to the debate may lie in the evidence that we process information in two ways, known as intuitive (or implicit) and formal (or explicit) reasoning. Children hear about God's ability to interfere in the world and answer prayers. These are two things, acting with intentions and as an agent, that the child already 'knows' characterise animate beings.[19] Other things, such as His ability to get angry or be helpful, are characteristics of persons. Not surprisingly, the child forms a picture of God as a special sort of human being. But at the same time the child learns that the Christian Deity is everywhere at once, Three Persons in One, and so on. Thus, like the deities of nearly all religions, God combines probable and improbable characteristics. The acquisition of the former is easy and follows from the child's intuitive knowledge of the world. Learning the improbable characteristics is more difficult, but is assimilated gradually from the culture, religious specialists, etc.[20,21] These two conceptions are held simultaneously, influence each other, but can be in conflict. The intuitive conception is more prominent amongst lay people, the theological one amongst the religious élite, but the latter, while rejecting anthropomorphic constraints on God, use an

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anthropomorphic image to understand stories, in situations of peril or emergencies and in theological discussion. Differences in the relative prominence of formal and intuitive forms of reasoning between European Americans and Chinese and Koreans may possibly be relevant to differences between their traditional forms of religion.[22]

The suggestion here is that criticisms of religion concerning the improbability of religious myths, although correct, miss part of the point in ignoring the affect-laden representations acquired intuitively. And, while the anti-theists tend to suppose that in a rational age their 'truth' trumps all, should it? Does the improbability of many religious myths make the whole religious edifice collapse? The fact is that millions of people all over the world are believers and care much less than is apparent about the veracity of the beliefs to which they claim to subscribe.

And one must not be too hasty: belief in an anthropomorphic God also has positive values for some people.[6] With belief in an all-powerful God you can (or could) ascribe the inexplicable, such as volcanic eruptions and tsunamis, to his handiwork. With belief, you can at least pray in a crisis: God may or may not answer your prayer, but at least you can feel you are doing something, and prayer gives a (false) sense that you are not powerless. Belief in an all-powerful being can be comforting. A short while ago, the BBC showed a TV programme in which families of men killed in Iraq were interviewed. Several of them said 'He is up there', pointing upwards, or 'I shall see him soon': in other words, they found comfort in their religious belief in Heaven. Dawkins agrees that religion can provide comfort to many, but implies that religion would not be necessary if we had a more sophisticated view of death. But death is not the only issue: religion also brings comfort to many who are anxious or in pain: the thought that the everlasting arms are open to receive you may bring more comfort than a clinical diagnosis. To a scientist, single cases mean little, but I remember the help my mother got from her beliefs when she learned that my brother had died of wounds in the Second World War, and the comfort my father, an agnostic nearly all his life, got from the Bible in his last lonely few years. The role of belief in comforting the lonely was brought home to me by a college student: after denying any form of religious involvement, saying that that sort of thing was not for her, she added, 'But I do like to talk to God every evening and tell him what has been happening to me.'

Many people who do not believe go to church. Some go by convention, but many go because it genuinely gives them a feeling of peace, a state of mind that gives them a different perspective, or inspires them to see the world in a different way.[6] Of course it does not work for everyone: some get irritated by the words that are spoken, and many of us get inspiration in other ways. But have we any right to take away the comfort that religion brings to many until we have something better to put in its place? Those who point to the fatuousness of

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religious myths taken literally tend to imply that we would be better off if we could sweep the whole lot away. Which is more important, 'truth', or relief from fear, loneliness, the agony of bereavement? Some would say truth, and – for the long run – so would I, but I am not sure that the time is ripe. 'Truth' can be elusive, and the 'truth' one finds can depend on where you are looking. Most societies are still predominantly religious, and while there are still so many who gain comfort from prayer, and peace of mind from their religious beliefs, is it right to take that away? Is it possible that there is something about the combination of belief/faith, ritual practice and the other elements of religion that appeals to some aspect(s) of human nature? Surely this is what science should be exploring. Religious beliefs are not literally or scientifically true, and truth, if it can ever be found, is of prime importance and must be sought and fostered, but at the same time those who do not need religion should be a little gentle, perhaps using persuasion and example, before trying to destroy it for others.

To summarise, God is not an entity, but a name for what some people experience. People's experiences differ, and there is no way for an outsider to say one way is right and another wrong. Some do not find it helpful to label their experiences theistically. Believers experience God simultaneously in two ways, intuitively and cognitively. For the majority, an intuitive anthropomorphic conception, as purveyed by Biblical myths, predominates with little cognitive analysis. That is the main target of most anti-theists. An élite, perhaps more sophisticated, finds it easier to assimilate a more abstract concept and attacks the anti-theist critics of religion as barking up the wrong tree because it happens not to be their tree. The important question, which scientists could now tackle, is how concepts of God have the appeal and the consequences that they do.

The need for morality

But the urgent issue is not belief but morality. Religion deserves credit for purveying morality. But if religion is not true, and Hell does not exist, why should anyone stay in the 'straight and narrow'? The issue is exacerbated because our complicated society depends on numerous institutions.[23] From marriage to family, from village shop to supermarket, from Parish Council to Parliament, our lives are influenced by institutions of varying degrees of complexity. Each institution involves numerous roles, and the incumbents of those roles have both rights and duties. For example, a Member of Parliament has certain duties to perform in his/her constituency and in Parliamentary debates, and is entitled to a salary and (in most cases) to a certain respect. Every individual who enjoys the privileges that membership of a society brings has the responsibility to strive to maintain its quality.

A major problem is that the rights and duties associated with the roles in the institutions on which our society depends run counter to those that the incumbents

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would follow in other contexts. For instance, to win elections or to advance the policies they see as correct, politicians may, indeed often must, stray from the truth. In Parliamentary debates they often have to vote as the Party Leader or Whip tells them. We condone this as 'political necessity'; they are doing their duty to political party or country. Again, in a society that believes in competition, we see it as normal for a second-hand car salesman to get the best price he can, or the duty of a firm's Chief Executive Officer to see off a rival firm even though it may mean unemployment for some of its employees. In business, the reciprocity of the Golden Rule of Do–as–you–would-wish-to-be-done-by (or some variant) too often becomes inverted into I-am-going-to-get-all-I-can-out-of-you-because-I-know-you-are-trying-to-get-all-you-can-out-of-me. This is called 'business ethics': perhaps it leads to the best mutually acceptable solution and, when generalised, it may lead to the best value for the consumer. Of course not everything is black: most businesses comply with the rules of fair competition and some enlightened businesses are run as cooperative enterprises.

However, competitiveness has spread into every corner of our lives and is perhaps a major issue in society's malaise. It has led to enormous differences in wealth between rich and poor. Selfish assertiveness too easily leads to lack of restraint. Capitalist enterprise can spawn self-centred competitiveness. It is no longer a question even of keeping up with the Joneses, but getting ahead of them. With environmental issues and global warming, what must be done is fairly clear but runs counter to powerful interests and too little actually gets done. The dictates of excessive capitalism have led to some technologies we need, but also to some, like nuclear weapons, that we do not. It has also led to escalating differences between rich and poor. There are constraints on 'unfair competition', and excuses are found, such as the Thatcherite view that wealth will 'trickle down', but the problem is that things do not work that way.

The church itself is an institution, and its religion helps some people but brings in its wake many problems, not the least of which is religious persecution or intolerance: at least in the case of Christianity, most of the problems stem from differences in belief. These problems include most obviously the wars fought in the name of religion, wars that have often been of incredible savagery. Many would add the destruction, by missionary conversion, of the ways of life of groups with a different outlook on the world. One must not forget also the intolerance that religion can breed within a society, including not just the extreme iniquities of the Inquisition, but also the everyday pretentiousness of those who see themselves as more pious than the rest. The latter is an almost inevitable consequence of a religion in which believing is seen to be meritorious.

Perhaps worst of all, it has sometimes seemed as though it would be in a country's best interests to go to war. In war it is the soldier's duty to kill. The combatants on either side would not dream of murdering someone in their own

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society, but their duty in the institution of war decrees that they should do their best to kill the combatants on the other side. Surely killing each other is a singularly stupid way of settling disputes?[24]

None of this is saying that the institutions of democracy or business are necessarily wrong. Democracy is probably the best system we can find, and business competition has its merits in reducing prices for the consumer. (War is different: it is certainly not the best way to settle disputes.) Institutions are essential in any complex society, but they have this tendency to create moralities of their own, moralities that spread beyond their province into everyday life. People will always be competitive, but the excessive competitiveness of capitalist society has contaminated our lives. It is in the nature of democracies that competitiveness should enter in at many points, and lead to half-truths and misrepresentations.

There will always be disagreements and conflict, and it is essential that we learn to settle them by mutual understanding, keeping our eyes on the common good. Can religion help us to solve the problems that surround us? I doubt it. Certainly not the religion many of us were brought up in. We no longer need many of the aspects of religion: science has taken over most of its explanatory functions, we have plenty of secular rituals, most of us have our own sources of inspiration, and while the sharing of unverifiable beliefs can be a powerful social glue, many groups are stable without it. That does not mean we should get rid of religion right away. So long as many people get some comfort from belief, why not let them? It may be that our minds are so constituted that belief in a person, rather than an abstraction, can more easily influence the way we live our lives for the good of all. We can hope that more and more people think the way we do, but it will not happen overnight.

The question remains, can we have a viable moral code without religion? While there is plenty of evidence to show that religious involvement makes people *feel* that they are being virtuous, evidence that religious belief helps people actually to *behave* pro-socially is negative or at best extremely slender.[25] In some ways, it might be easier to do without religious belief: we would no longer have conflicts between religious creeds; the moral precepts, while perceived as immutable, could more easily change in their emphasis as times changed; and the problem of extremists would be ameliorated. It would have to be a morality without Heaven and Hell to reward goodness or threaten wrong doers, and thus probably without belief in an after-life.

There is a real problem here. The moral values of a society are influenced by the behaviour and values of its members, and they may be affected by the religious beliefs of those members who hold them. In the morality we seek, questions about capital punishment, abortion, and euthanasia must not be influenced by religious systems based on personal, possibly erroneous and partly idiosyncratic beliefs.

Three mechanisms that we already have will help. First, we all have a conscience. We incorporate into the way in which we see ourselves, the values and

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rules of conduct in our society. We compare what we are doing, or how we perceive others to perceive what we are doing, with the rules we have incorporated and, if there is a discrepancy, we may then correct our behaviour, although it is too easy to take some devious mental route to convince ourselves that the discrepancy does not exist, or that we are behaving properly 'really'.[26]

Second, we saw earlier that what matters to each individual is that other people should be good: righteous indignation when we see others behaving immorally is already a powerful force. And, third, we already reward individuals for 'doing good' and punish or reject them for being anti-social. Unfortunately, what is 'good' is culturally influenced and countries are littered with memorials to military leaders, but there are also some for spiritual leaders and for those who have worked to promote peace, and honours are given for 'services to society'. These three mechanisms already play a major role in the maintenance of morality.

What sort of morality?

What sort of morality would we need? This is where the real debate must start. It is no good telling people that they must always be kind and loving and everything in the garden will be lovely. Of course, kindness and love are of first importance, but mere do-goodedness is not enough. Selfishness and self-assertiveness are present in all of us, and some actions that are good for society are driven by self-assertiveness. We must never forget how complicated the issues are and not be content with simple rules of conduct.

Perhaps the morality we seek may not be so different from that which we have now. As we have seen, certain principles, such as the Golden Rule, are already found in probably all societies. The precepts we observe may have been influenced by religious leaders, but have been honed over the years in the dialectical interchange between what we do and what we are supposed to do. For instance, divorce, previously disreputable, became accepted as it became more common after the Second World War 2, and consequently it became less disreputable, and thus more common.[5] Any new code will have to be congruent with the main shape of our society, be seen as absolute, yet have limited flexibility to enable it to strike a proper balance between controlling individual behaviour and accommodating to the situation and to changes in society. We must reject the view, although it is part of our biological heritage, that pro-sociality should be limited to our own group: the group boundaries must be worldwide. The basic principles, such as some variant of the Golden Rule and fair reciprocity, will remain ubiquitous. But cultural differences between precepts are inevitable and must be accepted. There is, of course, a difficulty here: we value our own culture, but there is also value in the diversity of cultures. We would not want to live in a uniform Coca-Cola world, so we must recognise diversity and the rights of others to have cultures and moralities that differ in some

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respects from our own. That does not mean a free for all: the Golden Rule is essential for any society to survive.

We will need to be careful of the institutions that grow within our society. Competitiveness is part of our nature, and it may be that competitive capitalism is the best system for the good of all, but if it is, we must ensure that it does not contaminate every aspect of the way we live. Easy-riders must be discouraged. We already have some constraints on what is seen as 'fair' competition, although they seem hardly adequate. We condemn the dishonesty of some politicians, but political dishonesty seems certain to recur through the very nature of the democratic system. Even the means used to wage war are in theory limited.

We need a morality that does not depend on an external transcendent force. That may not be easy, for how shall we determine what is right and what wrong? Here, we must get away from the old fashioned absolutes. We must be strong enough to recognise that rights and wrongs are not necessarily cast in stone: although it is essential that they be seen as absolutes, the circumstances may always be an issue. We have to cope with such contradictions and irreconcilables, and eschew our wish for a solely black-and-white world. Some authority or guidance may well be necessary, and it is not easy to see what form that should take, but perhaps it should involve discussion amongst representatives of all sections of society as a component of or contribution to the continuing dialectic between what people do and what they are supposed to do.[6]

That means in practice a new outlook on the world in which morality has a higher status than it has at present, and where individuals see it as their duty to maintain its rules and values. Many will say that even to think in these terms is over-optimistic. They will say that there will always be conflict, that humans are intrinsically selfish or that, in the best moral system we can devise, precepts will sometimes conflict with each other. Maybe. A perfect moral code, suitable for all people in all situations, will always be beyond our reach. Conflict between individual autonomy and the social order is inevitable: if that were not so, there would be no need for morality. Advances in science and technology will lead to new problems. Old rules cannot always be trusted. However, if science and rationality are allowed their say, the guiding orientations – that moral codes stem from views about how others should behave in the interests of social harmony and that moral codes must be based on an understanding of human nature as shaped by culture in an ongoing dialectical exchange – offer real hope for the future.

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About the Author

Robert Hinde served as a RAF Coastal Command pilot in the Second World War. His early research involved the naturally-occurring behaviour of whole animals and avian behavioural endocrinology. Subsequently he used rhesus monkeys as models to understand the effects of maternal separation in humans, and he supervised fieldwork on a range of species including chimpanzees, mountain gorillas and elephants. Hinde then turned to studying humans, particularly the effects of the mother–child relationship on the behaviour of 4-year olds in preschool, in both Cambridge and Budapest. In retirement he has applied his experience to understanding the persistence of religion and exposing war as a crassly stupid and inhumane way of settling disputes. Hinde holds seven Honorary Doctorates, is a Fellow of the Royal Society, the British Academy and is an Hon. Foreign Associate of the US National Academy of Sciences. He has written 14 books, edited many others and written over 300 publications.

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