Why Good is Good, by Robert A. Hinde (Routledge, 2002)

Reviewed by Richard Joyce for *Biology and Philosophy* 19 (2004)

[penultimate draft]

I recall a cartoon from some years ago, where a young child, upon being told that the animal before her is a cow, responds "Why?" It's funny because children learn early that "Why?" is nearly always a permissible response to any statement, and thus a reliable way of prompting further conversation from Mum or Dad; but in this case the question is unanswerable. There's an air of nonsense surrounding any question of the form "Why is an X an X?" Why is a cow a cow? Why is water water? Why is Socrates Socrates? This is not to say that such questions must ultimately be incoherent, only that they require interpretation. Perhaps when we ask "Why is Socrates Socrates?" we are asking how that man came to have that name; or perhaps—with a nod towards Shakespeare's "it out-herods Herod"—we are asking why that man has those characteristics that we have come to associate so paradigmatically with him. Such thoughts are prompted by the main title of Robert A. Hinde's book: *Why Good is Good*. How is this to be interpreted such that it isn't simply professing to explain why something is self-identical? Rather than speculating further upon the cover, let us seek the answer within.

Hinde is a Cambridge psychologist who has written books on diverse topics such as relationships, animal behavior, war, god, and now morality. His approach here, as elsewhere, is proudly multidisciplinary—drawing on research from psychology, evolutionary biology, social anthropology, and philosophy. The central task of the book is given in its subtitle: *The Sources of Morality*. Hinde sets out to trace the origins of the human "moral sense"—a sense, he argues, that "is intrinsic to the course of development" (48). Human nature, he asserts, involves both "prosocial" and "selfishly assertive" propensities. The basis is biological, but culture shapes which propensity dominates and how these propensities play out in detail. "[M]oral codes…have been elaborated in the course of human evolution and human history as the result of interplay between human psychological characteristics—many of which were originally evolved in other contexts—and the culture of the group" (14-15).

Thus the principal task of the book is a genealogy of morals. If this were its only task then its main title would surely have been better rendered: *Why Humans Judge Things to be Good*. But if this ultimately is how the title should be interpreted, then Hinde has chosen an appallingly misleading headline. (Just imagine a book that sought to investigate the sociological sources of female oppression—a genealogy of sexism—entitled "Why Women are Inferior.") All that can rescue him from this accusation is the fact that he aspires also to go beyond a descriptive history—claiming that "understanding the origin of moral codes can help us deal with moral problems" (151). In other words, it would appear that he hopes to show us that the things that humans judge to be good *really are* good. Unfortunately for those with a hankering for moral philosophy—or those

impatient for a hint of guidance with a real moral problem—this step beyond the descriptive mood is not explicitly taken until the fifteenth and final chapter. There's a lot of genealogy to get through first.

Not that there's anything wrong with a genealogy of morals. Why humans think in moral terms is a complex and fascinating question, concerning which (I need hardly tell a reader of this journal) great work is being done in fields such as game theory, neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, biology, primatology, and anthropology. Much study remains to be done, and the fact that relevant research is being conducted across a broad range of fields means that there is a wide open niche awaiting skillful interdisciplinary presentations. This book, unhappily, is not among them.

Before becoming critical, however, let me briefly sketch the outline of Hinde's descriptive case. He breaks his central discussion usefully into two tasks: the first is to explain how an individual picks up moral precepts from his or her culture, the second is to explain why a culture has adopted the values that it has. Addressing the first question is the job of developmental psychology, and Hinde is on his firmest ground here. He traces how the "self-system" develops in children, how prosocial behavior evolves, and the influence of parents, siblings and peers on the internalization of values. Well-known developmental psychologists such as Jerome Kagan and Lawrence Kohlberg stand in the background of a lot of this discussion. In addressing the second question of why particular values are accepted by a culture, Hinde turns to the processes of kin selection and reciprocal altruism, hypothesizing (plausibly) that it is to these that we must look in order to explain the origins of human prosociality, and devoting a chapter to each. The discussion of kin selection is indebted, in a fairly standard way, to William Hamilton's classic work and Robert Trivers's views on parent-infant conflict. Beyond this, Hinde is curiously preoccupied with explaining away what he takes to be apparent counter-evidence to the hypothesis that kin selection played a major role in shaping the human mind: contraception, infanticide, and adoption. Rather than just plumping for the obvious answer—that humans are not naturally motivated by thoughts of maximizing fitness, but rather achieve reproduction via proximate psychological mechanisms (e.g., the pleasure of orgasm) which can be easily "subverted" from their biological purposes in the modern environment—Hinde prefers the tactic of trying to show the ways by which these phenomena might, appearances notwithstanding, enhance inclusive reproductive fitness.

Hinde's discussion of moral precepts pertaining to non-kin focuses on reciprocity, but within this chapter, and apparently under the same heading, he endorses the view that group selection also played a significant role in the evolution of human prosociality. He seems to think that an appeal to inter-group selection is necessary in order to explain the evolution of prosociality in *large* groups. Following a path traced by the likes of Rob Boyd and Peter Richerson, he argues that group selection is unproblematic so long as it is *cultural* natural selection that is at issue. I am unsure what Hinde takes to be the relationship between genetic individual selection stemming from the process of reciprocal altruism on the one hand, and cultural inter-group selection on the other. The latter process certainly could produce attributes that allow and enhance reciprocal exchanges, but it could just as easily yield prosocial behavior that has nothing obvious to do with

reciprocity. In any case, Hinde leaves behind group selection quite quickly, returning to outline the characteristics we might expect to find in creatures designed to reciprocate: generosity, honesty, fair-dealing, an array of apparatus for dealing with cheats, and so on. There are fairly brief and routine discussions of shame vs. guilt, friendship, trust, and indignation.

There follow a few chapters that, I think, can be fairly described as "miscellaneous"—including a quite interesting discussion of whether there are differences between men and women's moral natures (answer: probably)—before Hinde comes to his "philosophical" conclusion. Prior to discussing that conclusion at some length, let me make a couple of very general critical comments about the heart of the book.

First, the descriptive, explanatory course that represents the bulk of the work does not offer any exciting or original research or theoretical tools, does not head off boldly in any unexpected directions. Though the book is described as "ground-breaking" on the back cover, it is certainly not in this respect. For the most part Hinde is satisfied with discussing others' research, others' theories, and others' ideas. Perhaps the only novel element of the story is his recurring employment of the concept of a "self-system"—a notion developed originally by the distinguished American psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan (1892-1949) (who isn't, incidentally, mentioned). Yet, despite the devotion of a whole chapter to "Morality and the Self-System," it remains unclear what this grand-sounding piece of theoretical apparatus from social psychology really adds to the debate. The self-system is how the individual sees herself—embodying "a complex store of information about herself, others, relationships, her position in society, her rights, value judgements, conventions, moral principles and other aspects of the culture" (37). Individuals strive to maintain consistency within this system, and any perceived inconsistency leads to anxiety and attempts to restore congruity. This "self-system" has played a major role in Hinde's previous writings, and so it is not surprising that he judges that the framework will be useful again. But how does this way of theorizing the self advance our understanding of the origins of morality? It seems at bottom to boil down to a recognition that humans have a faculty of *conscience*—that if we act in ways we judge to be wrong we tend to feel rotten—and that the strength and content of the conscience is culturally sensitive. This, though no doubt true, is hardly ground-breaking stuff.

The absence of original research or theory may be forgiven in a book that aspires instead to put forward a multidisciplinary overview that synthesizes empirical work from many fields. Presenting a great deal of research from disparate academic fields is, in my opinion, the best element of the book. I certainly made a number of notes for "further reading" from Hinde's extensive footnotes. Intrinsically interesting snippets—such as the symbolic value of weaving during the Song dynasty, or the role of football in the Argentinean sense of national identity—abound throughout. However, it must also be noted that Hinde doesn't do a particularly impressive job of synthesizing this material. Beyond the fairly mundane principle—that morality has a biological basis but is terribly sensitive to cultural input—there is no obvious theme or theoretical framework underpinning the discussion, and so the presentation lacks a unifying structure. There is a

“We have talked about this, and now we will talk about this” air to the composition; the order of many of the chapters could be shuffled around without obviously interrupting the flow of things.

If the bulk of the book is a moderately-interesting-but-not-terribly-exciting genealogy, one might have held out hope for something stimulating from the final portion, having been plied with promises that “an understanding of morality’s origins can clarify and inform contemporary ethical debates over topics such as abortion and the treatment of terminally ill patients” (back cover). In its concluding “philosophical” gestures, however, *Why Good is Good* is at its most disappointing. Hinde appears to articulate an incoherent mix of ethical relativism and a prescriptive tone concerning what we should do in order to resolve conflicts and promote tolerance of other cultures. This inconsistent marriage of valuing tolerance while espousing value relativism is something we try to weed out of philosophy students upon their arrival in *Ethics 101*. Simply put: if values are relative, then so are the values of tolerance and conflict-avoidance. Conversely, if tolerance is something to which we should all aspire and attempt to promote, then it is an absolute value and so relativism is false. Suppose there is a culture that is deeply intolerant and glories in bloody conflicts with its neighbors—say, medieval Japan. Is there anything absolutely wrong with this culture’s practices? Not according to the relativist. They may be wrong from *our* perspective, of course, but by the same lights our tolerant ways will be wrong from their point of view. The values of tolerance and conflict resolution are just other values—like honesty, humility, the subjugation of women, or glorious military victories—none of which, according to the relativist, can be accorded a privileged status.

Is Hinde really espousing value relativism? He doesn’t discuss it head on. At one point he tells us that his approach is “steering between absolutism and relativism” (182), though a few pages later we are told that moral codes “are labile and relative” (187). The former comment seems prompted by remarks that although moral codes are highly sensitive to cultural and historical placement, and thus there exist substantial moral differences among cultures, “the differences that are possible are limited by the necessity for viability in each society and the tolerance of its members, and thus depend on human nature” (182). If the thought is simply that nature places a leash on how far a plastic moral faculty may wander, then this in no way detracts from all-out relativism. Relativism is the view that the truth of a moral claim depends (*inter alia*) on the values of the culture within which the speaker exists. It thus allows that, say, “Tolerance is a virtue” may be true coming from one speaker’s mouth, but false if uttered by someone else. But relativism implies nothing about how extensive the differences may be. Relativism is consistent with widespread or even universal agreement. Even if, as a matter of fact, all cultures agree on some moral issue, it may still be that in order to make sense of the moral claim being true we need to take into account the values of the culture. (E.g., fashions are relative—what is fashionable here and now may not be there and then—but relativism about fashion isn’t undermined if all cultures agree that wearing a dead cat on your head is unfashionable.)

Perhaps by "relativism" Hinde just means that there are substantial differences in values among cultures. Thus by "steering between absolutism and relativism" maybe he takes himself to be proposing that there are certain commonalities among different cultures' moral systems, whereas in the details there is a great deal of divergence. The latter is certainly something he holds, and perhaps not unreasonably. He thinks that the biological basis of morality generates "pan-cultural moral principles," while differences in history and ecology produce immense diversity in the precise precepts. About the content of the commonalities he remains rather cagey; his favorite is the Golden Rule. However, despite the numerous chapters outlining empirical results, when it comes to providing hard evidence for the existence of these universals—which, we'll see below, play a central role in the final arguments of the book—Hinde's case is very thin. As far as the differences go, the one that strikes him most frequently is that some societies value individualism over collectivism, whereas for others it is vice versa; but we could just as easily mention widow-burning, foot-binding, or Nazi genocide.

This empirical issue of cross-cultural agreement vs. disagreement is not usually what is meant by "absolutism vs. relativism." Even people who believe that there is a single objective moral truth can accept the existence of widespread moral disagreement. Hinde clearly endorses relativism in a more robustly meta-ethical sense when he writes that it is "unnecessary to postulate any criteria of what is right and wrong, and thus any source for morality, beyond the products of the interaction between our own self-systems, the ways in which we perceive ourselves and others to behave, and the moral code of the culture in which we live" (187). I am not one to criticize a person for espousing moral relativism, but will object most vigorously if this relativism is voiced in the same breath as absolutist moralizing. And this, alas, is the well-greased hole into which Hinde's discussion descends. He considers the case of widow-burning (187-188). We in the West, naturally, condemn it, while those from Eastern cultures where it is practiced may equally condemn our non-widow-burning spinelessness. To recognize this fact is not to be a relativist; it is merely to note a difference in opinion. The relativist will say that when an Indian asserts "Widow-burning is okay" she may be saying something true, whereas if a Westerner were to assert it he would say something false; there is no absolute truth on the matter. But this is not where Hinde stops. His agenda clearly is to suggest that we in the West are *mistaken* in our denunciation of the practice; he wishes to promote the value of tolerance. ("We may judge the moral systems of other cultures to be wrong, but should not condemn the actions of individuals in such a culture if they have had no opportunity to know another" (188).) In other words, Hinde mistakes the relativistic view that moral judgments must be relativized to the culture of the person making the judgment, with the non-relativistic view that when we make moral judgments we must be sensitive to the cultural placement of the persons about whom we are making the judgment.

This is more than mere nit-pickiness over labels. For suppose Hinde objects that the latter is what he intended to say, irrespective of whether it deserves the philosophers' term of art "relativism." Then the glaring question is where this absolute moral prescription—that in judging others we should be sensitive to their cultural placement—comes from. Throughout Hinde's book, and with increasing frequency towards the end,

an absolutist prescriptive tone is adopted: “The values we place on trust, honesty, loyalty, compassion, understanding, responsibility and love have arisen as consequences of what we are and of our need to live in a viable society, *and must not be discarded*” (190, my emphasis). But this just prompts the question of on what grounds we should accept any of Hinde’s moralizing (regardless of how sympathetic we may personally be towards its content). It sometimes appears that he thinks that the commonalities among moral judgments—the “pan-cultural moral principles”—provide some kind of justification or criteria of rightness. Suppose that we agree with Hinde that any moral system involves a degree of “prosociality” in virtue of an evolutionary history involving kin selection and reciprocal exchanges. Would that make prosocial behavior correct? On occasions Hinde apparently thinks so. A concentration camp guard, he says, “could (should?) have known that [his orders] were wrong, in that they contravened the prosociality principle” (188). Hinde seems unaware of how much turns on his exasperatingly casual parenthetical “should?” Still with concentration camps, he writes: “Societies or groups whose moral code contravenes the prosociality/reciprocity principle are seen as wrong. Thus both the moral codes that justify death squads and the Nazi concentration camps, and the individuals within those groups whose actions contravene the Golden Rule, are to be seen as wrong” (186). Notice the slide from “are seen as wrong” to “are to be seen as wrong”—the former expressing an empirical observation, the latter making a moral judgment. Nazis, apparently, are beyond the pale, since their values contravene “pan-cultural moral principles”: prosociality, reciprocity, the Golden Rule. Never does it cross Hinde’s mind that if Nazis contravene a principle then they represent a counter-example to that principle’s supposed pan-culturality. One cannot claim that a principle is universal while condemning a culture for not endorsing it! It is, in any case, not at all clear in what sense violently intolerant cultures contravene “prosociality.” Hinde is so utterly vague about how such principles play out in concrete form that there is nothing to prevent us saying that genocide could very well be an expression of prosociality: “We are going to destroy *that* group—whom we hate—in order to promote the interests of *our* group—whom we love.”

Yet, to confuse things, on other occasions Hinde is willing to excuse violations of prosociality and beg tolerance. Widow-burning, he admits, “contravenes the prosociality principle” (187), yet we are lectured not to condemn the practice hastily. This inconsistency is sailing close to being nothing other than the kind of fashionable, boneless, politically-motivated, have-your-cake-and-eat-it so-called “relativism” that drives moral philosophers crazy. Such a view, voiced usually by confused undergraduates, first claims that all values are relative, then goes on to urge us all to be tolerant of other cultures so long as we’re talking about, say, unusual incest prohibitions or dietary restrictions, but digs its heels in at anything too gruesome. Now there’s nothing wrong with valuing *limited* tolerance of the customs of other cultures, but it amounts merely to a moral opinion requiring the justificatory backing of moral theory. Without that backing, we have no reason to agree with someone espousing the view unless we are antecedently inclined to do so. And relativism is not that theory. According to the relativist, if my culture happens to value limited tolerance of other customs, when I assert

"We shouldn't condemn widow-burning but of course genocide must be opposed" I've said something true. But had I lived in a culture with different values my assertion of the same judgment would have been false. Relativism does not allow that the judgment "We shouldn't condemn widow-burning but of course genocide must be opposed" has any absolute privileged status over "Crush all foreigners and press their children into slavery!"

Hinde frequently repeats his conviction that moral judgments can receive no justification from an "outside source or standard" (188), but it is never made clear whether he thinks they may instead receive justification from an *internal* source: a source fixed in human biology and/or culture—whether, that is, he thinks they are justified *at all*. If he thinks that in the end moral judgments cannot be justified—that pro-Nazi moral judgments are as justified as any others—then he hasn't provided grounds for legitimately criticizing any moral viewpoint (not even the Nazis'), and so hasn't helped us one iota with solving any concrete moral problem. His book hasn't lived up to its titular promise of showing us why the things that we judge to be good really are good, nor its back cover pledge of clarifying and informing contemporary debates such as abortion and euthanasia (which are barely mentioned!). On the other hand, Hinde's full-bodied moralizing about what we should do (try to appreciate other cultures, maintain honesty, loyalty and compassion, resolve conflicts peacefully, etc.) suggests that he thinks that certain moral judgments may be justified. Yet how he conceives of this justification escapes me. Granted we shouldn't look to a "transcendent authority" to provide justification, but how does the purely humanistic genealogy—even one that implies a moral common ground—justify anything?

Hinde's focus is often on the big picture: on how we can resolve inter-cultural disputes. He thinks that a mutual awareness of the broad commonalities, derived from biology, is somehow going to save the day. This is the theme he returns to again and again in his final chapter, yet the details are never painted in and the problems are daunting. First, if the common moral principles are not in any sense *justified*, then on what grounds can we legitimately criticize someone who ignores them? Drawing attention to the fact that we *will* criticize the transgressor hardly advances matters if it cannot be shown that such criticism is reasonable. Now it might be objected that if we're talking about truly *common* moral principles, then there will be no actual people who ignore them. Moral disagreements, by definition, must concern matters about which there is not universal agreement. But this observation just serves to raise the question of what bearing an awareness of common moral principles can have on any moral disagreement, since the latter, by definition, will not concern the former. Moreover, and importantly, Hinde remains so hand-wavy about the content of these "pan-cultural moral principles," and keeps them at such a level of extreme generality, that it is hard to see how appealing to them is going to help resolve any dispute. Perhaps all moral systems in some manner endorse the "prosocial principle," for example—but two cultures can engage in violent conflict over a moral disagreement and all the while the viewpoint of each can be effortlessly interpreted as championing "prosociality." (The Nazis, after all, were trying to create an Aryan master race—a thoroughly "prosocial" goal.) Finally, it should be

noted that what little Hinde says about these pan-cultural principles reveals them to be contradictory: along with the Golden Rule we have "Look after your kin" and "Be loyal" (178). How, then, a mutual awareness of this contradictory cluster of highly general common principles is supposed to lead smoothly or even bumpily to a conflict resolution is drastically unclear.

"Problems will always remain," Hinde concedes on the final page, implying that he has at least advanced matters slightly, and presented a blunt but useful practical tool for our moral decision-making. But I confess that I cannot see that we have received any guidance whatsoever, even if we grant Hinde all his empirical hypotheses. All we get in the final chapter, I'm sorry to say, is a somewhat depressing mélange of confused philosophizing and ideology-driven moralizing. He should have stuck to something he could at least do with competence: empirical moral genealogy.