
**Reviewed by:** Donald Wiebe, Professor, Trinity College, University of Toronto. dwiebe@trinity.utoronto.ca

Boehm’s ultimate goal in this volume is to make a contribution to understanding “extrafamilial generosity” in the human community which, he points out, is an evolutionary mystery that has still not been fully explained (p. 9). A generosity that includes nonkin? not only enhanced group social life but also made possible an extended form of cooperation that was already to some extent visible in hunter-gatherer groups living in small egalitarian bands from Palaeolithic to Neolithic times and was further exploited in much larger groups in the Holocene. To account for this Boehm proceeds on the basis of a “general evolutionary hypothesis…that morality began with having a conscience, and that conscience evolution began with systematic but initially nonmoralistic social control [of egoistic individuals] by groups” (p. 15, author’s emphasis). “Conscience” for Boehm refers to a uniquely self-conscious agency that made possible the internalization of the group’s rules of behaviour and whose evolutionary basis is both genetic and social.

The deep (evolutionary) history of conscience, Boehm maintains, includes “inherited tendencies from our ape ancestors to resent being dominated and being placed in a disadvantageously unequal position” within the group (p. 69) and the “building-block behaviors” that underlie those tendencies. The physically evolved but nonmoral building blocks involved such capacities as self-recognition and the capacity to differentiate oneself from others, a proto-theory of mind that made possible some understanding of the feelings and intentions of other apes, a fear-based response to dominance, and an ancestral capacity “to gang up” on dominating alpha males. Although our common ancestor with the apes did not have a moralistic sense of right or wrong, claims Boehm, their nonmoralistic potential for group social control emerged in the curbing of the behaviours of aggressive individuals that, in effect, created a preadaptive basis for the
development of a moral conscience. As Boehm puts it: “if earlier humans hadn’t already had an ancestral head start in the form of nonmoral group social control, today we might be just as amoral as any of the great apes that still live in sub-Saharan Africa” (p. 130).

The development of such a moral conscience, Boehm argues, made possible a new form of “purposeful” social selection involving what he calls a “lower-level teleology” (sometimes also referred to as teleonomy) that unwittingly affected gene pools. Hunter-gatherer bands used such social controls of behaviour so intensively, he maintains, that members of such bands began to inhibit their own egoistic and nepotistic behaviours for fear of punishment and consequently developed a “self-judgmental sense of right and wrong” (p. 152) which resulted in an internalization the band’s “rules” for social behaviour. The social mechanisms involved included the use of shame, gossip, shunning (and their effects on reputation), as well as prosocial preaching, the rewarding of prosocial behaviours and the prosocialization of children by adults, all of which would have provided compensation for altruists and ensured the persistence of their genes in the bands’ gene pool. Thus these cultural behaviours, he points out, would have not only shaped everyday group life in a prosocial way, but would also have helped to shape gene pools in a prosocial direction.

Boehm’s argument here is not simply based on “adaptive design”, or group selection theory, or game theory, all of which are ahistorical. “I find it curious,” he writes, “that in spite of our vastly improved knowledge from archaeology, and in spite of our growing capacity to make reliable ancestral behavioral reconstructions, [the] historical dimension has been set aside to the degree it has” (p. 324). His attempt to show “how our capacities for social conformity and self-sacrificial generosity could have evolved in the late Pleistocene” (p. 213) draws heavily on patterns of behaviour that still exist in Late-Pleistocene-Appropriate (LPA) foraging societies (p. 213). In particular, he makes use of the ethnographies of the Kalahari-dwelling Bushmen and the Inuit-speaking Netsilik and Utku groups in Canada “that are exceptional in their portrayal of moral life” (p. 215). Although it may be analytically useful for certain purposes to discuss innate dispositions and historical cultures as separate entities, he maintains that most behaviours “can be better understood as the product of both in combination” (p. 235). Moral origins in his account, therefore, emerged gradually over thousands of generations in which natural selection produced the nonmoral conscience in our ape ancestors and developed in the major political transitions of early humans from being a hierarchical species to an egalitarian one at the stage in which humans became “active-pursuit” hunters. This work therefore amounts to “a pointedly historical natural history moral
origins”, as he puts it, of the development of a moralistic group social control that in part made possible extrafamilial generosity (p. 323).

Moral Origins is a major accomplishment of scientific and historical thought in accounting for the extrafamilial generosity that has made humans incredibly efficient – even if fragile – cooperators. It should be read in earnest by Boehm’s fellow anthropologists and other social scientists, especially scientifically oriented historians.