



# A Mental Marathon

Robin Raynham

## THE ORIGINS OF VIRTUE

Matt Ridley

Penguin Books, £8.99

**H**ENRY GEORGE was right on at least two counts according to the conclusions reached by the author of this truly prodigious work, even though its subject matter is not supposed to be economics! No less than an ambitious and determined attempt to elucidate the evolutionary mechanism by means of which human beings have come so generally to practice altruistic forms of behaviour, it inevitably expands to encompass, to some degree, some aspects of the subjects of government and political economy.

Unfortunately (and despite the author's accomplished writing style), it is not an altogether easy book to read or to comprehend properly (especially if, like me, you are not versed in the tenets of modern evolutionary biology). Mr. Ridley does not actually define what he means by "virtue", although the inference is made at one point that he conceives it to lie in "pro-social" behaviour. (It is not clear if this means behaviour that is 'pro' the existing social order or 'pro' its beneficial development; two things which may well be in direct opposition.) It turns out that one (implicit) core theme of the book is that of the, currently very significant, issue of environmental sustainability, and how to ensure that our race adopts forms of behaviour that result in it.

In chapters 1 to 8 the author discusses the behaviour of a varied selection of types of mobile life forms, starting with ants and working all the way up the evolutionary tree to the dolphins and then to ourselves, attempting to explain the functional 'rationale' behind the way all these creatures behave and the factors that will have caused that behaviour to develop.

There is a great deal of material here and, there being no way all of it can be summarised briefly, I am not going to try. Chapters 9 to 12 inclusive deal with subjects that are closer to our own interests, however, including War, Trade, Ecology and Property. The author identifies the habits of conformism and what he calls "groupishness" as conducive to war, stresses the importance of trade as having the opposite effect and as being the primary stimulus of both ancient and modern economies, is disparaging about governmental administration of law and is enthusiastic about Ricardo's (counter-intuitive) Law of Comparative Advantage. In regard to ecology, he thorough-

ly debunks the popular idea of the 'noble savage', living in harmony with nature and respecting the environment, and illustrates that doing so is not an instinctive or innate tendency in our kind.<sup>2</sup>

But then he comes – with evident reluctance and distaste – to the conclusion that only property<sup>3</sup> rights (either communal or individual) can give rise to practices that will ensure the desired environmental sustainability. (If what Dr. Stephen Covey<sup>4</sup> calls "the production/production capability balance" is to be maintained then somebody has to have an interest in maintaining it: the owner of the capability is the only one likely to.). As nobody really owns the earth, this seems to me to be a somewhat sobering conclusion but let us hope that the Georgist paradigm of state administration of it on behalf of the community (effectively a form of communal ownership) will adequately serve if properly carried out.

In chapter 13 the author comes, rather suddenly, to his conclusions, remarking that he has argued that "there was morality before the Church; trade before the state; exchange before money; culture before Babylon; society before Greece; self-interest before Adam Smith; and greed before capitalism", some of which thoughts I find encouraging.

It is in his penultimate paragraph that he comes to the first of his conclusions that is essentially similar to that of Henry George's thinking – that the power and scope of the state

should be reduced to the minimum<sup>5</sup>. But he then comes up (entirely without giving any justification for it) with the curious statement that governments should "wither into their minimal function of national defence and redistribution of wealth" – entirely omitting any mention of the primary function of civil government, that of instituting and maintaining within its realm a proper system of law!<sup>6</sup>

His final conclusion is to stress the importance of encouraging social and material interchange between equals, almost paraphrasing George's words of more than a century ago that association in equality is the essential precondition of human progress.

The author has obviously put a tremendous amount of work and thought into this book and my overall impression is that it has been written by a brilliant (if slightly misguided!) friend who, if he were only to study and comprehend Georgist principles, might well become one of us. As reading it effectively constitutes something of a mental marathon, however, I suggest that, to ensure success, you should oil and polish up your intellect carefully before attempting to do so!

### REFERENCES

- 1 Altruistic: having regard to others. (Dictionary)
- 2 Evidently this may be another possible reason for the decline and disappearance of some previous civilisations, an alternative to the one highlighted by George, and the inference resulting from the stated insight must therefore be that, if we are to achieve a state of environmental sustainability on the earth, this can only come about as the result of the implementation on our part of a conscious and deliberate decision to do so.
- 3 Of course, he uses the term 'property' indiscriminately, as most people do, not being aware of the distinction we make between the terms 'property' and 'land'.
- 4 See "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" by S.R.Covey, Simon and Schuster.
- 5 Except that this was a premise, rather than a conclusion in George's case, based on grounds of economy, whereas Mr Ridley's conclusion is arrived at on the score of efficacy.
- 6 I don't agree that the redistribution of wealth is a proper function of government either!

## Need for a template to guide reforms

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*Continued on following page* ➔

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