

Dominic Kirkham reviews

Changing how we Live

by Robert Hinde

Spokesman Books (Nottingham 2011). Pbk. 132 pages.
£8.99.

The premise of this book is that present society is in a mess, and it is in a mess because it has lost its moral compass. The cover illustration of the book in a way says it all: a compass dropped – or should that be discarded? – on to the sands. From bankers at the top of the social pyramid to rioters on the streets at the bottom, the implications are the same: life is a free-for-all where you get what you can, the more the better. If we are not entirely happy with this state of affairs – and many aren't – the situation is compounded by a lack of any clear understanding of what to do about it. Simply tinkering with our political, financial and legal institutions is not enough; neither is finger-pointing at others or lamenting the old moral order. What is needed, in the words of Robert Hinde, is a recognition 'that the morality to which we subscribe may not be adequate for the modern world.'

Hinde – a distinguished scientist and former Master of St. John's College, Cambridge, who has written extensively on the problems of belief and morality in modern society – is not afraid to confront the problems of how we live head on as being fundamentally a moral problem. He is not alone: for example, Robert Skidelsky, in his recent cogent study of the great Cambridge economist, J.M Keynes – *The Return of the Master* – argued that at the core of the present financial and economic crisis is a moral failure 'of a system built on money values'. Keynes fully recognised economics is a means to an end, not the end itself, that was to be found in the ideal of 'the harmonious society', where all can live a good life 'wisely, agreeably and well'. It is a vision that has been discarded, with the present dire consequences.

What Hinde wants to do is understand the nature of the current imbroglio with a view to moving beyond it. One of the most significant problems in the way is that for many – in so far as they think about it at all – morality is associated with religion, and religion has lost much of its persuasive power in modern society. In fact, he argues, morality is not necessarily the hand-maiden of religion and over most of human history has not been. Hinde reviews the evidence across several disciplines of how morality evolved over historical time: social values and moral codes do not just happen to fall from the heavens on blocks of stone but are the first step in the political and economic systems we have developed, even if it is sometimes in the interests of elite groups and clergy to obscure this fact.

An alternative foundation for morality can be found in 'the propensities inherent, though partially

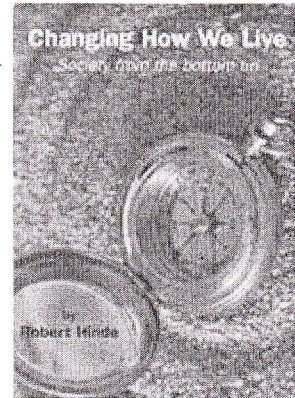
dormant, in our nature.' Hinde again reviews in considerable detail the genetic, social and psychological foundations that determine the acquisition of morality by individuals. At the heart of his

proposed model for the moral structure of society is a 'dialectic' – a two-way relation between what people do and what they are supposed to do, between the individual and the social environment. This is not the traditional 'top down' morality but a 'bottom up' one which recognises we are all complicit in the world we live in because we helped to create it. It was not just the banker who overspent, we all went along for a ride on the credit boom. In current parlance, we are all in it together.

And we can all make a difference! Hinde quotes with approval Edmund Burke's aphorism: 'No man can make a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do little.' There is no better recent example of the power of individuals to effect change than the Olympics and Paralympics, which not only showed ordinary people achieving extraordinary things, but in doing so contributed to a dramatic change in the self-awareness of society as a whole. In a way sport mirrors our capitalist society: intense individual competition within a socially controlled context. The two elements of selfishness and sociability provide the dynamics of the moral order and at present they are out of kilter: we have to decide, do we want more gated mansions or a more equitable society?

Despite its brevity this book covers a vast spectrum of issues with clarity and verve; it is densely written and extensively referenced. Hinde makes many useful distinctions: for example, between moral principles (which are pan-cultural) and precepts (more localised adaptations); between propensities and intentions; between atheists (who can still see the value of religion) and anti-theists (who seek to discredit all religions). As an atheist himself, Hinde says of religions: 'We should deny them the status they get when we have something better to put in its place'. This alternative is a rational and flexible approach to morality, similar to that argued for by Richard Holloway in his ground-breaking book *Godless Morality*. In the end it is not what we believe but how we behave that gives validity to our moral code.

Dominic Kirkham is an interested follower of the SOF movement who, being now redundant, has more time to think about the issues involved.



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