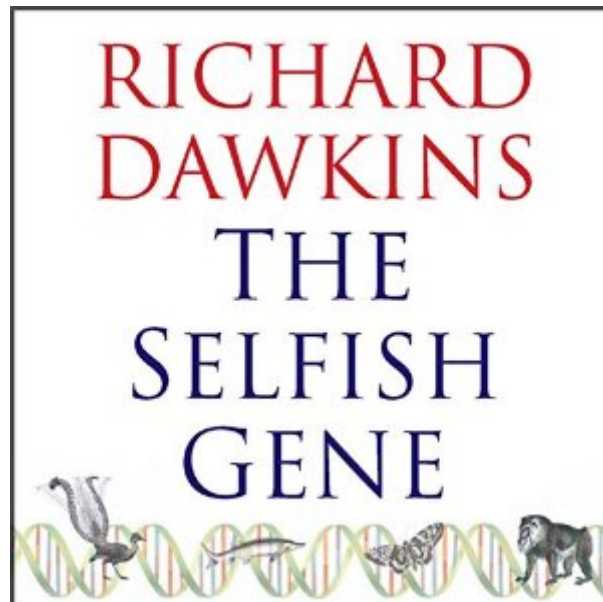


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# The Selfish Gene



## Synopsis

Richard Dawkins' brilliant reformulation of the theory of natural selection has the rare distinction of having provoked as much excitement and interest outside the scientific community as within it. His theories have helped change the whole nature of the study of social biology, and have forced thousands to rethink their beliefs about life. In his internationally best-selling, now classic, volume, *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins explains how the selfish gene can also be a subtle gene. The world of the selfish gene revolves around savage competition, ruthless exploitation, and deceit, and yet, Dawkins argues, acts of apparent altruism do exist in nature. Bees, for example, will commit suicide when they sting to protect the hive, and birds will risk their lives to warn the flock of an approaching hawk.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

More than a quarter-century after its first publication, Richard Dawkins's "The Selfish Gene" remains a classic of popular science writing. This edition includes two new chapters as well as extensive endnotes that do much to perfect the original text and correct the few mistakes that were found in it. "The Selfish Gene" is explicitly directed at the layman, and absolutely no knowledge of biology is assumed. While this presents a danger of boring readers (such as myself) who are already familiar with DNA and meiosis, the colorful metaphors Dawkins uses throughout the book do much to keep the reading engrossing and entertaining. After a lengthy exploration of basic biology, covering topics such as DNA and the origin of life, Dawkins introduces the gene-centered view of evolution that has long been textbook orthodoxy. Dawkins uses the remainder of the book to look at various types of animal behavior in an effort to convey some general conclusions and tools to help the reader

understand evolution and natural selection. Much of his effort is devoted to explaining behavior in terms of the 'selfish gene' - especially social behavior that has long been held to have evolved 'for the good of the species.' Dawkins shows that how fundamental axiom of natural selection (that the genes best at surviving and reproducing will eventually spread through the gene pool) leads directly to the selfish gene and the behavior exhibited by nearly all animals (humans being the prime exception). Many of Dawkins's metaphors have caused raised eyebrows - one outstanding example is his characterization of living things as "lumbering robots" built to protect the genes that hide in them - but the metaphors are always (eventually) brought under control.

I read *The Selfish Gene* (2nd edition, 1989) because it is one of the twenty books Charlie Munger recommends in the second edition of *Poor Charlie's Almanack* (which I have recently read and recommend very strongly indeed). I'm going to quote Dawkins from the preface to the original edition as he provides an excellent summary of the central message of the book and its effect upon him (and me): "We are survival machines - robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes. This is a truth which still fills me with astonishment. Though I have known it for years, I never seem to get fully used to it." Using one of the many excellent analogies utilised throughout his book, Dawkins explains that we are like a chess computer program that has been programmed by its creator to play in its absence. The programmer (genes) takes no part in the game (life) but instead provides the tools for its vehicle (animal, plant etc.) to play the game on its behalf. I am glad that Dawkins says that he never gets fully used to this idea. I find it very difficult to replace the idea of my primacy in my body with the idea above. It requires a sort of 'flip' in one's perception - but it is so different to what our senses tell us that it flips back without a conscious effort (or so I find, anyway). But how many of us have not regularly had to do battle with themselves to do what they know they should do rather than what they feel an urge to do? Dawkins' ideas provide an excellent framework in which to help understand these problems, which I suspect is a major part of the reason why Munger recommended this book.

I wish I could rate this book at 5 stars and 0 stars at the same time. It is a fascinating book, very well-written, and it conveys a real sense of how life works on the biological level, how all sorts of diverse factors interact with each other to create an incredibly complex system (the evolution of life, in this case); it also just as vividly conveys a sense of how scientists come to understand these processes. I started it many years ago at the suggestion of a friend, thinking I wouldn't find it very interesting, and not much liking the kind of philosophy of life that (on the basis of my friend's

description) seemed to lie behind it. But only a chapter or two in, I was completely hooked, and wanted to read more Dawkins. On one level, I can share in the sense of wonder Dawkins so evidently sees in the workings-out of such complex processes, often made up of quite simple elemental mechanisms, but interacting so complexly to produce the incredibly complex world we live in. But at the same time, I largely blame "The Selfish Gene" for a series of bouts of depression I suffered from for more than a decade, and part of me wants to rate the book at zero stars for its effect on my life. Never sure of my spiritual outlook on life, but trying to find something deeper - trying to believe, but not quite being able to - I found that this book just about blew away any vague ideas I had along these lines, and prevented them from coalescing any further. This created quite a strong personal crisis for me some years ago. The book renders a God or supreme power of any sort quite superfluous for the purpose of accounting for the way the world is, and the way life is.

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