



Genetics of Original Sin: The Impact of Natural Selection on the Future of Humanity (An Editions Odile Jacob Book)

By Christian de Duve, Neil Patterson

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Increasingly absorbed in recent years by advances in our understanding of the origin of life, evolutionary history, and the advent of humankind, eminent biologist Christian de Duve of late has also pondered deeply the future of life on this planet. He speaks to readers with or without a scientific background, offering new perspectives on the threat posed by humanity's immense biological success and on the resources human beings have for altering their current destructive path.

Focusing on the process of natural selection, de Duve explores the inordinate and now dangerous rise of humankind. His explanation for this self-defeating success lies in the process of natural selection, which favors traits that are immediately useful, regardless of later consequences. Thus, the human genome determines such properties as tribal and group cohesion and collaboration and often fierce and irrational competition with and hostility toward other groups' attributes that were once useful but now often ruinously dysfunctional.

Christian de Duve suggests that these traits, imprinted into human nature by natural selection, may have been recognized by the writers of Genesis, thus inspiring the myth of original sin. Is there redemption for genetic original sin? In a brilliant and original conclusion, the author argues that, unique in the living world, humankind is endowed with the ability to deliberately oppose natural selection. Human beings have the capacity to devise measures that, while contrary to local or personal interests, can bring forth a safer world.

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- Sales Rank: #2442050 in Books
- Published on: 2010-12-14
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: .90" h x 5.84" w x 8.55" l, .91 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 256 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Nobel-prize winning Belgian biologist de Duve (Singularities) ascribes "humanity's inability to come to grips with threats that extend beyond the immediate future" as the product of natural selection and akin to the myth of original sin. Introducing his thesis with a brief overview of evolution and the mechanisms of life, he looks at the unique conjunction of genetics and environmental conditions that favored the development and supremacy of the human species. Our unprecedented brain-power has given human beings the power to domesticate the planet, providing us with the food, fuel, and raw materials that supported massive population growth (now 6 billion and growing). Fortunately, as neurobiology shows, "our most decisive traits are epigenetic, the product of culture and education; our brains rewire as we mature and give us the ability to supersede the genetic imperative to reproduce at all cost. The necessary cultural shift, however, prioritizing protecting the environment over our own immediate desires, will require the simultaneous education of parents and children and thus, will be extremely difficult to accomplish. A provocative book by an elder statesman of science.

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Review

"De Duve provides an outstanding treatment of historical, present, and future biological/societal issues. This is a concise, superb book, clearly, succinctly, and analytically organized."—J. N. Muzio, *Choice* (J. N. Muzio *CHOICE*)

"De Duve makes biology accessible to virtually any reader. In addition, *Genetics of Original Sin* often provides a historical context for scientific discovery, describing biological innovation as the work of individuals, thereby heightening the drama of science."—Jamie Schwendinger-Schrek, *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*

(Jamie Schwendinger-Schrek *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*)

Selected as a Choice Outstanding Academic Title for 2011 in the Biology category.
(Choice Outstanding Academic Title *Choice* 2012-03-12)

About the Author

Christian de Duve is professor emeritus at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, and at Rockefeller University, New York. He lives in Belgium.

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