

The Evolution of Moral Progress: A Biocultural Theory
Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell
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In their 2018 book, *The Evolution of Moral Progress*, Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell set out to reanimate the debate on the nature of moral progress, which was a central concern of the field of philosophy for most of its history. By moral progress, the authors refer to the overall “improvement of our moral capacities”¹ as reflected by the widespread adoption of beliefs and behaviour that better take into consideration the interests of out-groups and other sentient beings. The authors claim that this important debate on the nature of moral progress has died down due to the general acceptance of evolutionarily driven parochial morality, that is the belief that human beings are evolutionarily hard-wired to disregard or heavily discount the moral status of people outside their group. The authors argue that the evidence used by defenders of parochial morality to support their view is also compatible with an adaptably plastic view of morality,² which has better explanatory power and aligns with new developments in

¹ Allen E. Buchanan and Russell Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress: a Biocultural Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 45.

² Buchanan and Powell, 37.

theories of culture-gene coevolution,³ archeological and ethnographic accounts of hunter-gatherer tribes, and studies in neuroeconomics.

In the first chapters of their book, Buchanan and Powell draw our attention to the work of authors such as Peter Singer⁴ and Steven Pinker,⁵ who have documented changes in moral attitudes and behaviour throughout the last few centuries. Buchanan and Powell synthesize these changes into two major moral revolutions or expansions of the circle of moral regard. The first great expansion of the circle of moral regard consists in the adoption by a considerable amount of people (and the institutions of the countries where they reside) of the belief in the equality of all human beings. This expansion is described as fueling social movements such as abolitionism, women's suffrage, and civil rights. The second great expansion consists in a trend towards greater consideration of the interests of non-human animals as shown by attitudes and changes in laws in many countries concerning the use of animals in the testing of cosmetics, medical research, and their consumption as meat.⁶

³ Buchanan and Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress*, 409; Joseph Patrick Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success: How Culture Is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁴ Buchanan and Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress*, 62; Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁵ Buchanan and Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress*, 127; Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York City: Viking, 2011); Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: the Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (London: Penguin Books, 2019).

⁶ Buchanan and Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress*, 214.

According to Buchanan and Powell, the standard tribalistic account of morality is unable to explain these two moral revolutions since they require concern for out-group members or beings that cannot reciprocate.⁷

The authors spend the second half of the book explaining the standard parochial account of morality and its shortcomings. These theories have existed since the publication of *The Descent of Man* by Charles Darwin in 1871 and are an attempt to explain the fact that humans have a propensity to sacrifice resources for others in ways that do not increase their own fitness, a trait that would seem *prima facie* to be disfavored by evolutionary theory. Based on the seminal works of Robert Axelrod and W.D. Hamilton, the parochial naturalistic conception of moral progress attempts to solve the paradox by conceptualizing morality as an evolutionary adaptation that facilitates cooperation among members of a group of people, usually united by ties of kinship.⁸ Such a morality would be favored evolutionarily by increasing the chances of one's genes to live on through offspring or closely related relatives. The flipside of this limited altruism towards family members and close cooperators is the development of distrust and moral disregard for outsiders. In other words, due to the harsh reality of the Environment of Evolutionary Adaptation (EEA) in the middle to late Pleistocene era, the moral

⁷ Buchanan and Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress*, 273

⁸ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 264

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mind of hunter-gatherer tribes would have been evolutionarily shaped to be tribalistic, because groups that lacked such moral emotions (by selfish behavior towards members of the same group or excessive altruism towards outsiders) were weeded out over millennia of natural selection, leading to the development in humans of a parochial morality that has remained unchanged since then. Buchanan and Powell accuse contemporary authors interested in questions of moral development such as Christopher Boehm, Joshua Greene, and Michael Tomasello, of uncritically espousing parochial morality⁹ to support the belief that social and political institutions can only keep in check our most tribalistic outbursts or try to project them on bigger “imaginary” tribes, such as the nation, without ever being able to change this hardwired morality. The very last chapter of the book is specifically addressed to more “optimistic” authors such as Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, who propose that we overcome our natural limits through biomedical interventions. According to Buchanan and Powell, these authors also share (wrongly) in the assumption that our moral mind, having been shaped at an earlier evolutionary stage, is now unalterably tribal.¹⁰

Having presented the tribalistic view of morality in addition to overwhelming evidence of moral progress over time, the authors argue that the tribalistic view of morality must be modified to account not only for the reality of ancient hunter-gatherer tribes, but also

⁹ Buchanan and Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress*, 120

¹⁰ Buchanan and Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress*, 345

contemporary societies. They then present new evidence from evolutionary psychology, which gives cultural evolution a more important role in shaping our moral minds to support a naturalistic theory of human moral development that is not fixedly tribalistic, but *adaptably plastic*.¹¹ This means that morality in particular humans can develop to be tribalistic or inclusive depending on certain cues (e.g. resource scarcity, signs of disease) that were important during the late Pleistocene era, when morality was shaped through natural selection. This new theory of moral progress allows for the explanation of the two recent expansions of morality, while providing a naturalistic account of morality that accommodates the dominance of tribalistic moralities in pre-historic societies.

Buchanan and Powell's framework has the advantage of being able to better accommodate the seeming moral development of the last two centuries in a way that is compatible with the hegemony of tribalistic moralities in the tribes of the late Pleistocene as well as in modern-day hunter-gatherers. However, their proposal is only put forward as a potential avenue for further research, not as a complete theory. The authors draw from a variety of sources to hypothesize about the selective pressures that would have favored a plastically adaptive morality over a fixed tribalistic one. One possibility is that trade and exogamy (i.e., marriage outside of one's tribe) played a bigger role than previously thought in pre-historic times, giving an

¹¹ Buchanan and Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress*, 396; Henrich, *The Secrets of Our success*, 2015.

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advantage to tribes that could modulate their aggression to outsiders¹². A second possibility explored by the authors is that the dynamic environmental context of the late Pleistocene favored tribes that were able to modulate the inclusivity of their morality, dissolving and rebuilding certain social groups (tribes and even family) according to resource abundance.¹³ Buchanan and Powell dismiss Peter Singer's explanation that morality is adaptive because it is based on reason, which would work independently from material evolutionary pressures. The problem with Singer's theory, according to the authors, is that it is unable to explain why morality sometimes stops progressing for large periods of time and even regresses to a more exclusive kind at times.¹⁴

The theory of moral progress presented by Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell in *The Evolution of Moral Progress* presents a novel naturalistic understanding of morality that gives an important role to the context in which it develops, rekindling interest in the role institutions play on the morality of people. Since the publication of this book in 2018, many articles have been written in response to the theory of plastic morality and Allen Buchanan has continued to publish on this subject.¹⁵ This avenue of research is particularly promising at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic continues to

¹² Buchanan and Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress*, 134

¹³ Buchanan and Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress*, 134

¹⁴ Buchanan and Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress*, 148

¹⁵ Allen Buchanan, *Our Moral Fate: Evolution and the Escape from Tribalism* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020).

exacerbate the prevalence and intensity of sickness and resource scarcity cues. Indeed, the last few months have been marked by an eruption of anti-social behaviour, ranging from individuals hoarding essential goods, to governments halting mask and vaccine exports. Beyond the economic and sanitary advantages associated with, for example, a responsible reopening of borders or a distribution of vaccines based on necessity, pursuing these policies may also prevent increases in xenophobia, selfishness, and the breakdown of social cohesion. Having witnessed the lack of international leadership and solidarity throughout the pandemic, now more than ever we must seriously consider the effect that our policies may have on the morality of citizens.

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