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Précis: *Our Moral Fate: Evolution And The Escape From Tribalism*

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Abstract: The book uses evolutionary principles to explain tribalism, a way of thinking and acting that divides the world into Us versus Them and achieves cooperation within a group at the expense of erecting insuperable obstacles to cooperation among groups. Tribalism represents political controversies as supreme emergencies in which ordinary moral constraints do not apply and as zero-sum, winner take all contests. Tribalism not only undermines democracy by ruling out compromise, bargaining, and respect for the Other; it also reverses one of the most important milestones of progress in how we understand morality: the insight that morality is not a list of commands to be unthinkingly followed, but rather that morality centrally involves the giving and taking of reasons among equals. Tribalism rejects this insight by branding the Other as a being who is incapable of reasoning.

Keywords: evolution of morality, biocultural theory, cooperation, environment of evolutionary adaptation, inclusive morality, ideology

This is a book about the evolutionary roots of tribalism, but also a contribution to the literature on naturalistic theories of large-scale moral change, including change that is reasonably regarded as moral progress. It builds upon *The Evolution of Moral Progress: a Biocultural Theory*, by Allen Buchanan/Russell Powell (2019). *Our Moral Fate* fills in gaps in some of the key arguments in *The Evolution of Moral Progress*, in particular by providing a better account of the social-epistemic conditions and moral psychology that contribute to large-scale moral change. But it also develops a naturalistic theory of ideology that characterizes ideology as an adaptation for competition among groups under modern conditions and explains the evolutionary roots of this phenomenon. Finally, *Our Moral Fate* defends a new thesis: if we come know enough about how particular environments interact with the moral mind—the set of cognitive and affective capacities that enable humans to have moralities that are more robust and flexible than the moralities (or proto-

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moralties) of some nonhuman animals, then in principle we can deliberately shape the moralities that are dominant in our societies and our own moral identities as well. Human beings are not condemned to tribalism. The plasticity of the moral mind when taken together with the human ability to create different environments that influence in different ways how the moral mind functions place us in a position of great potential freedom: in principle we can shape the kind of morality that is predominant in our society and the shape of our moral identities.

The central strategy of the book is to provide an analysis of one large-scale moral change, extract some general conditions for moral change from this analysis, and then use that knowledge to develop an account of how human beings could take charge of their moral fate—that is, how they can use ‘moral institutional design’ to optimize the progressive possibilities of their evolved moral psychology. The example of large-scale moral change examined in the book is the development of more inclusive moralities among some people, in some societies, roughly in the last three hundred years. Inclusiveness here encompasses the Two Great Expansions of the circle of moral regard: the acknowledgement of the equal basic moral status of all persons and the recognition that at least some nonhuman animals have moral standing, that is, are objects of moral concern in their own right. Only recently have these two moral insights been significantly realized, not just in the thinking of many people, but in their actual behavior and in the character of law and institutions.

The *Introduction* documents the prevalence of two dogmas, the Cooperation Dogma and the Tribalism Dogma that pose serious obstacles to thinking clearly about moral change. The Cooperation Dogma is the view that morality is a type of cooperation, with the implication that everything of importance about morality can be explained by the thesis that morality is a type of cooperation (or only functions to facilitate cooperation). The Tribalism Dogma is the view that human beings are ‘hard-wired’ for exclusive (tribalistic) moralities, with the implication that moral change in the direction of inclusion is either illusory or severely limited and unstable. The problem with the Cooperation Dogma is that it conflates the original function of morality (cooperation) with morality. I argue that under favorable conditions created quite recently by human niche construction, moralities can be and in fact have become much more than social tools for facilitating cooperation within a group. The tribalism doctrine is shown to rest on a confusion between the moral mind (our basic evolved moral psychology) and its varying expressions in different environments. Even if the capacities that constitute the moral mind have, through most of the life of our species, been expressed in tribalistic moralities, that does not mean that the moral mind itself is tribalistic. Instead, as I argue, the moral mind is highly flexible, capable of underwriting either exclusive or inclusive moralities, depending on the environment. If the environment has changed greatly

and in the right ways, then non-tribalistic, that is inclusive moral response become possible.

Chapter One describes large-scale moral change in the direction of inclusion, noting that while some of the ideas (for example, of human equality) it involves occurred much earlier, these ideas came to have a significant impact on law, institutions, and general social practices only recently. The emphasis here is that there have already been very costly efforts to implement the notions of the equal basic moral status of all persons and of the moral standing of some nonhuman animals. Although both of the Two Great Expansions are far from fully realized, they are much more than mere aspirations.

Chapter Two articulates the Big Puzzle: given that the standard evolutionary account of the emergence of distinctively human moralities represent human beings as essentially tribalistic, how could a large-scale moral change in the direction of greater inclusion occur? The standard account depicts human morality as the product of natural selection in the harsh conditions of the middle to late Pleistocene, around 400,000 years ago, in the so-called Environment of Evolutionary Adaptation (EEA). On this view, the selective pressures for the development of a moral psychology that fostered thick moral relations among members of small, widely scattered foraging (hunter-gatherer) groups, also promoted xenophobia, hostility, distrust, and preemptive aggression toward outgroups. If that account is correct, it is hard to see how human beings could develop inclusive moralities. The Two Great Expansions seem to be inexplicable anomalies. That is the Big Puzzle.

Chapter Three examines and finds wanting several attempts to solve the big puzzle: (1) the thesis that the circle of moral regard expands because the domain of cooperation expands (Kitcher and others), (2) the thesis the circle of moral regard expands when disadvantaged groups of humans cause disruptions that require adjustments in social practices and institutions that are responsive to the interests of the previously disadvantaged, and (3) the thesis that greater inclusion results from moral consistency reasoning. (1) fails because it cannot explain either the Second Great Expansion (the extension of moral regard to creatures who can never be participants in cooperation with us) or the fact that the moralities of some contemporary human beings include the idea of human rights, rights persons have simply as persons, independently of whether they can participate in cooperation. With respect to (3) I show that although moral consistency reasoning did play a role in the Two Great Expansions, it cannot be effective unless a complex set of social-epistemic conditions are present and that merely pointing to the capacity for moral consistency reasoning fails to explain why moral consistency reasoning only helped facilitate greater inclusion quite recently and does not address the fact that moral consistency reasoning sometimes puts the stamp of approval on exclusion

because it assumes mistaken views about which characteristics are relevant to moral status.

Chapter Four offers a revisionist history of the EEA. Here I argue that the standard account of the EEA that presents the moral mind as essentially tribalistic and hence generates the Big Puzzle is over-simplified. There was not one EEA: in different areas and at different times the force of selective forces favoring tribalism varied. In some cases, there were opportunities for peaceful, mutually beneficial relations among groups (in the form of long-distance trade and out-marrying), and a moral psychology that was flexible enough to allow humans to take advantage of these opportunities would have had an advantage in terms of reproductive fitness. The conclusion of this chapter is that rather than being hard-wired for exclusion, that is, being essentially tribalistic, humans evolved an adaptive plasticity: the capacity to respond either in an exclusionary way or in an inclusive way, depending on the environment.

Chapter Five, building on the conclusion of Chapter Four, develops the first piece of the solution to the Big Puzzle: the concept of Surplus Reproductive Success. The simple but powerful idea is that through their knack for niche-construction (which is grounded in the capacity for cumulative culture), humans became so successful that morality became unshackled from the demands of reproductive fitness. In effect, once surplus reproductive success was achieved, the development of more inclusive moralities became affordable, both in terms of reproductive fitness and in material terms.

Chapter Six explains the complex set of factors that had to be in place for people to use the opportunity provided by surplus reproductive success to develop inclusive moralities. Here I argue that the coming together of a set of conditions—including mass literacy, great increases in material well-being, and the development of a culture of reason-giving that was conducive to changes in moral identities—facilitated the Two Great Expansions. This chapter also includes a theory of ‘moral pioneers’ that explains how some people can become leaders in morally progressive change without having to be saints.

Chapter Seven uses the same theory of how progressive moral change in the direction of inclusion to explain regression to tribalistic moralities. The key idea is that if enough people find themselves in harsh conditions like those that were common in the EEA or believe themselves to be in such conditions, then they will tend to exhibit tribalistic moral responses. This chapter also explains how those who foment tribalism typically employ a folk psychology that implicitly recognizes the particular threat cues that provoke tribalistic responses.

Chapter Eight explains how tribalistic moral responses, which originally were directed toward members of other societies, can target groups within one’s own society. I argue that ideologies exploit the tribalistic capacities of our evolved

moral psychology and serve to facilitate cooperation within the group, but at the expense of erecting formidable obstacles to cooperating with outgroups. This chapter advances the thesis that ideologies are a product of cultural selection under conditions in which groups within society are in competition for power, social influence, political control, and economic dominance. I also argue that both tribalistic ideologies and democracy are adaptations for cooperation within groups for the sake of competition with other groups and that it may well be that tribalistic moralities are driving democracy to extinction—that is, that cultural selective forces are favoring tribalism at the expense of democracy.

Chapter Nine summarizes the main argument of the book and then goes on to argue that humanity may eventually be able to take charge of its moral fate—that if we come to know enough about how the capacities that constitute the moral mind get expressed differently in different environments, we may be able, through our formidable powers of niche-construction, to create environments that are unfavorable to tribalistic moralities and favorable to inclusive ones. I conclude that if successful, this project would be an exceptional form of creativity and perhaps the highest expression of human autonomy.