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# THE EVOLUTION OF MORAL PROGRESS: A BIOCULTURAL THEORY

ALLEN BUCHANAN AND RUSSELL POWELL

Reviewed by Michael Brownstein and Daniel Kelly

*The Evolution of Moral Progress: A Biocultural Theory*

Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, £25.99

ISBN 9780190868413

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Trend-spotters will have noticed a resurgence of interest in the idea of moral progress. The topic has been resuscitated in no small part by contemporary theorists from a range of disciplines who have improved on earlier theories of moral progress by naturalizing them. *A priori* pronouncements about the inevitability of moral progress have been replaced by deep dives into the contemporary sciences of the mind and discussions of macro-scale economic and public health trends (for example, Jamieson [2002], [2017]; Pinker [2012], [2018]; Singer [2011]; Moody-Adams [2017]).

Allen Buchanan and Russel Powell's *The Evolution of Moral Progress* (EMP) is likely to become a landmark in this resurgence. It adeptly builds on much of the recent empirical work, weaving it together with philosophical material drawn from a series of essays published by the two authors. EMP makes the case that moral progress is not only consistent with human psychology but—under some conditions—likely. At its heart is a careful, well-developed rebuttal to the idea that there are evolved constraints endogenous to human minds that place significant limits on various forms of moral progress, especially on the spread and sustainability of inclusive values. The alternative picture they present acknowledges that evolutionary history has shaped how our minds produce behaviour, but emphasizes that the contexts in which they currently operate are just as pivotal. While safe and stable ecological and social circumstances are hospitable to cosmopolitanism and encouraging of inclusive values, dangerous and threatening circumstances are more favourable to parochialism, exclusivist values, and morally regressive outgroup hostility (also see Buchanan and Powell [2015], [2016], [2017]). Overall, EMP is a compelling, well-researched, and timely book. It articulates arguably the most persuasive naturalistic theory of moral progress to date, and lays the groundwork for important and impactful research.

The significance that Buchanan and Powell accord to both endogenous constraints and external circumstances takes more defined shape in their 'biocultural' theory of moral progress. This is the core contribution of the book, and it is designed to

dispel the challenge to the sustainability of inclusivist-based forms of moral progress mounted by 'evoconservatives', so called because they draw on evolutionary considerations to support prescriptive conclusions traditionally associated with political conservatism. Evoconservatives (for example, Fukuyama [2002]; Arnhart [2005]; Asma [2012]; Haidt [2012]) argue that the 'groupishness' of evolved human moral psychology imposes unavoidable constraints on the human capacity for inclusivity, and thus on humans' ability to extend moral consideration to groups of people beyond their own (and also to non-human animals, plants, the environment as a whole, and so on). In short, evoconservatives hold that there are limits, rooted in how our minds work, to how far human groups can expand the moral circle. Our penchant for inclusion is not unbounded, but is rather strongly attuned to racial, ethnic, gender, or species-based markers of membership in our own parochial 'moral community'.

Buchanan and Powell's main complaint about evoconservatism is that it fails to appreciate the extent to which human minds are 'adaptively plastic', and so fails to appreciate that they can support both moral regression and sustained moral progress. Their argument for this claim turns on the 'evolutionary developmental' (p. 188) picture they describe thus:

Our central hypothesis is that exclusivist morality is like flea armor—the result of an adaptively plastic 'toggle' that is keyed in to cues of out-group threat that are detected in the environment in which individuals and cultures develop and evolve together. More precisely, exclusivist moral response is a conditionally expressed trait that develops only when cues that were in the past reliably correlated with out-group predation, exploitation, competition for resources, and disease transmission are detected. (p. 189)

Call this the 'adaptive plasticity model' (cf. Tooby and Cosmides [1992] on evoked culture). According to it, patterns of behavioural variation (for example, 'exclusivist moral response') are the result of the way innate features of the human mind (the bio part of their biocultural theory) interact with different external conditions (the cultural part) to evoke different families of behaviour. When external conditions, broadly conceived as including ecological, social, economic, and political conditions, are harsh and threatening—or, crucially, when they are perceived to be—exclusivist psychological dispositions are triggered, making parochial judgements

and xenophobic behaviours more common. Thus, the moral circle shrinks. Inversely, when environmental conditions are relatively secure, exclusivist dispositions remain dormant, inclusivist psychological dispositions are evoked, and the moral circle can expand.

Part I of the book carefully sets the stage on which Buchanan and Powell's quarrel with evoconservatists will play out. These first 115 or so pages do a commendably thorough job canvassing the relevant conceptual landscape and detailing criticisms of nearby theories, though they are at times almost aggressively meticulous; we found ourselves impatient to get to the authors' positive view. Particularly useful here is Buchanan and Powell's list of putatively uncontroversial examples of moral progress, provided to initially delineate the kinds of phenomena they take to be the proper subject matter of their theory. Also noteworthy are discussions of the pros and cons of metrics of moral progress other than inclusivity, and of the meta-ethics of assertions about what is and isn't progress. They end with a defence of their favoured 'pluralistic dynamic conception' of progress, designed to accommodate multiple forms of moral advance, including those that we may only come to appreciate in the future.

EMP's Part II makes the central case for the biocultural theory and its superiority over evoconservatism. Near the end of this, Buchanan and Powell also describe and critique a second strand of evoconservative thought. This second strand is characterized in terms of 'de-moralization', the process by which behaviours like masturbation, once thought to be morally wrong, come to be seen as morally permissible or even good. Evoconservatives see demoralization as hubristic, stressing our incomplete understanding of the wisdom baked into traditions. They also see it as risky, and employ a 'house of cards' metaphor to argue that demoralization can have unforeseen but catastrophic consequences. Buchanan and Powell argue instead that demoralization can be an important form of moral progress itself, especially when it unshackles us from 'surplus moral constraints' and unwarranted limitations on liberty.

In Part III, 'The Pathway Traveled and the Way Forward', Buchanan and Powell offer lengthy analysis of the modern human rights movement, focusing on its significance as an example of moral progress and showing how the biocultural account explains why it arose when it did. They also consider, and largely reject, the idea that moral progress will be made through reengineering human moral

psychology using biomedical moral enhancements. The book ends with a forward-looking chapter on the future of morality, and a short postscript that gathers and reiterates their reasons, scattered throughout the book, for being sceptical that moral progress can be explained by theories of cultural evolution.

Least controversial among Buchanan and Powell's central claims, in our view, is that there has been massive and meaningful global improvement in areas of human life that clearly bear on morality, such as murder rates, education, infectious diseases, poverty, and so on. They also persuasively tie many of these trends to the spread of inclusivist values, which centre on the core idea that all humans (and maybe also some non-humans) are deserving of similar moral consideration. Evidence of communities and nations expanding their moral circle beyond parochial boundaries has been well documented. It is seen—imperfect though all these examples are—in the dramatic worldwide reduction of legalized slavery over the past several centuries, the enfranchisement of women and non-white adults in countries like the United States, and the modern human rights movement.

However, a stark opposition between and the moral virtues of inclusivity and the moral vices of exclusivity distorts a picture that is both more complicated and more interesting. A richer set of distinctions will help illuminate the relevant possibilities. Use 'local' as a more evaluatively neutral term to pick out special concerns a person has for specific individuals, groups, and entities: her family, her close friends, her acquaintances from work and around her neighbourhood, even the fellow fans of her favourite bands and sports teams. **Local concerns, by definition, fall short of broad inclusivity;** they are not allocated equally to all morally significant entities. And yet these concerns are not in themselves intrinsically morally corrupt. It does seem undeniable that localism can go wrong, especially in extreme forms or when it crowds out other values and leads to parochialism, xenophobia, and worse. But this shouldn't discredit local values altogether. Satisfying local concerns appears to be crucial to leading a good life. They stand at the centre of a nexus of things that make human lives worth living: being able to nurture familial bonds, developing fulfilling personal relationships, cultivating close knit communities, and creating a meaningful social identity.

There is ample evidence from multiple disciplines that these kinds of connections to specific roles, communities, traditions, people, and places are central to human

flourishing. To choose a representative study, Diener and colleagues ([2018]) culled data regarding subjective well-being—life evaluation and positive and negative feelings about one's life—from the Gallup World Poll of 1,551,262 respondents from 166 nations between 2005 and 2015. Dividing respondents into three groups—the very happy, the moderately happy, and the unhappy—they found that **strong social relationships are 'virtually necessary' for high happiness.** Among other things, people with strong social relationships are those who spend more time with their friends and family, and who say that they can count on someone to help when they're in trouble.

Diener and colleagues are careful to say that strong social relationships are necessary, but not sufficient, for being very happy. Basic (but not high) material wealth and being treated with respect are also strongly associated with subjective well-being (also see Tiberius [2008]). But this points to a crucial question: **those stable and secure environmental conditions in which inclusive values have spread over the past several centuries are the same conditions that have seen the growth of macro-institutions like nation-states, international corporations, and global markets. What is the relationship between these conditions, values, and institutions, on the one hand, and the possibilities for local social attachments and human flourishing, on the other?** It's complicated, of course, but there is an increasingly plausible case that the rise and dominance of such macro-institutions, at least in their current form, has destabilized the smaller scale communities they have encompassed, exerting a corrosive effect on the kinds of social relationships that once thrived there. These are the very social relationships that researchers like Diener and colleagues demonstrate are central to a well-led life. (For recent discussions of these trends from an economic point of view, see Rajan [2019]; Smith and Wilson [2019]). In a sense, this vindicates one of Buchanan and Powell's main points: given how human minds have evolved, circumstances and external conditions matter! But it also illustrates that some circumstances congenial to the **scale and spread of inclusivist values may at the same time be inhospitable to local**

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It is important to distinguish our concern from two nearby ones. First, EMP addresses the 'moral degeneration thesis', which is the idea, typically associated with people like Rousseau, Montaigne, and Alasdair MacIntyre, that modern

Western societies have lost their pre-modern agreement about virtues and goodness, and so much the worse for modern Western societies. Buchanan and Powell more or less dismiss the worry about moral degeneration, arguing that it is based on idealized, inaccurate history. But this is not quite the localist objection as we mean it. Our worry is not that small, rural, or even pre-modern societies were better than modern societies. Rather, it is that there are features of a good life—family, social relationships, community, meaningful identity, and so on—that make a strong claim to be moral in nature but that are largely left out of the story EMP tells. There is reason to think, in other words, that moral progress along the dimensions on which Buchanan and Powell focus can be accompanied by moral regression along more locally oriented ones. We say global moral progress can be tied to local moral regression, but it needn't. This is the second concern adjacent to, but distinct from, ours. While our point bears resemblance to the Romantic backlash to Enlightenment rationalism, we're not suggesting that the global and the local are necessarily in tension. But there is good reason to think that the particular constellation of social and economic forces that have given rise to key instances of moral progress—most recently, neoliberalism, globalization, and so on—have also disrupted communities and local attachments that matter, and whose significance is moral.

Our emphasis on the local may be less an objection than an expression of caution. It is certainly a call for more attention to these features of human flourishing and to the ways that moral progress in Buchanan and Powell's sense may, or may not, augur well for them. In a review of (Pinker [2018]), Alison Gopnik ([2018]) has expressed similar concerns with characteristic eloquence:

[These local] attachments [...] are as central to human life as the individualist, rationalist, universalist values of classic Enlightenment utilitarianism. If the case for reason, science, humanism, and progress is really going to be convincing—if it's going to amount to more than preaching to the choir—it will have to speak to a wider spectrum of listeners, a more inclusive conception of flourishing, a broader palette of values.

Both Buchanan and Powell's biocultural theory and our localist concerns see questions about morally significant change as being most fruitfully addressed in light of state of the art, empirically informed theories of how human minds interact

with their ecological and cultural circumstances. The adaptive plasticity model plants the flag of evolutionarily informed psychology squarely between two long-standing dogmatisms about the fundamental driver of history, individual minds (think Freud) and social conditions (think Marx). In this way, the biocultural theory is in step with other welcome trends. For example, in personality psychology, 'interactionism' about individual differences and social factors has more or less replaced stale debates about 'the person' versus 'the situation'. Personality consists of differences between how individuals react to situations, rather than general, context-free individual differences (for example, Doris [2002]; Fleeson [2004]). Similarly, geneticists traditionally sought to trace changes to and variation in the phenotypes of organisms more or less directly to differences in their genotypes. Today, exciting work in epigenetics sees a much larger role for the environment in which organisms develop, and focuses attention on how different environments can elicit various phenotypic expressions from the same genetic code (for example, Jablonka and Lamb [2005]; Weinhold [2006]).

So the biocultural theory is a clear and welcome advance over many previous ways of thinking about moral progress. Indeed, we are advocates for advances in this direction, and would be delighted to see more integration of moral theory with empirical and evolutionary thought. Not unrelatedly, however, we remain unconvinced by Buchanan and Powell's dismissal of cultural evolutionary explanations of moral progress, which they dislike for being 'inattentive to normative reflection', and thus unable to explain 'the most momentous cultural changes in the direction of greater inclusivity' (p. 399). Two points on this. First, they correctly see that their biocultural theory is not a theory of cultural evolution, and that there is nothing logically inconsistent in advancing the former while remaining sceptical of the latter. Theories of cultural evolution go beyond simply acknowledging the importance of culture and context in explaining human behaviour. Rather, they see culture itself as evolving. Culture is construed as a body of information—ideas, preferences, behaviours, skills, norms, technologies—whose composition changes as it transmitted across populations and generations. Theorists attempt to understand the features and dynamics of changes in culture by appeal to the operation of a host of selection pressures, many of which are themselves rooted in human psychology (for example, Sperber [1996]; Morin [2016]; Henrich [2016]; also see Lewens [2016]; Sterelny [2017]).



We believe that the kinds of resources that cultural evolutionary theorists have developed to study human behaviour and changes in culture (both progressive and regressive) will be indispensable for explaining the emergence of the larger social, cultural, and institutional conditions that enabled the more recent, 'momentous' episodes of moral progress on which EMP focuses. From a historical point of view, not to mention an evolutionary one, recent landmark examples of inclusivist moral progress—the birth and victories of British abolitionism or the global human rights movement—can look like near overnight successes. But it is a cliché that such appearances can be deceiving, and it is more likely that these 'overnight' successes were enormously complex phenomena that were millennia in the making. From our perspective, these episodes, momentous as they were, took place within ecological, social, and political contexts that cultural evolutionary processes had previously assembled over the course of thousands of generations of individual human lives. These contexts were structured by the fruits of those cultural evolution processes, including accumulated intellectual capital, technological wherewithal, and, perhaps most importantly, complexes of norms and informal institutions that had themselves been successful, managing to survive, take root, and proliferate. Cultural evolutionary theories can help shed light on these developments and enabling conditions in a way that biocultural theories cannot.

Second, Buchanan and Powell's dismissal of cultural evolutionary theories is informed by the great emphasis they place on reflection and what they call "'open-ended normativity": the capacity to make explicit the norms one has hitherto been following and subject them to rational criticism and revision' (p. 147). They see this as the core engine of the episodes of moral progress in which they are interested, and moreover they distinguish EMP from theories of cultural evolution along these lines. Cases of the spread of inclusive values that are due to cultural evolutionary processes and that do not involve explicit normative reasoning would not count as cases of moral progress proper, according to EMP.

To us, this outlook is overly intellectualized and curiously limiting. We do not see why social change should only count as moral progress proper if it stems from a specific kind of normative reasoning. As just noted, even in those cases reasoning will be but one of a much larger set of interesting and relevant factors. But even granting their way of delineating the explanatory target, their argument that

cultural evolution is unequipped to help explain it is unconvincing. Indeed, explicit normative reasoning of the sort they prize is an instance of a phenomenon that cultural evolutionists have integrated into their theories as 'guided variation'. Guided variation is an important source of novelty, of the new ideas, norms, behaviours, and so forth that cultural evolutionary pressures then filter. Crucially, since it produces innovations in a way that is guided by intention and foresight, it is a key way cultural evolution differs from genetic evolution (Richerson and Boyd [2005]; especially Chapter 3). So cultural evolutionary theories in particular have important resources to offer that other ways of applying evolutionary thought to human behaviour lack. The framework can accommodate Buchanan and Powell's favoured normative reasoning alongside its other theoretical tools (Richerson and Henrich [2012]; Richerson *et al.* [2016]), and so need not be rejected.

Finally, despite EMP's more-or-less rosy depiction of the overall state of moral progress through recent history, we were surprised that there was not more extensive discussion of one ominous possibility in particular. If the biocultural theory is on the right track, climate change has the potential to be an unmitigated disaster for moral progress. Not only does climate change threaten the actual material security of much of the world's population, but the dramatic weather events and social upheavals likely to follow in its wake seem tailor-made to create the perception of even harsher conditions. We hope research as careful and thorough as Buchanan and Powell's will address how to most effectively stave off the kind of spiraling moral regression that could ensue.

EMP provides an excellent platform on which to do it. The book ends with a useful list of questions for future research, to which we would add our concerns about cultural evolutionary theories and moral localism. Perhaps today's evident tension between the global and the local is merely an accident of history, and there are stable institutional arrangements, accessible from where we are, that could promote both macro-level progress and local social bonds. By continuing to improve our understanding of the psychological, cultural, economic, and political factors involved—which EMP has helped us to do—we might better understand the trade-offs we face, which can in turn help guide us in designing global institutions that are both hospitable to inclusivity and are more humane than the ones we have now.

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