

Our Moral Fate

Allen Buchanan

© 2020 The Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Buchanan, Allen E., 1948– author.

Title: Our moral fate : evolution and the escape from tribalism / Allen Buchanan, The MIT Press.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019025836 | ISBN 9780262043748 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780262357876 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Ethics—History. | Progress—Moral and ethical aspects.

Classification: LCC BJ71 .B83 2020 | DDC 170—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019025836>

The Big Puzzle: How Could a Tribalistic Great Ape Species Ever Develop Inclusive Moralities?

Origins Stories Old and New

According to Navajo tradition, their own tribe and all others were late arrivals in the complicated process of creation, which involved at least four distinct worlds, one appearing after the other. According to the creation story contemporary Christian fundamentalists endorse, God didn't begin with human beings, either. Yet even when creation stories don't say that things started with human beings, they typically reserve a special place for them, at least for those human beings who are thought to be ancestors of the particular group whose creation story it is. Traditional creation stories that give a special place to the first appearance of human beings typically highlight how they differ from other creatures.

Evolutionary creation stories are no different: they present the first appearance of human beings as a late development in the history of life on planet Earth, and they attempt to explain how we differ from other creatures that were forged by evolutionary forces and with whom we share a common ancestor. Evolutionary scientists think that a big part of what is distinctive about humans is that they have a robust, complex morality. So it's no surprise that their creation story includes an account of how our particular branch of the primate tree became the peculiarly moral creatures we are.

Why the Origins of Human Moralities Matter

What if you aren't an evolutionary scientist; why should *you* take seriously the idea that morality is the kind of thing that is apt for

evolutionary explanation? I've already given one reason: if you want to understand tribalism to combat it effectively, and if you recognize that tribalism is a kind of morality, then you should want to find out what science has to say about human morality, and that will include exploring what evolutionary scientists who study "moral origins" can tell us.

There are several other good reasons. First, the tiny minority of sociopaths aside, morality is ubiquitous among human beings and as far as we know always has been; but no other creatures on our planet, including our nearest primate relatives, have anything approaching a morality that is as complex and powerful as ours. So we need an explanation of why, even though we share a common ancestor with chimps and bonobos, we came to have the sort of moralities we have and they lack. Unless you believe in a special creation by some supernatural being or in some other creation story that denies that common primate ancestry, the explanation of the difference would have to be an evolutionary explanation: as Darwin puts it, a story of "descent [from a common ancestor] with modification" (Darwin 2003, 335).

Second, as I've already noted, what distinguishes human beings from all other living creatures is that we are *supercooperators* and, unlike social insects, highly flexible cooperators who are constantly and rapidly developing new, more complex forms of cooperation. In his intriguing and instructive book *The Secret of Our Success: How Culture Is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter*, the star cultural evolutionary theorist Joseph Henrich emphasizes that we have outcompeted all other species because we are supercooperators (Henrich 2015, 11). The fact that we alone are supercooperators cries out for an explanation.

Henrich emphasizes that we are highly flexible cooperators because we have *cumulative culture*—which I defined earlier as the ability to pass on information, ideas, skills, techniques, and technologies across the generations and to continue to combine and recombine them and build on them in new ways. So far as we know, no other animals have cumulative culture.

Our being flexible supercooperators depends crucially on one central aspect of our cumulative culture: morality. To be superco-

operators, we have to be able to regulate our interactions with one another according to moral rules, to have moral motivations (sympathy, a sense of fairness, and indignation or disgust when people violate moral rules), and we have to be able to apply moral rules to new situations, which requires moral judgment and moral reasoning. In their brilliant book *A Cooperative Species*, cultural evolutionary theorists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis show that, without morality of that rich sort, we couldn't coordinate with one another in the flexible, highly complicated ways that make us supercooperators (Bowles and Gintis 2013, 3–4).

A moment's reflection makes it clear that virtually all human cooperation—unless it's based solely on some people forcibly dominating others, an extremely anemic sort of “cooperation,” if you can call it that—requires all or at least most participants in cooperation to act morally to some extent. Successful cooperation requires that cooperators restrain the pursuit of their own self-interest, do their allotted share of the needed work rather than shirking, defer immediate gratification for the sake of achieving common goals that take time to achieve, and be willing to bear some costs in helping ensure that the rules are followed, where this can include punishing violators.

Successful cooperation of the sort that humans engage in requires *reliable partner choice*, the ability to decide whom to cooperate with. Individuals must be able both to discern who is a reliable potential partner in cooperation and to signal to others that they are themselves reliable partners. Across a wide range of environments, both of these skills are conducive to an individual's reproductive fitness: if you are good at choosing reliable partners in cooperation, then you will thrive or at least survive; if you are not, you'll be exploited by free riders or fail to achieve the goals of cooperation because your partner isn't up to making his contribution to cooperation. If you're good at signaling to others that you are a reliable partner, you'll be included in their cooperative endeavors and reap a share of the benefits; if you fail to convince others you are reliable, you'll be shunned, excluded from cooperation and the benefits it yields.

Evolutionary thinkers have recently argued—persuasively, in my opinion—that much of our basic moral psychology came to be

because of its contribution to solving the problems of reliable partner choice, reliable partner signaling, and partner control (to make sure our partners don't lapse into free riding or try to dominate us, taking more than their share of what we produce together). Choosing reliable partners requires ascertaining whether they are committed to following moral rules, and signaling that you are a reliable partner requires convincing others that you do so. That means convincing them that you're moral.

Being Supercooperators Makes Us Distinctive; Moralities Make Us Supercooperators

So if you want to understand why humans are supercooperators, so good at cooperation that they have come to dominate the planet, you need to understand why humans came to have the rich sort of moralities that they alone possess. And to do that, you need to understand why and how such moralities came into existence among us and not among other creatures, including those with whom we share a common, fairly recent primate ancestor. In other words, you need an *evolutionary* explanation of the origins of human moralities. And if you also think, quite reasonably, that the evolutionary origins of things have some implications for what moralities are like, then you'll also assume that studying the evolutionary beginnings of morality can tell us something important about moralities as they exist today and even about what they might become in the future (Joyce 2006, 222–230).

We have another reason to try to discover the evolutionary origins of human moralities: the moral mind appears to be an *adaptation* (or a collection of adaptations). An adaptation is a trait that arose because it solved some problem and thereby enhanced reproductive fitness. The main way to explain something in evolutionary terms is to show that it is an adaptation. To understand what the problems were that led to the emergence of the moral mind and how human moralities solved them, we need to identify the key features of the ancient environment that created the problems that moralities helped solve. Evolutionary theorists call that the Environment of Evolutionary Adaptation, or EEA for short.

Before considering what the EEA was supposedly like, I want to emphasize a simple point: to say that something is an adaptation is to make a purely retrospective statement about it. A trait is an adaptation if and only if it *came to exist* in a species because it contributed to reproductive fitness, that is, its existence contributed to genes being passed on to the next generation (Lewontin 1978, 213, 215). Traits contribute to reproductive fitness by performing certain functions—by doing things that need to be done if the organism in question is to survive long enough to reproduce and pass on its genes.

Note that the statement “X is an adaptation” (though it’s framed in the indicative mode) is purely backward looking, a fact about the history of some species. The fact that a trait came to exist because at some point it performed a function that contributed to reproductive fitness has no implications whatsoever about whether that trait is *now* performing that function or any function that contributes to reproductive fitness. To the contrary, that trait, even though it “is” an adaptation, may *now* be reducing reproductive fitness. That would be the case, for example, if the environment in which the trait first arose was quite different from the one in which the species now finds itself.

All of this may sound like nit-picking, but it is vitally important for understanding evolution, including the evolution of human moralities. Why? Because even if moralities are adaptations—more specifically, even if they originally came to exist because they performed the function of facilitating cooperation in early human groups in ways that contributed to reproductive fitness—this is perfectly compatible with moralities no longer being limited to that function. What is more, the idea that moralities first came to exist because they contributed to reproductive fitness by facilitating cooperation in early human groups is also perfectly compatible with some features of current moralities actually reducing reproductive fitness or being “fitness neutral”—neither increasing nor decreasing fitness. Why? Because once humans have created environments in which they have solved the basic problems of survival—once they achieve surplus reproductive fitness—they can afford to act in ways that aren’t maximally conducive to reproductive fitness. More

specifically, they can afford to develop moralities that are more than just cooperation facilitators.

Avoiding Mistakes about What “Morality Is an Adaptation” Means

My main point in clarifying the notion of an adaptation is to avoid two serious mistakes: first, failing to see that to say that something is an adaptation is a strictly backward-looking statement, an assertion about why it came to be at some point in the past, not a statement about what it’s doing now; second, wrongly assuming that if something now performs a function, then knowing how it performs that function suffices to explain everything about it. The first error is pretty obvious: it’s just a matter of being fooled by the indicative mode of the phrase “is an adaptation.” The second is subtle. We make it when we fail to see that things can come to exist for all sorts of reasons, and that even in the cases where they first appeared because they performed a particular function, they can later come to perform other functions or to have effects that aren’t best described as performing functions at all.

Avoiding the second error is especially important for what I’m trying to do in this book. I want to argue that even if moralities first came to exist among humans because they performed the function of facilitating cooperation, and even if moralities still perform that function, understanding how they perform that function will not suffice for fully understanding human moralities—in particular, for understanding certain crucial aspects of some moralities as they are now, including their incorporation of the Two Great Expansions.

The Mistake of Hyperfunctionalism

One more error that people who try to think in evolutionary terms sometimes make is to commit the sin of hyperfunctionalism. This amounts to assuming not only that everything in nature has a function but also that the only adequate explanation of anything in nature is one that identifies the thing as having a function. The evolutionary version of hyperfunctionalism is to think that everything

has a function that contributes to reproductive fitness, and that the best—indeed, the only satisfying—explanation of anything is to show that it has a function that contributes to reproductive fitness.

Although nowadays it's usually dressed up in evolutionary togs, hyperfunctionalist thinking predates the Darwinian revolution. In fact, it is a kind of archaic teleological thinking to which humans seem naturally disposed, even though it should and can be resisted. It may well be a kind of anthropomorphic projection onto nature. As human beings, we like to think of ourselves as purposeful, as doing things for reasons, to accomplish certain ends. Explanations in terms of purposes are sometimes (though not always) pretty reasonable when it comes to human behavior. But our thinking goes awry if we see purposes everywhere and think that if something exists, it must have some purpose.

A paradigm case of the overuse of purposive explanations that has done enormous damage in human history and still does so in some cultures is the belief in sorcery. Until fairly recently in the long history of our species, most people were disposed to regard any serious mishap that befell them as a malicious action performed by some other human (or spirit or god) who was out to get them. If your crops died or your cow ran dry or you cut yourself with an ax, it must be because someone put a spell on you, magically manipulating you or some items in your environment. You and I take for granted that bad stuff happens for all sorts of reasons, but that's because we have the idea of impersonal causes operating without purpose or intention. That idea hasn't been pervasive until recently and it still isn't universal.

The tendency to see purposes everywhere takes on a new form when, under the influence of evolutionary discourse, people substitute "function" for "purpose," see everything in terms of supposed functions, and assume that the only good explanation of anything is to show that it performs some function. Such thinking leads them not only to assume that every trait is an adaptation—something that came to be because it performed some function (and thereby contributed to reproductive fitness)—but also to assume that everything important about the thing now must be explainable in terms of its performing some function.

That's a big mistake, first of all, because not everything is an adaptation (Brandon 1990, 9). Some things result from essentially random processes, including "genetic drift," and others are not adaptations but rather by-products of adaptations—traits that just happen to coexist with adaptations because of contingent causal relations that exist in the process of an organism's development.

Here's an example of a by-product that I think you'll remember. Apparently there has been natural selection for aggressiveness in female spotted hyenas, because more aggressive females secure more food for their pups and therefore pass on more of their genes. In other words, aggression appears to be an adaptation; it came to exist among female spotted hyenas because at some point in the past one or more females had genetic mutations (just as a matter of chance) that under the selective pressures of that environment led to higher levels of testosterone, which in turn led to greater aggression, which in turn enhanced their reproductive fitness. (Like humans and other mammals, male and female hyenas both have "female" and "male" hormones, including testosterone.)

Now it just so happens that a side effect (a causal by-product) of high testosterone levels in female spotted hyenas is hypertrophy of the clitoris—a clitoris that is at least as large as the male hyena's penis. (My students' reaction to that fact is a term they typically overuse but that may be spot-on in this case: "awesome!") If you assume that the huge clitoris exists because it must have contributed to reproductive fitness at some point back in the spotted hyena lineage or is doing so now, you are barking up the wrong tree (so to speak). You're committing the sin of hyperfunctionalism.

Sometimes the hyperfunctionalist mistake I've just identified gets combined with the second mistake I noted earlier: not only thinking that something must have come to be because it performed a certain function but also assuming that that function is still so important that, to explain what the thing is now like, all you have to do is characterize that function. In the case of morality, this would amount to thinking that if it came to be because it performed the function of facilitating cooperation and still performs that function, then everything important about morality can be explained in terms of showing how it performs that function.

Unfortunately, I think that some people who try to apply evolutionary thinking to human morality are hyperfunctionalists and make some or all of these mistakes. If I'm right, that's ironic, because it means that though they are trying to be modern and scientific and evolutionarily sophisticated, they are really thinking like prescientific folks who saw purposes everywhere, in effect anthropomorphizing the whole of reality.

The Environment of Evolutionary Adaptation (EEA)

So much for my attempt to get some basic evolutionary concepts straight and preview why doing that will turn out to be important as my thinking unfolds in this book. Now let's get back to the task at hand: understanding what the EEA, the environment in which human moralities first arose, was supposed to be like and why understanding what it was like appears to lead to the conclusion that we are morally tribalistic beings.

The EEA is defined as the set of conditions in which the basic features of human cognition and motivation, including those that make moralities possible, first emerged in our species. This crucially formative period is thought to have occurred somewhere between 1.8 million and 10,000 years ago. (Ten thousand years ago is the cutoff point because that's roughly when the Neolithic Revolution began, the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture and the domestication of animals. When that shift occurred, human life became profoundly different.)

The main features of the EEA that are supposed to be most important for the formation of the moral mind are the following: (1) There weren't many humans, and they lived in small, widely scattered groups. (2) When they encountered individuals from other groups, they were in a desperate competition for survival resources. (3) Because these groups were widely scattered, they had different immune histories, which meant that if you encountered people from another group, you might become infected with lethal pathogens (like the native peoples of the so-called New World when they came into contact with Europeans). (4) Individuals from other groups not only presented a risk of biological parasites but also could be social

parasites, free riders on your group's cooperative practices, because they hadn't internalized your group's rules and weren't bound to you by the ties of loyalty that your group's traditions and practices fostered. Or, at the very least, strangers could disrupt your group's cooperation because they simply didn't get how you do things. (5) There was little or nothing in the way of social practices or institutions to enable peaceful, mutually beneficial cooperation among different groups (no markets, no governments that united different groups under common laws, etc.). (6) Because human groups were widely scattered and had their own histories, they had different languages, different styles of bodily adornment, clothing, hairstyles, and so on, and different ways of doing the basic things that all human societies have to do to survive. Later I'll explain that these differences aren't just natural contingencies; some of them are contrived because they performed the vital function of enabling people to distinguish quickly and reliably whether someone was one of Us or not.

Some evolutionary thinkers believe that a turning point in this process of developing robust moralities as facilitators of cooperation may have occurred between 400,000 and 450,000 years ago. Around that time, the climate in which humans existed changed significantly, with the result that much of the vegetation and small game they had depended on became scarce. Some early humans adapted, first by cooperatively scavenging game killed by large predators (using simple stone tools to crack open the carcasses' large bones and skulls to extract high-calorie, protein-rich marrow and brains), and then by learning to cooperate to prey on larger, more dangerous game. To do the latter, humans needed to develop complex social coordination that enabled them to work together to find, chase down, and kill game through teamwork. The teamwork required not only ramped-up cognitive skills, including planning, forming "we" intentions rather than just individual intentions, and creating a division of labor (for example, between the individuals who funneled game into narrow gorges and those who killed them there), but also the development of rules for dividing the spoils of a successful hunt (Bowles and Gintis 2013, 2; Tomasello 2016). Moreover, the harsher new environment meant that collisions among

groups became more deadly as they competed more desperately for scarcer resources (Boehm 2000, 41; 2012, 136; Lambert 1997, 77–110).

Groups that didn't develop in these ways were unable to cope with the demands of the new environment. Groups that did were able to reproduce not just biologically but also culturally, passing on the moralities they created, with later generations solidifying and elaborating them. You and I are moral beings because we are descendants of people in the groups that survived because they developed moralities.

The Evolutionary Roots of Tribalism: Cooperation among Us, for Competition with Them

Whether the crucial change occurred in just that way at just that time may not be essential to the evolutionary explanation of the origins of human moralities. Some scientists doubt that around 400,000 years ago was a tipping point. They think it occurred considerably later, after humans had become such successful cooperators that their numbers increased, leading to more collisions among groups and more conflicts and consequently in strong selection pressures for the development of moralities that facilitated successful intergroup competition. In spite of these differences, scientists largely agree on the broader outlines of the standard evolutionary account: human moralities developed because they facilitated *cooperation within the group, including cooperation that allowed the group to compete successfully with other groups when necessary*—to avoid the threats that encounters with other groups entailed and to secure control over survival resources (Bowles 2009, 1293–1295; 2008a, 326–327; 2008b, 1605; Bowles and Gintis 2013, 2–4; Choi and Bowles 2007, 638; Joyce 2006, 21; Keeley 1996, 15, 31, 117; Richerson and Boyd 2005, 244; Sober and Wilson 1999, 79, 84). It's worth noting here that we needn't take the extreme view that moralities emerged only because they facilitated competition among groups. It's more likely that they came to be because they facilitated cooperation within the group that had nothing to do with intergroup competition *and* also because they enabled successful competition with other groups.

According to this evolutionary origins story, the basic elements of human moral psychology, like other features that were selected for in the EEA, such as the fine motor control of hand muscles that allowed toolmaking and the rotational flexibility of our shoulder joints that allowed our ancestors to bring down game with projectiles, persist to this day.

The scientific study of moralities in different societies around the world reveals great diversity, but some commonalities: every society (that lasts for any length of time) features certain general types of moral rules and practices. There are rules against killing your fellows, against taking what isn't yours, rules that require you to reciprocate when others help you at some cost to themselves, rules that specify how scarce and valuable resources are to be divided among members of the group, rules that serve to curb the tendency of stronger individuals to dominate others, rules designed to discourage free riding, and rules that not only permit but require punishments for infractions of rules (Boehm 2000, 141; Bowles and Gintis 2013, 20).

An evolutionary approach to understanding human moralities can help explain both what is common across different moralities and what is different. Remember: evolution, in the most basic sense of the concept, is descent with modification. Even if all early human groups had to solve certain problems to cooperate successfully and even if, to do so, they needed the same core moral rules, the character of the problems they faced may have varied somewhat, creating selection for different rules or different priorities among the rules.

Perhaps more important, even when groups faced the same problems, different groups found different ways of solving them equally well, or well enough, from the standpoint of reproductive fitness. Think, for example, of rules that are strictly conventional coordination devices, like the rules of the road. What's important, in any given locale, is whether we all know to drive on one side of the road; but whether it's the left or the right doesn't matter. If the problems that early human groups faced varied across different environments, and if they developed different conventional ways to solve some of them, then different groups would go down different paths in developing moralities.

Risks Humans Faced in the EEA and How They Shaped the First Moralities

As you can see from the list of EEA features, encounters with other groups posed several kinds of risks, and all were potentially lethal in that harsh environment: the risk of biological and social parasitism, the risk that the other group would expropriate your group's survival resources (chase you off your foraging grounds; steal your women, thus reducing the human resources you needed to survive; or eat you). In addition, there was the risk that if you allowed strangers into your group, their "foreign" values or ways of doing things would disrupt your cooperation and thus reduce your reproductive fitness. If they weren't simply clueless, unwitting disruptors, foreigners might be free riders, reaping the fruits of your cooperative efforts but not doing their bit.

For early human groups—hovering on the margins of subsistence—free riding was always a huge problem. Letting in foreigners only exacerbated it. Groups that developed moralities that successfully countered these threats survived and reproduced; those that didn't disappeared.

The Asymmetry of Risks and Benefits of Interacting with the Other in the EEA

So far I've identified the risks that human groups supposedly faced in the EEA if they encountered members of other groups. What about the benefits? Remember that in the EEA (according to the standard account) human cultures had not yet developed social practices and institutions for peaceful, mutually beneficial cooperation among groups. For this reason, a dramatic asymmetry existed between the risks and benefits of encountering members of other groups. The risks were great; the benefits were minimal or nonexistent. Under these conditions, risk-management strategies would have evolved and, along with them, a corresponding set of psychological and moral responses to strangers that allowed the strategies to work: fear, distrust, hostility, and preemptive aggression toward strangers (Haselton and Nettle 2006, 53).

Prehistoric Risk-Management Techniques

To implement effective risk-management strategies you would first have to be able to identify individuals, to distinguish between Us and Them. If you encountered another creature of human form on the savanna, you needed to be able to know at a glance whether he was one of Us or one of Them, because, due to the asymmetry of risks and benefits, correct identification would be a matter of life and death. Natural selection fostered cultural practices that allowed quick and easy identification, and this explains why item (6) above was a salient feature of the EEA: differences in appearance were necessary for distinguishing Us from Them.

Humans evolved not just to be able to detect such differences but also to *invent* them. Different groups developed different visible traits, everything from distinctive forms of greeting, to nose, lip, and ear piercing, to tattoos, and different modes of dress and hairstyles. Such differences were presumably adaptations: they came about because they facilitated recognizing whether someone was one of Us or one of Them, and doing that was necessary for reproductive fitness. But here's the bad news: although the easily detectable differences (such as skin color or hair texture or bodily adornment) may have been fairly reliable proxies for identifying Us versus Them in that early environment, they don't provide reliable guides to what is morally important, namely, our shared humanity in the moral sense.

We all know that humans have a history of mistaking superficial differences for morally important ones. In apartheid South Africa, a quick test the authorities used to determine whether someone was "white" or "nonwhite" was to insert a comb into the person's hair and see if it remained upright. If the comb stayed upright, the conclusion the authorities drew wasn't that you had hair with exceptional body and didn't need a volumizing shampoo; it was that you didn't have certain basic rights. The explicit conclusion was that you didn't deserve to be treated the way white people were. The implicit justification for not treating you like white people was that by being nonwhite you were inferior, perhaps not even fully human.

If the foregoing characterization of the EEA is correct, and if moralities were adaptations to cope with the problems that the

environment posed, then one would expect moralities *in that environment* to be tribalistic—exclusionary and xenophobic. Human moralities in the EEA would feature highly developed and demanding requirements so far as interactions among members of a cooperating group were concerned, but “foreigners”—out-group members—would be fair game, morally speaking, and literally as well.

Furthermore, if moralities in that environment were nothing more than adaptations that enhanced the reproductive success of the group by facilitating cooperation among its members, then one wouldn’t expect even the most moral people to regard nonhuman animals as worthy of moral consideration. Because early human groups had to work hard to subsist, and because their subsistence depended largely on exploiting animals to the fullest, one wouldn’t expect their moralities to regard the well-being of animals as having any independent moral value, apart from how well it serves human interests. Vegans or even vegetarians wouldn’t have flourished in the EEA; groups that ruthlessly exploited animals for protein and fat would have outcompeted them.

So if the standard description of the EEA is accurate, early humans would be blind both to the moral equality of all human beings and to the moral standing of nonhuman animals. The Two Great Expansions would be absent. In that environment, natural selection would have produced tribalistic moralities.

Imagining What the Environment of Evolutionary Adaptation Was Like: Hobbes’s State of Nature and *The Walking Dead*

If you want to get a firmer grip on what the EEA was supposedly like and the kind of moralities it supposedly fostered, I suggest you either read the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes’s description of “the state of nature” or view a couple of episodes of the popular television series *The Walking Dead*. These two major cultural phenomena have a lot more in common than meets the eye.

For Hobbes, the “state of nature” was the hypothesized original condition of humankind before states were created to enforce law and order and enable human beings to cooperate peacefully with one another (Hobbes 1982). Hobbes’s state of nature, like the

EEA, lacks institutions and practices for peaceful, mutually beneficial cooperation. The only big difference between Hobbes's state of nature and the EEA is that in the EEA there is at least peaceful cooperation within groups (though not among them). In contrast, Hobbes thought that in the state of nature individuals were on their own, facing a continuous war "of each against all."

In that respect, the standard description of the EEA is more realistic than Hobbes's characterization of the state of nature, because we have every reason to believe that as long as there have been humans, they have lived in cooperative groups, even if the groups were originally only as large as nuclear families. So if ruthless competition characterized the state of nature, it was mainly competition between groups.

In spite of this difference, what evolutionary theorists say about asymmetrical risk management in the EEA is precisely what Hobbes says about the state of nature: the best survival strategy is distrust and preemptive aggression toward the Other. Hobbes realizes that though that strategy is rational for each, it is disastrous for all. He concludes that so long as people remain in that EEA-like condition, there is no hope for them. Life, he famously says, will be "nasty, brutish, and short."

The only solution, according to Hobbes, is to create a "sovereign"—an individual or group of individuals who have the overwhelming might needed to impose rules of peaceful interaction so that humans can develop social practices and institutions that enable them to engage in genuine cooperation according to moral principles rather than continuing forever in a competition for dominance. But Hobbes doesn't really solve the problem of how to escape the state of nature; he limits himself to a proposal for peaceful, moral cooperation at the level of what we call the nation-state. He thinks of international relations as a state of nature, a realm of perpetual insecurity, a moral dead zone.

If seventeenth-century political theory isn't your thing, consider another way to appreciate the EEA as evolutionary moral origins stories typically depict it and the sort of moralities it would have fostered: have a look at *The Walking Dead*. Here's the nub of the plot,

for those who can't tolerate the gore. An infection of unknown origin has converted most human beings into mindless, human-flesh-eating zombies. As a result, the surviving humans exist in small, scattered groups, in an environment in which all the infrastructure of civilization has broken down. Because there are no longer any social practices or institutions that allow peaceful cooperation among groups, and because there is intense competition among groups for the meager means of survival (mainly what can be scavenged from the ruins of civilization), trust has broken down, and the rational strategy seems to be to regard every stranger as a lethal threat. The groups that survive develop robust, demanding moral bonds among their own members but tend to regard members of other groups as predators or prey. In other words, the zombie apocalypse has re-created the EEA (or the group-conflict version of Hobbes's state of nature, if you prefer).

The world of *The Walking Dead* is the EEA, but with a crucial difference: unlike our remote ancestors, the survivors in this series remember what it was like to live in a world that was friendly to inclusive moralities. Hobbes's state of nature is supposed to be what things were like *before* civilization; the world of *The Walking Dead* is the way they would be *after* civilization has been destroyed.

It's not the zombies that make *The Walking Dead* morally interesting. (They're a pretty dull lot, mindlessly wandering around looking for people to munch on, and they don't seem to have any interesting relationships among themselves other than a tendency to travel in herds.) The zombies are just a mechanism for *reintroducing* the EEA and depicting how contemporary humans might cope with it. So people who think that the only value of *The Walking Dead* is that it provides valuable instruction on a multitude of ingenious ways to dispatch zombies (on the off chance you'll ever need to do that) are missing the point. It's a marvelous primer on political theory and on evolutionary anthropology.

The genuine drama of the series is that it portrays with great pathos how hard it is for even the best-intentioned people to preserve an inclusive morality in circumstances that are profoundly hostile to it. In other words, what makes the series so interesting is

that it grapples with the very problem that I take up in chapters 7 and 8: how we can stave off regression to tribalism (or, if that isn't possible, recover from regression once it has occurred).

Evoconservatism: Pessimistic Lessons from the Origins Story

Some people who think that the correct account of the evolutionary origins of morality implies that human moral nature is tribalistic go on to draw pessimistic conclusions about the possibilities for moral progress (Buchanan and Powell 2018, 116). I call these folks “evoconservatives.” They think that because evolutionary thinking teaches us that our evolved moral nature is tribalistic, it follows that deeply inclusive morality is a pipe dream, a mere aspiration that we can never really *live*. Or they think that there are severe limits to how inclusive humans can be and that we've probably already reached them. Evoconservatism has practical consequences. It breeds pessimism about moral progress, and that can sap the motivation to try to make things better.

Because they think that inclusiveness goes against the grain of our evolved moral nature, evoconservatives also conclude that whatever meager gains in inclusivity humans may have managed to achieve are extremely fragile, not likely to endure. For example, in *The Limits of International Law*, Jack Goldsmith and Eric Posner go so far as to predict that our tribal moral nature dooms the project of creating genuinely cosmopolitan international institutions (Goldsmith and Posner 2005, 8–17). They don't explain how, if we are so tribalistic, humans could have developed moral bonds with tens of millions of fellow nationals they will never see or interact with—and be willing even to die for them in wars and other national emergencies. Nor do they explain why, if the circle of moral regard can expand that far, it can go no farther.

Evoconservatism is a pretty depressing view. So before we make the move from “morality was tribalistic in the EEA” to “morality is and always will be tribalistic,” we should think carefully about whether the inference is valid. A lot is at stake here; more specifically, the fate of human moralities is at stake.

It should be clear why the inference the evoconservatives draw is invalid and hence why it shouldn't prompt pessimism. The slide from "was in the EEA" to "is and always will be" fails to distinguish between the moral mind and its earliest expression in particular moralities—and it overlooks just how different the EEA was from the niches that multitudes of humans now occupy.

The Way Forward

Avoiding the failure to distinguish between the moral mind and the different ways its capacities can get expressed in different environments won't by itself explain how morality got more inclusive, but it demystifies the process considerably. In chapter 4, I further the demystification by offering a revisionist prehistory: I paint a more subtle picture of the origins of human moralities by offering a more nuanced view of what the EEA was like. That will enable me to draw a clear contrast between the highly plausible claim that the central features of the moral mind were fixed in the EEA and the highly dubious claim that the moral mind is so rigid that we should expect all moralities to be as tribalistic as those in the EEA supposedly were. But before that, in chapter 3, I'll work through some unsuccessful attempts to reconcile the fact that human moralities are a product of evolution with the fact that, for some of us, morality is now not so tribalistic—I'll scrutinize some notable attempts to explain the Two Great Expansions. Showing why they lead to dead ends will, I hope, convince you that, like good detectives, we need to retrace the steps of our investigation and question our starting assumption—in this case, the way we've been thinking about the ancestral environment in which distinctively human moralities first appeared.

