Our Moral Fate

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Revisionist Prehistory: Getting the Moral Origins Story Right

In the preface, I sketched my central argument, which can be stated in the following steps: (1) what sort of moralities humans have and what sort of moral agents they are depend on the character of their social environment; (2) some individuals have much more control over the character of the social environment than others; therefore (3) some individuals have much more influence over what sort of moralities we have and what sort of moral agents we are—but those individuals are utterly unaccountable for, and usually oblivious to, those momentous effects. (4) So far, humans have unwittingly created the conditions that determine their moral fate, but they may eventually learn enough about how the moral mind interacts with different social environments to exert significant control over their moral fate rather than leaving it to chance. (5) If we care about what sort of morality is predominant in our society and what sort of moral beings we are as individuals, we should develop a scientifically informed theory of moral institutional design to ensure that the social environment we inhabit is conducive to moral progress. (6) Understanding how instances of large-scale moral progress such as the Two Great Expansions occurred can provide us with valuable information about how the moral mind interacts with specific features of the social environment and can thereby provide resources for developing a theory of moral institutional design—a theory that can help us take charge of our moral fate.

In chapter 2, I drew the outlines of one particular creation story among many: the standard evolutionary explanation of the origins of human morality. According to that story, uniquely sophisticated

types of moralities, with variations among groups, emerged and spread among our remote human ancestors because they facilitated complex and powerful forms of cooperation that enhanced human reproductive fitness in the challenging conditions of the EEA. An important point to remember about that creation story is that although moralities were supposed to be a purely intragroup affair, the cooperation they facilitated within the group was important for enabling the group to compete successfully against other groups. In evolutionary terms, the natural selection pressures of that peculiar environment resulted in the moral mind being expressed in moral rules, moral motivations, and moral practices that facilitated the kind of intragroup cooperation that humans needed to engage in to survive and reproduce in that environment, including cooperation to outcompete other groups, whether through violence or other means. Given the harsh conditions of the EEA as the standard origins story characterizes them—in particular the asymmetry between the meager or nonexistent benefits a group could gain from trying to engage peacefully with strangers and the enormous risks that strangers posed—the moralities that selection produced were tribalistic, not inclusive.

Chapter 2 sharpened the distinction between tribalistic and inclusive moralities and described two large-scale moral changes—the Two Great Expansions—that not only disconfirm the thesis that humans are beings with a tribalistic moral nature but also are mysterious, given the standard evolutionary story of "moral origins." That led to the conclusion that we should question the standard evolutionary story—in particular its apparent reliance on the two un-Darwinian dogmas: the Tribalism Dogma and the Cooperation Dogma. Chapter 3 canvassed several attempts to explain how, given the standard evolutionary origin story, the circle of moral regard could have expanded. They were shown not to work: they just aren't capable of explaining the First Great Expansion and they are even worse at explaining the Second. That chapter ended with the suggestion that we need a fresh start if we are to make any headway in solving the Big Puzzle. More specifically, I said we need to go back and question the key assumptions that generated the puzzle in the first place, including the standard characterization of the EEA. Let's

do that now; let's be more critical about our initial assumptions. Here's the detective story analogy: what if the famous fictional detective Hercule Poirot came to the conclusion that he hadn't figured out who committed the murder because there was no murder?

Two Assumptions That Create the Big Puzzle

Productive backtracking requires recognizing the major landmarks on the route that led us to the Big Puzzle. One of them is the inference from "this is how morality originally evolved" to "this is how morality is (and will be)." That inference *appears* cogent if (but only if) we assume that there was *one* EEA, that the environment in which human morality arose was so *uniformly* hostile to peaceful, cooperative relations among groups that it produced beings whose moral minds were tribalistic, where this means, on the strongest formulation of the Tribalism Dogma, that inclusive moralities, if they exist at all, are deeply unstable aberrations because they are contrary to our moral nature.

I've already explained why I think that the assumption that the moral mind is dualistic is more plausible. It explains the existence of both tribalistic and inclusive moralities and the evidence of the preponderance of tribalistic moralities throughout most of human history without making the unnecessarily strong assumption that the moral mind is tribalistic—and without the awkwardness of characterizing the inclusion we do see as somehow "unnatural." But let's look more closely at the assumption that there was one EEA. This amounts to believing that *throughout* the EEA, cooperation with members of other groups would have been so detrimental from the standpoint of reproductive fitness that natural selection would have produced humans whose moral nature was thoroughly tribalistic, incapable of inclusive moral responses.

One EEA or Many?

That assumption is probably wrong. In fact, there's evidence that some cooperation among groups did occur in the EEA, though it was limited and didn't spawn deeply inclusive morality in the sense of

recognizing the equal basic moral status of all human beings. The archaeological record, when taken together with anthropological studies of contemporary hunter-gatherer peoples, indicates that there were at least two forms of cooperation among groups in the EEA: out-mating (mate selection of members of other groups) and long-distance trade (especially in materials like obsidian and quartz for making efficient, durable projectile points and tools). Some groups may have also formed military alliances with each other, but the archaeological evidence for this (so far) comes from the Mesolithic Era, somewhat later than the period in which, according to most evolutionary scientists, the moral mind supposedly first appeared.

Long-distance trade, military alliances, and out-mating are forms of intergroup cooperation. They require some limited trust of *some* humans who are not members of one's own immediate group, in this case the small hunter-gatherer group whose members lived with one another on a day-by-day basis. These forms of intergroup cooperation require recognizing others as beings who are somewhat like us—at least so far as their ability to engage in agreements and keep them is concerned. More specifically, all these forms of intergroup cooperation require the ability to recognize people from other groups (at least *some other groups*) as potential reciprocators in cooperation that involves following some basic moral rules, like "keep your promises" and "return the favor when others confer benefits on you." People who were hardwired or programmed solely for fear, distrust, and preemptive aggression toward members of other groups couldn't engage in these or any other forms of intergroup cooperation.

So, if early human groups engaged in long-distance trade and out-mating (if not also military alliances), we have good reason to assume that the EEA was not uniformly conducive to (purely) tribalistic morality. In other words, if these forms of intergroup cooperation occurred, then the moral mind was capable, even at this early point in our history, of producing moralities that were not purely tribalistic, that restricted cooperation and minimal moral regard to the level small bands of humans. Or, if you prefer, there wasn't just one EEA; there were several, and depending on which one you were in, there may have been greater or lesser opportunities for limited

cooperation among groups *and hence selective pressures for a morality that wasn't hardwired for tribalism*.

One might be tempted to conclude that some humans in the EEA exhibited a *shallowly inclusive* morality. That would only follow, however, if the limited cooperation they engaged in was not restricted to their own ethnic or cultural group. Remember, shallowly inclusive moralities involve a kind of limited moral regard for people who are not part of one's ethnic or cultural group—the kind of regard that is needed to make market relations encompassing diverse kinds of people work. It may well be that trade and out-mating among the hunter-gatherers of the EEA was restricted to coethnics—people with whom one shared a language, as well as important customs, modes of dress, bodily adornment, and so on. Or, as we might also say: these forms of intergroup cooperation occurred only among groups who shared a culture.

Anthropologists tell us that at some point, loose associations of bands came on the scene. This may have happened through a process of fission: when moralities enabled bands to cooperate so successfully that their numbers increased to the point where they began to strain local resources, subgroups split off and moved to other areas. The "parent" and "offspring" groups would often have maintained some forms of cooperation; in particular, they could unite for defense against, or aggression toward, other groups, and they might come together periodically for mate selection and trade. As long as the groups that split off maintained a common language and similar customs with the parent group, they could sustain cooperation with each other and at the same time maintain an exclusive, "tribalistic" moral attitude toward other groups, people of other ethnicities or cultures.

Such cooperation among bands didn't require complete cultural homogeneity. It could have occurred even if, as one would expect, over time some significant cultural differences developed among the bands that split off. So once human groups reached the level of associations of bands, the distinction between in-group and out-group was no longer quite so clear and stark; and consequently, the bald claim that humans are tribalistic by nature is to that extent misleading or inaccurate.

The main point, however, is that even if humans practiced limited intergroup cooperation in the EEA, it doesn't follow that they had moved from exclusive morality all the way to shallowly inclusive morality. That transition requires cooperation between different ethnic or cultural groups.

I think it's plausible to hold that tribalistic moralities were preponderant in the EEA, though humans in some locales practiced limited cooperation with other groups of the same ethnicity or culture, and that the development of shallowly inclusive morality, which enabled cooperation among more diverse groups, came considerably later—perhaps as late as the Neolithic Revolution, when large, ethnically and culturally diverse political units were forged mainly by conquest. In chapters 5 and 6, I will offer a historical narrative that places the transition to shallowly inclusive morality largely in the world in which agriculture began replacing hunting and gathering.

Why Intergroup Cooperation in the EEA Fell Short of the First Great Expansion

Whether or not long-distance trade and out-mating in the EEA still only represented instances of exclusive morality or instead encompassed diverse ethnic or cultural groups and hence count as evidence of shallowly inclusive morality, I want to emphasize a simple but major point: those two forms of cooperation are limited in two senses. First, they are not as comprehensive as the cooperation that went on within groups that lived together on a day-to-day basis; and they were episodic rather than continuous. Second, and more importantly, those forms of cooperation could be conducted successfully without either of the participating groups having achieved a *deeply inclusive morality*.

This is most obvious in the case of trade. Recognizing that members of some other group are the kinds of beings you can engage in peaceful exchanges with doesn't mean you believe they have the same basic equal moral status that you grant to yourself and members of your own group.

You might think that out-mating practices differ from trade in that respect—that to be willing to mate with someone from another group, you have to recognize them as full moral equals. Unfortunately that isn't so. Slaveholders mated with slaves even though they professed to believe slaves were less than fully human. Indeed, sexual interaction between groups occurred even in what was perhaps the most brutal form of slavery, hereditary chattel slavery as it existed in the American South.

In fact, until very recently, and then only in certain parts of certain societies, mating between male and female humans has typically been deeply patriarchal, characterized by huge power differentials and therefore status disparities. The mere existence of the practice of mating with members of other groups, even when it is marked by various sorts of rituals, doesn't mean that either member of the mating pair regards the other as a being with full basic equal moral status.

Furthermore, we have good reason to believe that in early human societies a lot of out-mating was coercive, not cooperative—organized rape conducted by men raiding other groups to capture women. Tragically, this still goes on, both in the activities of ISIS and among some indigenous people, including the Yanomami and some other tribal societies of Amazonia. Neither population genetics studies nor the commercial genetic testing company AncestryDNA can distinguish between the products of voluntary and coercive out-mating.

Nevertheless, some forms of out-mating may have come close to according the mate from another group the same status as those born into the group. This doesn't imply, however, that people who practiced that sort of relatively egalitarian out-mating had the moral concept of a human being, that they had achieved the First Great Expansion. Why? Because it's compatible with their still believing that those other groups they didn't consider suitable for mate selection are not fully human, maybe not human at all. Being willing to mate with members of *some* other groups and to accord your mate something like equal status doesn't mean you regard people of *all* groups as having equal status.

Having said that, I want to emphasize that the basic point remains: evidence of out-mating and long-distance trade suggests that different groups in "the" EEA practiced limited cooperation, and therefore that whatever the selective pressures were like in the EEA, they didn't produce moralities that only included moral norms for interaction with those who were part of a group that lived together on a day-to-day basis.

It's not hard to see why it would have been advantageous for people in the EEA (or some local variants of it) to engage in long-distance trade and out-mating. Both of these forms of intergroup cooperation could enhance a group's reproductive fitness: trading increased your stock of survival goods, and out-mating increased your population (and hence your pool of cooperators, thus increasing the probability that your cultural innovations, as well as your genes, would be preserved and passed on).

If this characterization of limited intergroup cooperation in (some parts of) the EEA is correct, we now have the beginnings of a plausible evolutionary account of how some people in the environment in which human morality initially emerged could have had something approaching, if not fully reaching, shallowly inclusive moralities. And so we also have all the more reason to believe that the moral mind was not so inflexible as to warrant the characterization "our tribal moral nature."

A New Hypothesis: The Variable Challenges of the EEA Produced an Adaptively Plastic Capacity for Moral Responses

There are two ways to argue that the selective pressures of the EEA didn't produce a tribalistic moral mind while admitting that the moral mind, under those conditions, for the most part underwrote tribalistic moralities. The first is to do what I've just begun to do: postulate that the EEA wasn't so uniformly hostile to inclusive moral responses; that in some locales there was actually selective pressure for a flexible moral response that allowed cooperation with strangers under the right circumstances (Buchanan and Powell 2018, 80). The second is simply to appeal to the general flexibility of the moral mind.

I'll opt for the first alternative for a simple reason: the second alternative is explanatorily vacuous, because just saying that the moral mind exhibits general flexibility doesn't explain why that flexibility issues in one kind of morality in certain environments and another in different environments. The second alternative can't deliver what we're after: an explanation of moral progress (or regression) in the dimension of inclusion and of the fact that human moralities vary as to inclusion versus exclusion.

So let's develop the first alternative, *the special adaptive plasticity hypothesis*. Perhaps some locales in which the earliest humans found themselves afforded opportunities for peaceful, mutually advantageous interactions, not just with other bands of the same ethnicity or culture, but with genuine strangers. For example, in cooler, drier environments, the threat of parasites from strangers wasn't so high as it was in tropical areas, so interacting with strangers wasn't as dangerous. Or resources may have been more abundant in some areas than in others, which meant competition among groups wouldn't have been so intense. In other words, some of the threat cues that trigger tribalistic responses may not have been so strong everywhere. Here I agree with the sagacious philosopher of evolutionary biology Kim Sterelny, who observes that "relations between groups were variable and contingent throughout the Pleistocene" (Sterelny 2012, 124). In other words, some locales offered opportunities for cooperation, not just for conflict.

If there were enough of these opportunities, there would have been natural selection (selection on genes) for a moral mind that allowed flexible responses to strangers: when the conditions were right for mutually beneficial cooperation, people would be able to take advantage of them; when those conditions weren't present, they would react to strangers in a hostile, tribalistic way. According to this idea, the selective forces that produced the moral mind would have resulted in it having a special kind of flexibility, the ability to relate to strangers either in a welcoming, cooperative way or with distrust, fear, and preemptive aggression.

The standard evolutionary story of moral origins in the EEA tends to present competition among groups as violent competition—war. But groups would have competed in other ways. For example, they

would have competed for members. A group that was willing to accept members of other groups—people who either left voluntarily or were kicked out or survived an epidemic or the violent destruction of the rest of their group in war—could gain strength in numbers, so long as the group was able to discern whom to let in and whom not to.

Remember, in the EEA human power was the greatest resource of all. Perhaps some groups were more welcoming than others. If they were, then, other things being equal, they would have had a reproductive advantage. Any group that was uniformly hostile toward the Other—a group whose members were "hardwired" or "programmed" for tribalism and only that—would be at a fitness disadvantage. So would any group that was promiscuously open to accepting strangers. Natural selection would favor flexibility, but discerning flexibility.

Note that a willingness to accept strangers into the group doesn't imply that groups that did so had embraced the First Great Expansion, that they regarded all humans as having an equal basic moral status, for three reasons. First, admitting strangers may have been selective: only members of certain groups, not all groups, may have been allowed in. Second, as anthropologists have documented, admission of out-group members into hunter-gatherer groups is often, perhaps always, provisional in this sense: the stranger has to demonstrate that he or she has become one of Us to be accorded full membership status. Third, admission to the group sometimes entails a permanently inferior status that cannot be overcome regardless of the stranger's efforts to assimilate. Nonetheless, admitting strangers under any of these conditions could occur only if early humans didn't have a uniformly robust exclusionary response to strangers.

That largely tribalistic moralities could develop alongside more inclusive moralities, as a result of variations in the EEA, makes it all the clearer that the moral mind is not tribalistic. One would only miss this obvious fact if one were in the grip of the two un-Darwinian dogmas, the Tribalism Dogma and the Cooperation Dogma. The whole idea of the moral mind—our moral human nature—is the idea of something that is invariant across the diversity of moralities, something that is the basis for generating different

moralities under different conditions, in response to different stimuli. The special plasticity hypothesis *explains* the variation in human moralities, from more thoroughly tribalistic to deeply inclusive, by positing that the special plasticity is a part of the moral mind itself. It is the part or aspect of the moral mind that generates either tribalistic moralities or inclusive ones, depending on the environment.

Plastic Moral Responses

Let's explore the special plasticity hypothesis further. More precisely, let's take seriously the idea that the moral mind is flexible regarding responses to strangers, because in some locales of the EEA, specific features of the environment conferred a reproductive advantage on this kind of flexibility. As I noted when I first introduced our friend the water flea, evolutionary biologists have a term for a particular kind of flexibility that exists in a lineage of organisms because at some point in the past it conferred reproductive advantage: *adaptive plasticity*. After giving the example of the water flea in the introduction, I noted that adaptive plasticity is pretty common in nature, across a wide range of organisms.

The flexibility the water flea exhibits is one-way only: if predator cues disappear from the water in which the fully developed creature lives, it does not lose its spines and helmet. The kind of flexibility that human moral psychology exhibits is two-way: people who have developed inclusive moral responses can lose them if the environment comes to resemble the EEA—or if they come to believe that it does. The same facts about human moral psychology that allow inclusive moralities to develop in certain environments also make inclusion liable to regression, if the environment changes. I'll use the phrase "adaptive plasticity" to cover this kind of two-way flexible adaptation.

Adaptive plasticities have a peculiar feature: you won't notice them if you only encounter the organism that has them in one kind of environment. Remember: if you only observe water fleas in environments that include the chemical signatures of predators, it may not occur to you that other water fleas elsewhere might not have spines and helmets. You'll think that it's in the nature of water fleas

to have these protective devices. Similarly, if for most of human history, our species has lived in environments in which their plastic capacity for moral responses only manifested itself in one way, in the form of exclusive moralities, you'll mistakenly believe that human beings are tribalistic by nature.

If humans tend to respond tribalistically to the Other in environments that mimic the harsher locales of the EEA, and if until recently most humans lived in such environments, then tribalism would be preponderant in human experience. But that is compatible with acknowledging that in less harsh environments humans can exhibit more inclusive responses. One good reason to believe the special plasticity hypothesis is that if it were true, it would explain a lot that can't be explained by rejecting it.

A Plea for a Richer Research Agenda in the Evolutionary Study of Morality

Let me end this chapter with a cautionary note. This book isn't really concerned mainly with exposing the errors of people who confuse the possibilities for human moralities with the actuality of human moralities in the EEA and therefore have an unduly static picture of moralities. The best evolutionary thinkers don't make that mistake (though, as I've shown, in their less careful statements, some of them certainly give the impression that they do). The most astute thinkers are aware that from the assumption that the basics of human moral psychology were fixed at some time in the Middle to Late Pleistocene, it doesn't follow that the content or character of human moralities is fixed. Nor is my main focus combating the pessimistic conclusions about the fate of morality that evoconservatives draw because they are crude biological determinists in the grips of a bogus moral origins story.

As I've said before, I have two more positive, constructive goals. My top-priority goal is to develop a theory of large-scale moral change that can illuminate the possibilities for moral progress and regression. I want to do that because it is vital to rethink our understanding of the nature of morality and the fact of unequal power in light of the realization that the moral possibilities depend

on the character of the social environment, the constructed niches that humans build and that humans can reshape. We need such an understanding if we are ever able to take charge of our moral fate. In the process of explaining the Two Great Expansions, I hope to provide the elements of a more general theory of how large-scale moral change comes about—a theory that can provide resources that will enable us to exert some control over what sort of morality we have and what sort of moral agents we are, a theory that can help us engage in the vital task of moral institutional design.

To further this primary goal I hope to achieve another: to enlist science in helping us learn what we need to know in order to shape our moral fate in a progressive way. I want to demonstrate that the research agenda of even the best people who try to think about human morality in evolutionary terms is arbitrarily limited. That's because they focus only on morality as something that functions to facilitate cooperation. That may be a wise choice for the *initial* research agenda, but it's inadequate for a more comprehensive research agenda, one that attempts to see how far evolutionary thinking can take us in understanding all the important parts of human morality—and it is a fatal limitation if you want to understand how morality has changed and may change further. In brief, I hope to persuade evolutionary scientists to theorize not just the origins of morality but also moral change. Above all, I want them to help us understand large-scale moral changes that are progressive and to give us information that will help us to protect our most inclusive moralities from regression. If our goal is to combat tribalism effectively—and learn how to influence the environmental factors that shape us as moral beings—we need to get the science right. Ultimately, only genuine scientists can do that.

The needed scientific account will have to free itself from a prejudice: namely, that everything worth knowing about morality can be explained by showing how it contributes to reproductive fitness. Deeply inclusive moralities—moralities that incorporate the Two Great Expansions—don't seem to have any obvious reproductive-fitness-enhancing functions. On the contrary, it's not hard to imagine a lot of environments where inclusive moralities would be detrimental to reproductive fitness. In fact, those are just the sorts of

environments that most humans lived in until very recently and in which all too many still do.

Here's the next clue for solving the Big Puzzle: if, as the standard evolutionary account says, the original character of human moralities was shaped by features of the environment in which those moralities arose, then won't the character of moralities change if the environment changes? And won't moralities and the character of human moral agents change if humans manage to construct niches in which some of our moral behavior is "fitness independent"—human-made environments in which new forms of morality can come about even if they don't contribute to reproductive fitness? That leads to another question: what is common to environments in which some important aspects of moralities are "fitness independent"? The answer is this: environments in which humans have achieved *surplus reproductive success*.