

# Our Moral Fate

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## **Solving the Big Puzzle: How Surplus Reproductive Success Led to the Great Uncoupling of Morality from Fitness**

I ended the preceding chapter with the suggestion that an attempt to explain the progressive shift from shallowly inclusive to deeply inclusive moralities should pay close attention to the capacity for critical, open-ended moral reasoning. This is the ability that cognitively normal human beings have to make the particular moral rules that they're following objects of conscious awareness and to subject those rules to critical scrutiny that sometimes results in modifying or abandoning them. It also includes the even more remarkable ability to scrutinize our most basic moral concepts and even our concept of morality. Later in this chapter, I will also argue that it can even contribute to changes in a person's moral identity.

We saw that it is one thing to show that this capacity came about because it was strategic to exercise it—so as to make oneself an attractive partner in cooperation or to build coalitions to suppress bullies or to make war on other groups—but quite another to show why it would ever come to be used in very different ways. In particular, we need an account of how anybody would ever come to use it in ways that contributed to the Two Great Expansions.

Before I say more about this peculiar capacity, I want to clarify why it's important to do so. Once human beings achieve sufficient surplus reproductive success, the character of their moralities is no longer determined by the demands of reproductive fitness. Morality becomes unshackled. The awesome flexibility of the moral mind can then produce moralities that were not viable when morality was the

slave of fitness. A key resource for exploiting this newfound freedom is the capacity for critical, open-ended moral reasoning.

### A Creative and Subversive Human Capacity

I call this cognitive ability “open-ended” because its exercise *can* go on and on. Once people start exercising this capacity, their critical reflection has no natural end point, even if in fact it has to end somewhere, given that we are finite creatures and have a lot of other things to do besides reflect on our moral rules and concepts. Viewed from one angle, this capacity is incredibly subversive, because it has the potential to pull the rug from under the status quo; from another angle, it’s a promethean creative power, because it can transform our conception of morality and of ourselves as moral beings.

Let me quickly add a clarification: when I say this is a capacity for *open-ended* critical moral reasoning, I don’t mean that when people engage in it they always follow as far as good reasoning would lead them. The path of reasoning, whether it is moral reasoning or not, can be blocked in many ways. One way is when you begin to see the path’s destination and simply find it too disturbing to go there. Another is when you prematurely terminate the chain of reasoning because you have reached the result you wanted. My hunch is that both of these failures to go where reason leads have occurred in our thinking about the moral standing of animals. That’s one reason why I think the Second Great Expansion is probably incomplete, not just in terms of implementation but also in terms of changing our confident (and almost certainly anthropocentric) beliefs about the inferiority of nonhuman animals.

Whether or not humans have always possessed the capacity for critical, open-ended moral reasoning, it’s clear that many of them now are capable of exercising a fairly sophisticated version of it and that it can have large-scale social and political effects, *under certain conditions*. What conditions are those? Once again, I can’t pretend to offer a comprehensive answer. I think I can say a bit about what some of the *necessary* conditions are likely to be, without claiming to be able to identify the full set of *sufficient* conditions.

### **When Does the Capacity for Critical, Open-Ended Moral Reasoning Contribute to the Two Great Expansions?**

The necessary conditions include the kind of constructed niches that I described in the list that constituted the historical narrative in the preceding chapter (items 1–8). I won't repeat that list here. I'll only emphasize a few of its most important items, to refresh your memory so that I can then explain what further conditions are needed. Above all, humanity must have already reached the point where its knack for niche construction has lessened the harsh conditions of the EEA by providing the physical security and infrastructure for peaceful cooperation among groups that reduce the costs of being open to relating to the Other in ways that show a degree of moral regard for them. In addition, material prosperity has to have reached sufficient levels so that people can afford to act more altruistically toward strangers, even strangers they don't see as potential cooperators, and to be less ruthlessly exploitive of nonhuman animals, without paying too high a price, in terms of reproductive or cultural fitness or what they regard as success in life. Material prosperity makes it a lot easier to treat both strangers and nonhuman animals better.

In other words, I think it is probable that the exercise of the capacity for critical, open-ended moral thinking is only likely to be well developed, widespread, and socially and politically potent after humans have used their capacity for cumulative culture to construct niches that leverage them out of the harsher conditions of the EEA. In that sense, the widespread, relatively unconstrained exercise of the capacity for critical, open-ended moral thinking, like the move toward deeply inclusive morality that it can help produce, is something of a luxury good, something that requires considerable surplus reproductive success.

The commonsensical point here is that people generally have to be doing well enough in securing subsistence and security to afford to be reflective about their morality—and to put the results of their reflections into action. (I added the qualifier “generally” to acknowledge the possibility that in some cases a major social or

political catastrophe can trigger deep moral reflection, if it is severe enough to make people think “we can’t go on like this anymore!”) Yet I think considerably more than security and material prosperity is needed to fill out the full list of conditions under which that remarkable capacity is likely to be exercised in ways that eventually lead to the two momentous moral-conceptual shifts I call the Two Great Expansions.

### **The Social-Epistemic Context for the Exercise of the Capacity**

Here’s my speculation as to what, at minimum, the list of additional conditions would have to include for it to be likely that the capacity for critical, open-ended moral reasoning would be exercised in such a way as to lead many people eventually to the idea that all human beings have the same high basic moral status and to the idea that at least some nonhuman animals have moral standing.

- (i) There must be widespread literacy, along with printing presses or more advanced technologies for disseminating ideas and especially for disseminating the connections among ideas that constitute reasoning about how people ought to live or how it is permissible for them to live.
- (ii) There must be considerable freedom of expression and association, so that discussion of ideas about how to live among people with diverse viewpoints can be relatively open-ended; generally speaking, the results of discussions that question some significant aspects of the moral status quo must not be prevented from arising or from spreading. This requires, among other things, that control over communication technologies must be dispersed, so that no one person or group can monopolize them and thereby constrain freedom of information and expression and curtail the exercise of critical moral reasoning.
- (iii) Significant numbers of people must be exposed, either through direct experience or through reading history or works of fiction or using other media, to the fact that there are other societies with other ways of doing things, and to the fact that the moral practices and rules of their own society have changed significantly over time.

That awareness opens up the possibility of wondering whether the rules and practices people are currently following are optimal. The better understanding of people from other cultures that these new experiences and sources of information provide, when combined with the moral mind's capacity for perspective taking, enables the extension of sympathy beyond its formerly parochial limits. It also allows people to identify the common interests that all human beings, not just members of their group, have; and it contributes to the broader application of ideas of impartiality that originally operated only in the much more limited context of strategic reasoning to recruit coalition members for suppressing bullies or engaging in war or helping convince people that an individual is a reliable partner in cooperation.

(iv) There must be a developed culture of reason giving: a significant portion of the population must expect and must believe that others expect that, at least for certain areas of human behavior, justifications must be offered if they are requested. And justifications must involve the giving of genuine reasons, not brute appeals to authority or tradition. Moral consistency reasoning—reasoning that focuses on morally relevant similarities and differences in the pursuit of coherence in judgment and ultimately in action—must figure prominently among the kinds of reasoning about how to live that significant numbers of people frequently engage in.

(v) The pressures for moral conformity must not be too great, either because of a cultural practice of tolerance for moral disagreement, or because of the inadequacy of the social learning mechanisms that promote agreement on moral rules and their internalization, or because punishment practices are not sufficient to deter noncompliance, or for all three of these reasons. The social environment must allow some individuals to depart from the moral status quo.

(vi) Moral innovators, the first people who deviate from the moral status quo, must have the power to do so and must be able to afford to do so—that is, the material and social costs of their refusal to conform must not be too high. The affordability condition requires two key factors to be in place: there must be multiple cooperative schemes, and the costs of exiting one scheme and joining another must not be prohibitive. When these two conditions are in place,

the greatest impediment to moral innovation is removed: the threat of exclusion from the only cooperative scheme available to the individual.

Taken together, these six conditions constitute what you might call *the social-epistemic context* in which the exercise of the capacity for critical, open-ended moral thinking is likely to reach all the way down to a reconsideration of the bases for moral regard and what consistency in conferring moral regard requires. The “social” part is obvious; the term “epistemic” is there to emphasize that these are social conditions that have a large effect on how we come to have beliefs and hence knowledge (*epistēmē* is a Greek word for “knowledge” or “understanding”). This social-epistemic context is a product of history; all the components that constitute it only came together on a large scale fairly recently, and then only in some societies, in the past three hundred years or so.

My hypothesis is that the Two Great Expansions were likely to occur only when the historical process outlined in chapter 4 (items 1–8) had transpired *and* conditions (i) to (vi) in this chapter were also present. What is more, I think that conditions (i) to (vi) are only likely to obtain on a large scale where the process outlined in items 1 to 8 has already taken place. My hypothesis is that all these environmental conditions were probably necessary for the exercise of the capacity for critical, open-ended moral reasoning to have resulted in the Two Great Expansions.

### **The Vital Role of Institutions**

As with conditions 1 to 8, the satisfaction of conditions (i) to (vi) depends on *the character of the institutions in a society*. More specifically, none of the conditions is likely to be satisfied unless institutions promote considerable decentralization of power. This doesn’t mean that society must be thoroughly nonhierarchical, that there can be no differences in power or authority among individuals or groups, no significant inequalities. Rather, if hierarchies exist, they must be multiple and relatively independent of one another: there can be no one overarching structure of power and authority. There must also



be effective civil-society institutions: persisting voluntary organizations that are free to pursue their goals without undue government interference or interference by an official religious establishment and that have the resources to do so effectively. In addition, the existing array of institutions must not include severe constraints on the ability of individuals to exit one cooperative scheme and enter another, as was the case where occupations were limited by caste or other hereditary distinctions or allocated by monopolistic institutions such as guilds or gender or race-based licensure agencies.

Above all, government power must be limited and responsive to organized moral demands from sources outside it, in particular, civil-society groups. If government power is not limited, any attempted moral innovation that runs contrary to official policy or the interests of those who wield government power is liable to be suppressed. Limited government also means that some moral disagreements are regarded as not being subject to settlement by the government. For large-scale moral changes such as the First and Second Great Expansion to begin to be realized in social practice and institutions, government action will be needed (in the form of laws prohibiting discrimination, laws protecting animal welfare, etc.). If such changes are to occur without coercive imposition by a minority, moral innovators must be able to mobilize public support that government will have to heed.

In brief, *the sort of institutional order in which large-scale moral progress is likely to come about through peaceful means will be—in broadest terms—a liberal and at least minimally democratic order.* It will be liberal in the sense that it will afford considerable individual freedom, including freedom of expression, freedom to deviate from the moral status quo, and freedom of association to mobilize pressure for moral change or to engage in moral experiments. It will also be liberal in the sense that it will have no single hierarchy, but instead multiple, relatively independent hierarchies—something that can only occur if power is decentralized, which in turn requires considerable private property, so that no single entity controls all resources (and can use that control to establish a single hierarchy and wield a credible threat of exclusion from all cooperation). So far, at least, that has meant a society in which markets, operating on the basis

of a system of private property rights, are a major factor in overall social organization.

Another reason to conclude that a society in which moral progress in the direction of inclusion will feature a large role for markets is that it is only that kind of society that has achieved *and sustained* the high levels of material prosperity that makes inclusion feasible and stable. State socialist societies with central planning rather than markets, like the Soviet Union, achieved high levels of productivity for short periods of time (in particular under the existential threat the Germans posed in World War II). But they didn't achieve growth and generalized material prosperity in nonemergency situations for extended periods of time. In such systems, the government's control of all the important productive resources meant that it could use the threat of exclusion from cooperation to stifle dissent—to prevent attempts at moral innovations that went against the party line.

It's worth emphasizing that a society in which large-scale moral progress is likely to occur through nonviolent means will be one in which the economic order includes multiple cooperative schemes, operating in relative independence of one another, at least so far as the conditions for individuals entering and exiting them are concerned. Without this condition, the pressures for moral conformity—and against moral innovation—will be too great. The threat of being excluded from one's current cooperative scheme will stifle moral disagreement and moral innovation, if one has no other viable options.

Finally, let me also stress that the political order must allow for agitation for moral innovation bubbling up from civil society to influence government policy, in cases where large-scale moral change requires changes in laws and social policy. In other words, government must not be able to ignore advocates for moral change if they secure widespread public support. The liberal order must be at least minimally democratic.

To avoid an all-but-inevitable misinterpretation of what I have just said, let me make clear that I am not saying that anything approaching laissez-faire capitalism is a precondition for large-scale moral progress. On the contrary, I'm convinced that laissez-faire capitalism is a moral disaster, first and foremost because it produces

undeserved concentrations of wealth that violate commonsense, eminently reasonable notions of fairness and opportunity. I'm also confident that laissez-faire capitalism limits, rather than promotes, moral progress by transforming unconstrained economic inequality into stifling social and political domination. When I say that a liberal-democratic order is necessary for nonviolent moral progress, I mean an order with humanely regulated markets, not unconstrained capitalism. (I also think that for reasons of justice—and as a matter of decency as well—there must in addition be some welfare provisions—that the state's functions should not be limited to providing law and order, enforcing contracts, and protecting citizens against foreign enemies.)

Moreover, although hierarchies—structured, stable differences in power and authority—may be necessary if some individuals are to be able to buck the pressures for moral conformity and influence others to follow suit, it should be clear that inclusive moral progress will occur only if some people with greater influence are willing to listen to and advocate for those with lesser influence. In an unrestrained capitalist society, the best-off would have little or no incentive to listen to appeals for moral change that didn't serve their interests, and even less incentive to advocate for such change themselves.

In some ways, the term “open society” may be more descriptive of what I have in mind. Nonetheless, I think the term “liberal democratic society” is, all things considered, quite apt, because it emphasizes that government must be accountable to the public and institutions must allow individuals the liberty to deviate from the moral status quo and try to persuade others to follow suit.

### **Motivation for Exercising the Capacity: The Need for Moral Identity**

I have just characterized the kind of social-epistemic environment and institutional order that creates the possibility for large-scale moral change of the magnitude of the Two Great Expansions. Good detectives know that opportunity isn't enough; one also needs a motive. So we have one more question to answer, if my protosolution is to get off the ground: we need to know why anyone would

be *motivated* to exercise the capacity for critical, open-ended moral thinking and to do so in ways that could lead to their rethinking their most fundamental notions of moral standing and equal moral status. Here's the best answer to that question I can think of, for now, anyway: the deep human need for affirming moral identity supplies the motivation.

Because humans have always needed to be included in cooperation with other humans, and because we evolved to be creatures whose cooperation is structured by morality, we also evolved to care deeply about whether other people regard us as moral. If they don't, they won't cooperate with us, and that will be disastrous for us, in terms of both reproductive fitness and cultural fitness (or, if you prefer, success in life).

Furthermore, given how important cooperation is for human reproductive fitness, you would expect that in addition to evolving the capacity for morally structured cooperation, humans would also evolve a potent capacity to detect pseudo-cooperators, deceptive free riders, people who only feign being moral. If that's so, then it may well be that the most efficient way for most humans—though not all—to be regarded by others as being moral is for them actually to *be* moral, at least much of the time (Baumard et al. 2013, 66). In other words, if morality is so important for the distinctively robust and flexible cooperation that humans engage in, and if because of its importance they have developed sophisticated means of discerning whether someone really is moral, then one would expect that the ability to detect those who only feign being moral would be a strong selective pressure for the emergence of a human moral psychology that features the desire to be moral.

Whether or not trying to be moral is for most of us the best strategy for having a reputation for being moral, and therefore necessary for reaping the benefits of having that reputation, the deep desire to affirm and sustain moral identity is likely an object of selection at both the individual and group levels. Groups whose members had robust desires to affirm and sustain moral identity would outcompete groups whose members lacked that trait, other things being equal; and such groups would have greater fitness, both in successfully passing on the genes of their members and in reproducing

their moral practices and other aspects of culture over time. Individuals who were seen by others to have a strong moral identity would be more desirable partners in cooperation, and greater access to cooperation with others would enhance their individual reproductive fitness; so, at the level of the individual (or his or her genes), there would also be selection for having a commitment to being moral. Finally, in “buffered” environments, under conditions of surplus reproductive success, exhibiting a strong commitment to moral identity would enhance individuals’ economic prosperity, social success, and status, even if it didn’t increase their reproductive fitness. For all these reasons, then, it’s not surprising that most humans feel a deep and motivationally potent need to affirm and sustain their moral identity, their commitment to being moral. In fact, a good deal of empirical psychological research demonstrates that most people do care very deeply about their moral identity (Gotowiec and van Mastrigt 2018, 79; Han et al. 2018, 2–3; Hertz and Krettenauer 2016, 3; Lapsley 2015, 165; Sets 2010, 389, 393).

If humans generally have a deep-seated, socially reinforced need to think of themselves and be regarded by others as moral, then once people live in an environment that is conducive to the exercise of the capacity for critical, open-ended moral thinking—an environment in which being moral includes participating in a practice of reason giving—one would expect at least some of them to be motivated to exercise it, because they would be inclined to think that they need to do so to affirm and sustain their moral identity. In other words, if the desire to regard oneself and to be regarded by others as a moral being no longer just means the desire to “do what we do” or what God supposedly commands or tradition or the ancestors require, but becomes the desire to participate in morality as a reason-giving enterprise and to do the right thing for the right reason, then the commitment to moral identity can motivate people to exercise their capacity for critical open-ended moral reasoning.

If you care about being moral and understand that being moral means acting for good reasons and that acting for good reasons requires consistency among your moral judgments and between your moral principles and your intuitive moral responses, then you will be motivated to achieve consistency. If you become aware of a

serious inconsistency in your judgments or a discrepancy between what you say you believe and how you act or feel, that awareness will stimulate you to think things through and achieve greater consistency. The social-epistemic conditions I listed earlier increase the likelihood that you will become aware of such discrepancies.

For example, if your moral identity includes a commitment to acting in ways you can justify with sound moral reasoning if called on to do so, and if you see that slaves or women are treated very badly compared to how you are treated, then you'll take seriously the need to discover a good reason for this difference in treatment and, if that can't be done, to change your evaluation of it. Because this capacity is open-ended, nothing in the moral status quo is off-limits, even our notions of moral standing and equal moral status, *if* the social environment doesn't prevent its exercise from going that far and even includes some encouragement for it to do so.

It may well be that for most individuals, the capacity for critical, open-ended moral reasoning gets activated only if the individual encounters an "irritant." (I thank Andrew Lichter for suggesting this handy term.) In other words, something has to disturb you enough to compel you to attend to an inconsistency and be motivated to try to resolve it by reasoning.

It is also likely that some people are more sensitive to inconsistencies than others, more bothered by them, for reasons having to do with the particular developmental path taken in the formation of their personalities. These more sensitive individuals can become irritated enough to engage in moral consistency reasoning and come to the conclusion that their behavior and that of others in their society is inconsistent with some shared rule. At that point, they may become irritants to others, calling their attention to the inconsistency and appealing to their moral identities, trying to get them to be disturbed by the inconsistency, too. I think I've just given a pretty accurate description of Peter Singer and other pioneers of the animal liberation movement and also of the earliest abolitionists and feminists. (When I encounter people like Singer, I feel so morally inadequate that I think about donating a kidney to a stranger—though in the end I settle instead for doing a bit more volunteer humanitarian work on the southern border of my country.)

To summarize: when a society's institutional structure is sufficiently liberal and democratic to satisfy conditions (i) to (vi), the social-epistemic environment not only doesn't prevent but in fact stimulates the exercise of the capacity for critical, open-ended moral reasoning to proceed all the way down to our notions of moral standing and equal moral status. In those conditions, it's likely that at least some people, motivated by their commitment to moral identity, will exercise the capacity for critical moral thinking in ways that can lead them to reassess their moral orientation toward the Other and their treatment of nonhuman animals, to move beyond shallowly inclusive morality to deeply inclusive morality. And if those moral pioneers enjoy social influence and prestige or are adept at mobilizing the capacity for critical, open-ended moral thinking in enough other people, the Two Great Expansions may begin to come about.

### **Originating versus Spreading**

It's important to distinguish here between how a moral innovation first occurs and how it diffuses. I've focused on how some human beings could first undergo the transition from exclusive to shallowly inclusive to deeply inclusive morality. More specifically, I've concentrated on trying to understand how—and in what circumstances—a person of normal cognitive and moral capacities could be motivated to exercise the capacity for critical open-ended moral reasoning and do so in a way that leads her toward the Two Great Expansions.

I've not offered an account of how, once a large change in moral orientation has occurred among some people, it spreads to others. That would require a sophisticated theory of the mechanisms of social influence and learning, which I don't pretend to possess.

I want to note, however, that the processes by which moral innovations like the Two Great Expansions spread within one society and then become adopted in other societies are likely to be complex. It won't be a one-size-fits-all story.

In some cases, individuals may learn from prestigious or otherwise influential individuals in their own society who have already made these transitions through exercising their capacity for critical,

open-ended moral reasoning. In other cases, people in one society may adopt the moral views and other elements of culture of the societies that have colonized them or come to dominate them in more subtle ways. Individuals may imitate the norms and practices of a culture they deem more successful or in some other way more attractive than their own. Once people become exposed to moral orientations different from their own, they may adopt them because they find that they do a better job of delivering the psychological goods and community with others that they value.

To summarize: First, if you care about being moral, and if you believe that being moral requires moral consistency, then—if you live in the right sort of social-epistemic environment and can bear the costs—you will be motivated to engage in moral consistency reasoning; and in some cases, doing so may lead to large changes in your moral outlook, including something as momentous as the Two Great Expansions. Second, even if some individuals don't travel that route themselves, they may arrive at the same destination by learning from others, in a variety of ways. With that addition to my protosolution to the Big Puzzle, I now want to take stock of what I've accomplished and what I haven't.

### **The Attractions of My (Proto)Solution to the Big Puzzle**

It's all too obvious that I've provided at most only the basic contours of an explanation—and that I haven't offered either experimental evidence or much of anything in the way of other types of hard empirical evidence for some of the factual claims involved. But there's something to be said for my effort nonetheless. In fact, there are several things.

First, it isn't a spooky, nonnaturalistic, or overly rationalistic explanation. Especially in items (i) to (vi), it does assume that human beings can reason, and that in some cases, under certain extremely demanding environmental conditions, their reasoning can result in fundamental moral-conceptual changes, changes that can alter motivations and thereby behavior (recall my disgust at the thought of eating an octopus). Yet nothing I have said suggests that rationality is an autonomous, self-sufficient force for moral change



that can be effective regardless of environmental conditions or that reason can motivate people effectively on its own, without tapping into their existing evolved emotional capacities, including the desire to see oneself as moral and the capacity to feel sympathy, guilt, disgust, and shame. Nor was my explanation overly idealistic: recall my emphasis on the role that the immoral, violent competition for dominance that resulted in the modern state played in achieving surplus reproductive success and unshackling morality from the demands of reproductive fitness. I don't assume that moral progress has an unblemished pedigree; quite the contrary.

Second, my proto-explanation fits the historical facts about *when* the Two Great Expansions occurred and *where* they first began to occur. Recall that they are both very late arrivals on the human scene, as they have become fairly widespread across a number of different societies only in the last three hundred years or so. The full set of conditions (1–8 plus [i]–[vi]) that I have listed have come to coexist (and then only in some, not all, locales) only during that time frame. That's when some modern states became increasingly liberal and democratic and in which productivity soared. That is the time frame—and those are the states—in which the Two Great Expansions began to occur.

Remember, it is only in the last three hundred years or so that the abolition of chattel slavery, the drive to extend full civil rights to people of color and other minorities, the beginning of the women's rights movement, efforts to eliminate the most egregious forms of torture of humans (including excruciating torture as punishment for various crimes), and reductions in the cruelest treatment of non-human animals have transpired. Moreover, the first states in which these changes began to occur on a large scale weren't authoritarian, centralized regimes; they were among the more liberal and democratic states at the time.

Third, my account is compatible with the plausible hypothesis that the moral mind hasn't changed since it first emerged and certainly hasn't changed in the last three hundred years, the period in which the Two Great Expansions achieved liftoff. That's because my account is an explanation of how the capacities that constitute the moral mind came to be expressed differently in response to the

new niches that humans created for themselves. Nothing I've said requires a modification of the moral mind as I've described it. So my explanation of the Two Great Expansions fits well with my general point about moral change: understanding how it has occurred and can occur requires distinguishing clearly between the moral mind and the particular moralities that the moral mind underwrites in various different environments.

Yet another virtue of my proto-explanation is this: the historical narrative laid out in chapter 5 draws significantly on evolutionary thinking, in particular the ideas of natural and cultural selection, niche construction, and adaptive plasticity. That's important, given that the task I set myself at the outset was to see whether the fact of the Two Great Expansions could be squared with sound evolutionary thinking about the origins of human moralities.

One additional reason for regarding my proto-explanation as promising is worth emphasizing. My account doesn't rely in any way on an all-too-common assumption that I have demonstrated to be not only false but fatal for any prospect of providing a plausible explanation of the Two Great Expansions: the assumption that because morality originally was (perhaps) nothing more than an adaptation that enhanced reproductive fitness by facilitating cooperation, that is all it is and can be. I've given the relationship between morality and cooperation its due, without subscribing to the Cooperation Dogma.

In the next chapter, I try to enhance the plausibility of my proto-explanation by showing how its basic conceptual framework permits the construction of a powerful theory of a different kind of moral change: regression to tribalistic moralities. And in the chapter after that, I add still more plausibility to my account by showing how it can also help explain intrasocietal tribalism, the *social construction* of groups *within society* that evokes the same threat cues and accordingly the same tribalistic, exclusionary responses that encounters with members of other societies often evoked in the EEA. In that chapter, I argue that tribalism has evolved to take on new forms, forms that rely on a distinctively modern phenomenon that is itself a product of cultural evolution: ideology.

## But What about Religion?

Before I do all of that, I need to address a topic that has so far been all but absent in my speculations about how the Two Great Expansions came about: religion. I haven't neglected religion entirely. I did note that sometimes religious beliefs have *impeded* the Two Great Expansions, in particular by distorting the exercise of moral consistency reasoning or even preventing people from engaging in it. One example of this is the existence of theological doctrines in the Judeo-Christian tradition that relegate nonhuman animals to the role of serving human interests. Thinking of animals in that way precludes even entertaining the idea that they have moral standing in their own right, even if one recognizes that they feel pain and experience pleasure much as we do. Another example I might have given is that, throughout most of their histories, all the major religions tolerated slavery (and in some cases, as was true of Christianity, admonished slaves to obey their masters). To that extent, religion hindered rather than facilitated movement toward the idea that all human beings have an equal high basic moral status. Also some religions divide humanity into the saved and the damned or the faithful and the infidels, a kind of thinking not particularly conducive to the recognizing fundamental moral equality of all human beings. Christian and Muslim doctrine alike have held that it's perfectly acceptable—even commendable—to behave toward heretics or infidels in ways that are otherwise be strictly forbidden, even going so far as to disregard their most fundamental human rights, including the right not to be tortured.

Nevertheless, it is clear that many people's religious beliefs have played a role in their participating in one or both of the Two Great Expansions. This is particularly true, I think, of the most recent and fully developed manifestation of the First Great Expansion, the modern human rights movement and its roots in British and American abolitionism. Before I speculate about the role that changes in the conception of Christian moral identity played in the abolition of Atlantic slavery, I want to make something clear with regard to how I am conceiving the First Great Expansion.

Recall that I use the term in a very specific way: to refer to a moral change that involves basic alterations in the understanding of equal moral status of large numbers of people *and* has begun to become socially and politically potent—that is at least beginning to transform the way individuals act and the character of social institutions, including the law. That usage is perfectly compatible with acknowledging, as I am happy to do, that various ideas of human equality emerged much earlier and that often they emerged in religious traditions. For example, we find ideas of human equality or of a common humanity in the writings of the Stoic philosophers and in other ethical and religious traditions as well, including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

I'm not saying, then, that no human beings had any idea of human equality until three centuries ago, and I'm certainly not denying that religions played a role in the development of these ideas from their earliest appearance. Instead I'm focusing on explaining moral changes *that combine widespread changes in moral ideas with significant implementation of those ideas in ways that transform important social practices and institutions*. That kind of change, which I call large-scale moral change, occurred much later than the first occurrences of ideas of human equality.

Similarly, the idea that humans have moral obligations regarding their treatment of animals on their own account did not first arise only three hundred years or so ago. We find discussions of such obligations in the writings of Pythagoras and Epicurus, for example, twenty-five hundred years ago. Nevertheless, it is only much more recently that a socially and politically potent and clearly articulated understanding of the moral standing of animals has emerged.

Think of it this way: for a very long time, some human beings have formed ideas of the fundamental equality of all persons, and some have recognized that at least some nonhuman animals count morally in their own right. But for these ideas to develop into a relatively coherent, articulated moral orientation shared by many people *and* to become powerful forces for change, a formidably complex set of conditions had to come together. That magic combination—that tipping point—only occurred rather recently. And it wasn't inevitable; it was an unplanned, highly unlikely occurrence.

Now let's return to the story of how moral identity can motivate the exercise of the capacity for critical, open-ended moral reasoning in ways that can contribute to large-scale moral change. I noted earlier that there are good evolutionary and social science reasons to think that moral identity is an important element in the psychology of most humans. Sometimes moral identity takes a religious form. It appears that many abolitionists were religiously motivated, as are many human rights advocates today. More specifically, their motivation to try to abolish slavery was grounded in a change in their understanding of their own moral identity—a moral identity they understood mainly in religious terms.

These remarkable people seem to have undergone a sea change in their understanding of what it is to be a Christian. They became convinced that being a Christian required one to resist and help abolish slavery. That was a momentous transformation of their moral identity, since mainstream Christian doctrine made it easy to reconcile one's conception of oneself as a Christian with complicity or even direct participation in the enslavement of other human beings. Not only did passages in the New Testament enjoin slaves to be obedient; also, one of the justifications given for slavery in mainstream Christian thinking was that it was a useful and even necessary vehicle for converting heathens to the One True Faith.

The eminent historian of slavery and emancipation Seymour Drescher suggests that Christians who rethought their moral identity in ways that led them to take up the abolitionist cause were prompted to do so in part because they had already embraced the Enlightenment's commitment to the practice of reason giving and to the recognition of natural rights, rights that all humans are supposed to have, simply by virtue of being human (Drescher 2009, 124; 1999, 23). Moreover, in American abolitionist discourse, including that of Frederick Douglass, appeals to human rights were prominent (Douglass 2005, 54). Drescher also notes that even though the term "humanity" may have occurred more frequently than the phrase "human rights" in their rhetoric, the British abolitionists' understanding of "humanity" encompassed a central component of the concept of human rights: the idea that all humans, regardless of race, have a common nature, and that properly recognizing this

common nature is incompatible with according some human beings freedom and enslaving others (Drescher 2015, 182).

Note that Drescher's understanding of the connection between abolitionist motivation and Christian identity gives a prominent role to item (iv) in my earlier list: a culture of reason giving, something that was one of the main contributions of the complex cultural phenomenon we call the Enlightenment. (He also emphasizes item [i], high literacy rates and potent information technologies that were dispersed, accessible to a plurality of parties, under no one's exclusive control.)

If Drescher is correct about the connection between the spread of Enlightenment ideas about human or natural rights, often expressed in terms of a common humanity, and the Enlightenment culture of reason giving, on the one hand, and the transformation of Christian moral identity, on the other, then we needn't choose between a religious explanation of the First Great Expansion and one that features a prominent role for the exercise of the capacity for critical, open-ended moral reasoning. Religious motivation can play an important role in both of the Two Great Expansions, at least if it is connected in the right way to moral identity and if the motivation to preserve one's image of oneself as moral stimulates new critical reflection on what being moral requires.

Having said that, I want to emphasize that many people today do not understand their moral identity in religious terms. Yet their distinctively human concern about their moral identity can, under the right circumstances, motivate them to exercise the capacity for critical, open-ended moral reasoning. Moral-identity-based motivation for critical, open-ended moral thinking can play a significant role in the Two Great Expansions, whether one's moral identity is religious or secular.

We needn't assume that the process by which people's commitment to their moral identity comes to motivate them to move toward deeply inclusive morality is the same for everyone. Some people have a strong commitment to rationality, to being attentive to reasons (even though, of course, like all of us, they fall far short of being fully rational); and they have a genuine commitment to moral

consistency. Such individuals, in the right social-epistemic environment, can be motivated to engage in moral reasoning that leads them to realize that their previously exclusive, tribalistic responses (to members of other human groups or to nonhuman animals) were based on morally irrelevant distinctions, and to conclude that consistency in applying the principles for determining moral status and moral standing that they already subscribe to requires enlarging the circle of moral regard.

Other people may come to more inclusive moral responses not by their own reasoning but by imitating the responses of people they view as prestigious or as moral exemplars. Still others, once more inclusive moral orientations have spread, might use what cultural evolutionary thinkers call the strategy of conformity, making their own responses congruent with those that are dominant in their social environment. A fully developed theory of the transition from shallowly inclusive to deeply inclusive morality, which I don't pretend to offer here, would need to determine how the best work on social learning could illuminate the process by which people's desire to affirm and sustain their moral identity can lead them to learn from others how to have more inclusive moral responses.

To summarize: the central role of moral identity in human moral psychology goes a considerable distance toward explaining why, under the complex set of conditions I've outlined in this and the preceding chapter, some people would be *motivated* to exercise the capacity for critical, open-ended moral thinking—sufficiently motivated to carry through to conclusions that may fundamentally reshape their moral outlooks.

If one's commitment to moral identity is strong enough and one lives in a social environment where ideas can be exchanged freely, where there is readily available knowledge about alternative ways of doing things, and where there is a culture of reason giving, one may be sufficiently motivated to exercise the capacity for critical, open-ended reasoning and to follow it to destinations that alter one's most fundamental moral orientation—one's conceptions of moral status and moral standing—if one is fortunate enough to live in a human-created niche that makes taking that path affordable.



## The Costs of the Free Exercise of the Capacity for Critical, Open-Ended Moral Reasoning

I emphasized earlier that whether or not the capacity for critical, open-ended moral reasoning is exercised in a way that leads to a change in moral orientation as fundamental as the Two Great Expansions depends on the character of the social-epistemic environment, including the *affordability* of exercising that capacity. At this point, it is worth emphasizing that “affordability” here covers several different items. So far, I have only considered material and reproductive costs. I have argued that in certain environments, where a rare cluster of conditions come to coexist, the reproductive costs and the costs in terms of material well-being of expanding the circle of moral regard may be radically lowered. When this occurs, the capacity for critical, open-ended moral reasoning can, if it links up with the motivation to sustain moral identity in the right way, lead people to rethink their understandings of moral standing and equal moral status.

However, another kind of cost can pose an obstacle to people changing their moral outlook: the *social costs* of bucking the status quo. Those costs run from being ridiculed as eccentric to being branded a radical or a dangerous subversive, to being ostracized—excluded from forms of association and community one greatly values.

### A Puzzle about the Role of Moral Pioneers

Major changes in morality, including the Two Great Expansions, don’t happen all at once, with everybody participating from the start. More commonly, change begins with a small portion of the population; call them “first adopters” or, better yet, “moral pioneers.” The costs of pursuing the exercise of the capacity for open-ended moral thinking wherever it leads and then trying to put the results into practice might seem prohibitively high for moral pioneers. Their costs are certainly likely to be higher, other things being equal, than the costs incurred by those who get on the bandwagon after it has already started to roll. Why do some people lead the



way, given that, as moral pioneers, they're liable to incur especially high social costs?

So our Big Puzzle encompasses a subpuzzle: even if someone lives in a human-constructed niche that is quite comfortable—so that the reproductive and material costs of her revising pervasive understandings of moral standing or equal moral status are negligible for her—won't she face another formidable obstacle, namely, the social costs? Won't the anticipation of social costs override the motivation for pursuing critical moral reasoning all the way to the fundamental moral reorientation that the Two Great Expansions represent? Or even if some people persist in exercising that capacity so as to traverse the whole distance to that destination, won't they refrain from *acting* on their conclusions if the social costs of doing so are too great?

To fill out our explanation, we need to understand the conditions under which some people are willing and able to bear the social costs of being moral pioneers. The need is urgent, because evolutionary theories and anthropological research indicate that humans have developed powerful mechanisms for ensuring conformity to existing moral norms, to not challenging the moral status quo. And conformity is often achieved by imposing weighty costs on individuals who don't conform.

Once again, historical research is relevant. Historians of American abolitionism have demonstrated that early abolitionists in the Boston area—the seedbed of the movement—were in fact ostracized, cast out from social circles that had been central to their lives, and were subject to derision and even overt hostility. (For good reason, Wendell Phillips, one of the greatest abolitionist orators, habitually carried a Colt revolver in his coat pocket when he spoke publicly.) The same historians have also shown that abolitionists formed their own new associations when they became stigmatized as “radicals,” often forming networks of extended abolitionist families through marriage (Friedman 1982, 226–229). They found a way to prevent the social costs of being moral pioneers from sapping their motivation to use moral consistency reasoning to work through the full implications of their commitment to basic human equality and put the results into action.

Such a strategy usually wasn't available in the earliest societies or, for that matter, for most of human history. Hunter-gatherer societies offer the clearest illustration: if you violate your group's rules, then you may be excluded from all cooperation, and exclusion might well be a death sentence. The early abolitionists in the Boston area lived in a profoundly different social environment: they could afford to follow their convictions and agitate for a new norm of equality because their society was complex enough to offer opportunities for participation in more than one cooperative scheme; and they had the economic and political freedom to take advantage of this crucial fact. So here is another illustration of a major theme of our investigation: the moral possibilities, including the opportunities for moral change, are environment sensitive. What's not possible (or at least highly unlikely) in one environment may be possible (and even likely) in another.

The point I want to emphasize now is that the social costs of being a moral pioneer in achieving fundamental moral change can vary widely for different people, depending on their wealth and power, and their possibilities for forming new associations if they are excluded for holding unpopular new views. In general, the more wealth and power you have, and the greater your "social capital" for forming new associations, the lower are the costs of your being among the first to embrace and publicly advocate new moral views.

Here, too, the painstakingly detailed documentation of the case of British abolitionism provides some important clues about the role of social costs in determining whether people will exercise the capacity for open-ended moral thinking in a way that leads them to a new understanding of moral standing or equal moral status, and try to live accordingly. Historians of British abolitionism, including Drescher, whom we met earlier, have emphasized that most of the early advocates of abolishing slavery in the British Empire came from the middle or upper-middle class. They were people who were comfortable in material terms. And they belonged to "nonconformist" Protestant churches—denominations that were Christian and Protestant but were independent of the official religious establishment,

the Anglican Church, also called the Church of England (an institution that, by the way, owned many slaves in the Caribbean).

These nonconformist Protestant groups had already fought and won a prolonged battle to establish their legitimacy, and to avoid being subdued by the forces that tried to sustain the religious status quo. They had already developed resources for implementing their conception of what a community of Christians should be like in spite of powerful opposition. Their religious moral identity as nonconformists, as believers who were independent of the Church of England, had already equipped them with the ability to cope with the stigma or derision that they provoked in some quarters when they first became enthusiastic public supporters of abolition. In fact, it was part of their moral identity that they were moral pioneers, first with regard to what the proper form of Protestantism was, and later with regard to the abolition of slavery.

Had some other group tried to spearhead the abolitionist movement in Britain, a group that possessed less material wealth and less social capital and lacked a history of successfully struggling to shape what was at first a new minority religious moral identity and follow the commitment to it into new moral terrain, it might well have failed. The costs that the members of a less well-positioned group would have had to bear to try to fundamentally change the status quo might have been too high. This is another sense in which the willingness to follow critical moral thinking wherever it leads, even if the destination is an initially unpopular view, is a luxury good.

Once again, I'm not pretending to have fully solved a puzzle, in this case the puzzle of how moral pioneers become sufficiently motivated, in spite of formidable obstacles, including social costs. I'm simply emphasizing that in thinking about the full set of conditions that have to come together for it to be likely that the capacity for critical, open-ended moral reasoning will be exercised in a way that leads toward the Two Great Expansions or toward any other basic moral reorientation, we have to take into account the fact that there can be social costs of doing so even in an otherwise favorable environment in which material and reproductive costs are negligible. In other words, we have to add "acceptable social costs" to the list

of necessary environmental conditions. At the same time, however, we also have to acknowledge that how high the social costs are will depend on who you are. Other things being equal, moral pioneers generally bear higher moral costs than those who get on board later. Yet some people may be successful moral pioneers because, owing to their social position and the history of the group of which they are a member, the costs they have to bear aren't unacceptably high.

So now I have one more item to add to my list of the virtues of my proto-explanation of the Two Great Expansions: it doesn't require superhuman moral motivation on the part of moral pioneers, or anyone else, for that matter. Of course, history reveals many cases of people who have been willing to bear any costs, including torture and death, to stand by their moral convictions, to preserve their moral identity. I'm not denying that. Instead, my point is that once we realize that some people can be so fortunately positioned that they can afford to be moral pioneers without being saints, we don't have to assume that saints are necessary for moral progress to occur.

### **Is My Solution to the Big Puzzle Evolutionary?**

I've sketched several different, fairly plausible evolutionary explanations of how the capacity for critical moral reasoning, at least in the form of moral consistency reasoning, could have originated. I've also provided an admittedly speculative historical narrative that shows how some people could come to exercise that capacity in a way that changed their understanding of moral standing and moral status. But that historical explanation doesn't seem to be a fully evolutionary one. Elements of it could be presented in cultural evolutionary form, but it's not clear that all of it could be. So I'm not convinced that an adequate solution to the Big Puzzle will be an evolutionary explanation through and through. And I'm also not convinced that evolutionary science can tell us everything we need to know about how the moral mind interacts with specific social environmental factors to produce different kinds of moralities and different kinds of moral agents. Consequently, I can't confidently conclude that *evolutionary* scientific thinking will provide us with all the information we need to take charge of our moral fate. I hope that

my reservations in that regard will stimulate evolutionary scientists to take up the challenge of trying to provide that information. If they do take up the challenge and succeed, they will only demonstrate what I've known all along: they are better trained for this kind of detective work than I am.

