

Book Review

Buchanan, A. (2020). [*Our moral fate: Evolution and the escape from tribalism*](#). The MIT Press.

Reviewed by Peter A. Kindle, Ph.D., CPA, LMSW
The University of South Dakota

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Buchanan is a political philosopher at the University of Arizona. In this accessible and somewhat controversial book, he wants to refute a form of evolutionary determinism that limits human nature and morality to tribal identification or to the need to cooperate. In his view, tribalism was an appropriate evolutionary adaptation approximately 10,000 years ago that helped insure our survival by limiting disease transmission from out-groups and improving shared resources and thereby reproductive possibilities among in-groups. Those seeking a naturalistic explanation for human morality are correct to link the stimulus to cooperate to this environment of evolutionary adaptation (EEA), but err by attempting to explain all subsequent human moralities through a tribal and cooperative lens. Social workers will care about Buchanan's arguments because tribalistic morality is a denial of the Other's humanity that subsumes their individuality into a homogenous whole, restricts rational thought to black/white thinking, and adopts a winner-takes-all view of inter-group competition. Advocacy for human dignity demands a more inclusive morality.

The evidence he offers to support his claims that human morality is malleable rests primarily on what he calls the Two Great Expansions that have occurred in the last 300 years: (a) that all human beings possess certain human rights, and (b) that some nonhuman animals have moral standing of their own. Buchanan is addressing a scientific audience who he hopes to engage in his larger purpose, "to design institutions that will contribute to a social environment in which moralities will be progressive and individual human beings will realize their potential as moral beings" (p. 10) but he writes as a philosopher – with precise definitions, exacting care, and repetitive summaries of his logical arguments. The lay reader

will find her attention waning. The essence of his argument is that the evolutionary development of our capacity for a moral mind did not stop when tribalism was environmentally sound. The cognitive and emotional development of the moral mind, and the human proclivity for niche construction of new environments, produced the possibility of moral progress toward inclusion once the environment created surplus reproductive success that decoupled morality from the constraints of reproductive fitness. Yet moral progress is not inevitable. Moral possibilities may ossify into cultural spaces that hinder additional progress, become constrained by power brokers defending their own privilege and position, or simply regress to the exclusive tribal morality when facing perceived threats.

What Buchanan does emphasize is a few of the environmental and historical changes that facilitated the development of a more inclusive morality: (a) public health and sanitation improvements reduced the threat of a new stranger, (b) the King's Peace (or the restriction of violence to the state) and then the rule-of-law improved physical security, and (c) the development of markets spurred cooperation. These changes did not require inclusive moralities but permitted them as they permitted the development of the capacity for critical open-ended moral thinking. This kind of thinking is not only necessary to moral progress, it is a socially reinforced need to be regarded by others as moral, to develop a moral identity, and to be the kind of person who does the right thing for the right reason. For most, this kind of thinking stems from a rising awareness of an inconsistency, an irritating realization that one has insufficient justification for their behavior or beliefs. Societally, the spread of this kind of thinking depends on the institutional

structure, political organization, and social practices of that society.

Since the development of agriculture, Buchanan argues that ideologies have taken over the role of exclusionary tribal in-groups. Ideologies are systems of beliefs and attitudes that map social life, define good and bad, and morally justify cooperative action for the group. Ideologies need not be comprehensive and overly evaluative, but in the worst case, they are, and they can be deeply divisive. In the best of cases, ideologies promote in-group cooperation; in the worst they make out-group cooperation impossible. Buchanan calls this the belief immune system of deep ideological differences – the complete discounting of all out-group voices.

Our moral progress over the last 300 years has been largely a matter of luck. What Buchanan calls for is a more scientific and intentional agenda of moral theorizing and institution-building that is focused on continued expansion of inclusionary morality. His big conclusion is that

If humans learn enough about the moral mind and the interactions between it and specific environmental features, we can in principle take charge of our moral fate: we can exert significant influence on what sorts of moralities are predominant in our societies and what sorts of moral agents we are. Doing so would be perhaps the highest form of human autonomy. It would also be the most profound kind of creativity: the creation of the moral self in a species for whom the moral self lies at the core of our being (p. 249).

Sadly, Buchanan does not provide much in regard to the characteristics that lead to moral change. He notes that the existing social/religious mechanisms for compliance with moral rules must be loose enough to permit nonconformity, that liberal institutions are required to promote freedom of expression, civil society's influence over government, a culture that values rational justifications, and communication technologies that enhance perspectives and sympathy toward others but constrain EEA-threat provocations.

Buchanan does not hide his underlying concern of the tribalistic form of political organizing that has risen in the United States. He

understands this to be a repugnant moral regression and a response to the perceived failure of democracy. He calls for an unbundling of ideologies, making them less toxic, and creating a plurality of ideological contestants rather than a majoritarian winner-takes-all political structure. There is a very real sense that he hopes to convince his readers that this moral regression is not our fate. With additional effort, we may be able to direct ourselves toward a more inclusive future. Unfortunately, he provides little more than encouragement toward that goal. No meaningful guidelines are provided. Readers might also be disappointed that his arguments in support of the malleability of human moralities does so little to attempt an explanation for the current regression back into tribalism. I am concerned that the unstated cause of the current regression is the failure of market competition to fairly distribute resources, a structural behemoth standing in the pathway of human rights, human dignity, and our mutual humanity. I believe that the social work profession stands with inclusiveness, but I fear that our focus on micro and clinical practices leaves us largely underprepared for the moral, institutional, and political challenges that we need to face.

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