

Buchanan, Allen.
***Our moral fate: Evolution and the
Escape from Tribalism.***
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Our moral fate is a 271 pages book divided into nine chapters with an introduction and a preface. In this book, Allen Buchanan reflects on how tribalistic behaviour works in our species and, later in the book, in our societies. The aim of the book is to explain how moral progress is possible and how to preserve it. Its argumentation has two parts: first, he undermines what he refers to as the two Dogmas of evolutionary psychology: the Tribalist Dogma and the Cooperation Dogma; second, he explains how the tribalistic mind works and why our society is divided by ideologies. The reader should know that the author takes for granted two reasonable but controversial thesis: 1) the theoretical framework of the evolutionary psychology, and 2) that group selection is an appropriate approach for some human phenomena.

In the first part of his argumentation, Buchanan begins by providing precise conceptual clarifications to address common mistakes in the ongoing debate. One notable example is the distinction he draws between the “moral mind” and “moralities,” as many philosophers and moral psychologists often fail to differentiate between the two. However, most of this section focuses on the discussion of the two “Dogmas.” Buchanan argues that traditional evolutionary approaches to moral psychology face a significant challenge in explaining the occurrence of the two Great Expansions of the Moral Circle, which encompassed the inclusion of all human beings and later extended to

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include many animals. He attributes this challenge to the implicit acceptance of these Dogmas.

The first Dogma is the Tribalistic Dogma, which assumes that since evolution is driven by genes and fitness, the scope of morality should only encompass family and members of one's own group. The second Dogma is the Cooperation Dogma, closely related to the first, which assumes that moral behaviour serves solely to coordinate cooperation. Buchanan contends that these theses are deeply flawed and fail to explain moral progress. Throughout the remainder of this section, he elaborates on why these Dogmas are fundamentally erroneous and inadequate in accounting for the phenomenon of moral progress.

Indeed, in this part, the author delves into the explanation of why we might exhibit tribalistic responses in certain situations. He posits that in the past, human groups faced struggles and conflicts with other groups that posed challenges to cooperation. These challenges included differences in language, traditions, immune systems, and infections. Given the scarcity of resources in such environments, it becomes difficult to see how inclusivity and cooperation with these other groups would have provided any immediate advantage. In this context, the emergence of xenophobic behaviours can be seen as a possible outcome of biological evolution, serving to protect one's own group and minimize the risks associated with interacting with unfamiliar and potentially dangerous groups.

However, Buchanan contends that moral intuitions alone do not encompass the entirety of morality. He believes that we must provide justifications for our moral choices to others and strive to persuade individuals with differing and incompatible perspectives. To achieve this, consistency is crucial: we cannot argue that something is morally wrong when applied to us but permissible when applied to others (p. 95). This point is significant because the author can relate it back to moral intuitions and tribalism. If we accept that certain things in the world do not merit moral consideration, our intuitions are no longer directed towards them. Consequently, we do not need to justify why we acted in an otherwise unacceptable manner towards them.

In the second part, he elucidates that the environment in which tribalistic morality developed no longer exists. Consequently, the triggers for

tribalistic responses may have diminished, enabling the Two Great Expansions. He goes on to explain that in present times, divisive ideologies (in contrast to inclusive ones) depict the Other as dangerous individuals, thereby undermining their moral standing and impeding moral progress. Buchanan emphasizes that this phenomenon is not merely a temporary suspension of moral considerations but rather a recharacterization of the moral world that activates moral responses. He provides several examples, with perhaps the most pertinent being eugenics. This ideology portrays certain individuals as threats to social welfare, arguing that those with unfavourable genetic traits tend to lack self-control and propagate their detrimental genes through reckless sexual behaviour, thereby causing societal degeneration by contaminating the genetic pool. Consequently, preventing such a dire outcome becomes a moral imperative.

The characterization of the relationship between ideology and tribalism is a significant aspect of the book. Buchanan's definition of ideology as a cognitive map that helps individuals interpret events in a complex social world provides insight into how ideologies shape our perceptions and actions. However, the problem arises when divisive ideologies present the social world as populated by enemies, leading to a disregard for those deemed as threats. By triggering tribalistic responses, these ideologies reinforce an "us versus them" mentality, where individuals with different ideologies are dehumanized and dismissed. This inhibits open dialogue, empathy, and cooperation, ultimately contributing to societal divisions and intolerance.

Buchanan emphasizes the importance of recognizing this dynamic as a crucial first step in fostering a more tolerant society. Understanding how ideologies can exploit our innate tribal instincts and influence our behaviour is essential for promoting empathy, respect, and constructive dialogue across ideological differences. By acknowledging the influence of divisive ideologies and their impact on our perceptions, we can work towards overcoming tribalistic tendencies and creating a more inclusive and understanding society.

The author, armed with this theoretical framework, is now able to propose a solution to what he refers to as The Great Puzzle. This puzzle revolves around the question of why our species, having evolved in a hostile world, now takes responsibility for how we treat not only individuals within

our immediate proximity but also people worldwide and some animals. Conventional viewpoints suggest that morality is an adaptation geared towards those who frequently feature in our lives and our family, making it seemingly implausible for us to extend concern towards individuals from distant lands (whom we may never meet) or towards animals (p. 42). Having dismantled other somewhat ad hoc explanations, Buchanan presents a plausible solution—one that integrates cultural accumulation, the biological perspective, reason, and reciprocity. However, despite the brilliance of his argument, he overlooks other previously developed options, such as the distinction between proximate cause and ultimate cause.

Additionally, by presenting tribalism as a product of our biological abilities, Buchanan justifies the differentiation between intra-societal tribalism and inter-societal tribalism (p. 172). Our capacity for tribalism is primarily directed towards individuals within our own group or foraging communities, while at the biological level, it holds little significance. This distinction is a key takeaway from the book: ideologies have the potential to divide societies and individuals by highlighting differences and deeming others morally worthless.

Inter-social tribalism, therefore, involves identifying individuals within our own society whom we believe deserve to be hated. This can manifest subtly, such as labelling members of other groups as ignorant (implying they cannot comprehend what is evidently true) or malicious (suggesting they act with hidden intentions). In either case, it is important to prevent the dissemination of their toxic messages. However, there are instances when these ideologies present people themselves as a threat, as seen in the case of antisemitism (p. 176).

To address these issues, it is crucial to understand the origins of intra-societal tribalism, acknowledge the inherent bias in our perspective on social issues, and recognize why we often approach other people's ideas disrespectfully. By considering the impact of these biological mechanisms, we can strive to prevent social division and animosity within our own society.

Undoubtedly, the most valuable section of the book is the final part, where Buchanan accomplishes something that is often asserted but rarely achieved: an explanation that seamlessly integrates biological and social approaches to human behaviour by elucidating precisely how social cons-

tracts activate biological mechanisms. Furthermore, he provides a compelling explanation of ideologies and their functioning, delving into alternative conceptions of the term. As promised, he also explains how scientific knowledge can be utilized to build a more favourable social world.

With respect to the first part of the book, he may have seen some interesting points, but his interpretation of other authors is sometimes misleading. For instance, he speaks of Jonathan Haidt as he could not explain the psychology of rational discussion or as he said it has no effect at all (p. 136). But he only cites an article that shows how important moral intuitions are; in his book *The righteous mind*, Haidt explains what Buchanan is criticizing. Or he talks about Steven Pinker's thesis of moral progress as if was so naïve to think that the progress is irreversible (p. 39), when he says explicitly the opposite in his book *Enlightenment now*.

Lastly, while there is some criticism to be made, such as the questionable use of the term "Dogmas" when referring to other people's theses, and the overlooking of certain fundamental distinctions that partially explain the points raised in those theses, like the distinction between proximate cause and ultimate cause, which is often employed to explain the "Cooperation Dogma" and adds greater reasonability to it. Additionally, there are certain important definitions that are lacking, such as the precise meaning of democracy when discussing how it can be harmed by tribalism. That being said, the book is still valuable due to its clear and precise exposition of the role of ideology and its characterization of tribalism and its relationship with ideology. Undoubtedly, it is an important book for gaining an understanding of these phenomena.