



## The Evolution of Moral Progress. A Biocultural Theory

Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell: *The Evolution of Moral Progress. A Biocultural Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.  
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The question of moral progress leads into shaky terrain. Is it even possible to raise it in a scientific context, given that benchmarks of progress are inevitably biased? And what is morality, after all? Undoubtedly, the idea of moral progress has suffered too many blows to serve as an immaculate guiding light in postmodern times. However, are challenges from cultural criticism and moral epistemology reason enough to cease investigating ‘moral progress’ altogether? As the recent rediscovery of moral progress as a question and object of research indicates, there remains a lot to learn, even if one is convinced that definitude is out of reach from within the realms of meaning, positing or (de-)valuing, or if one doubts linear global ‘moral progress’.

*The Evolution of Moral Progress: A Biocultural Theory* by Allen Buchanan (Duke University/King’s College) and Russell Powell (Boston University) slots neatly into existing debates. Integrating findings from various fields of research, the book provides an in-depth picture of the complex questions at stake. Well aware of the pervasive scepticism surrounding moral progress, the two philosophers nevertheless argue that moral progress is real and can be explained. Their ‘pluralist theory’ lists the criteria that constitute moral progress: better compliance with valid moral norms; better moral concepts; better understanding of virtues; better moral motivation; better moral reasoning; proper (de-)moralisation; better understanding of moral statuses; and improvements in the understanding of the nature of morality (pp. 54ff.).

It soon becomes clear that Buchanan and Powell’s concept of morality is partisan in a number of ways. First, moral progress is tied to *ethical* progress (the ‘exercise of human moral powers’, p. 50) and hence not everything that counts as ‘an improvement from a moral point of view’ (ibid.) amounts to genuine moral progress. What is more, their criteria contain substantial normative content that, from rival perspectives, must appear controversial. For instance, the authors define better (understandings of) virtues in terms of a concept of honour that renounces obsessions with female chastity and the violence it breeds (pp. 55 f.) and approach proper demoralisation from an explicitly liberal-secular point of departure (pp. 239ff.).

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Given that no account of moral progress is neutral, this is not an objection to the overall endeavour of the authors, who choose to focus primarily on the least controversial type of moral progress: the expansion of the sphere of moral consideration. As Buchanan outlined elsewhere (2013) already, expanding moral consideration works only once we change our moral-status consciousness. As long as a mere *strategic-reciprocal* stance is taken, moral consideration in terms of principal reciprocity is limited to those possessing strategic capacities (“hunter-gatherer morality”). However, people without ‘strategic value’, – in particular those who cannot threaten us – will not be morally relevant at all (“nothing that can be done to them is unjust”, p. 293) unless a *subject-centred* moral concept emerges. According to such a concept, “being a subject of justice does not depend upon one’s ability to contribute to or disrupt cooperation [...] in this or that group” (ibid.) but on properties human beings share as human beings. This is the crucial precondition for moral inclusiveness (pp. 293ff.).

One instructive example (2018, pp. 172 f.) is advances in women’s rights: As long as moral concern was distributed in exchange for personal benefit, the ‘weaker sex’ could never achieve equal status and could consequently not enjoy equal concern. What was needed was a fundamental shift in axiological perspective – or in other words, moral revolution – in order to place the worth and needs of each and every human being at centre stage.

Proceeding from the assumption that changes in human beliefs and practices have occurred (at least in some societies) that fit the category of moral inclusivism, the authors then turn to the question of how these changes can be explained. They offer a bio-cultural theory that takes seriously both what we believe we know about our evolved human nature and what they call the ‘open-ended normativity of the ethical’ (p. 180). At the end of their tour d’horizon, the authors’ explanatory approach crystallises as follows: Under the prehistoric conditions in which humans evolved – physical insecurity, infectious diseases, inter-group conflicts (pp. 208f.) – the restriction of moral consideration to members of one’s own group was generally favoured in group-selective processes. It thus should not surprise us that parochial altruism ‘is among the most cross-culturally robust features of human moral psychology’ (p. 130) and that ‘morality is essentially an intragroup affair’ (p. 133). Nevertheless, as instances of inter-group cooperation such as trade or marriage indicate, human nature is not ‘hard-wired’ for exclusivist morality – a claim similar to that presented by Joshua Greene (2013), whose work, however, is not mentioned.

Buchanan and Powell hence stress the ‘adaptive flexibility of prehistoric human morality’ (p. 124), which allowed humans to respond to their environment in the form of either exclusive or inclusive moral systems. From this overall assumption they conclude – against the flow of hard-line ‘evoconservatism’, i.e., evolutionary determinist views (pp. 138ff.) – that our evolved psychological constraints in terms of universal altruism are by no means insurmountable (p. 179). Once the catalytic functions of human living conditions are properly understood, these conditions could be modified in order to enhance our capacity for moral inclusiveness. It is thus that cultural interventions could curb those conditions that ‘trigger’ exclusivist responses (pp. 211ff.). Additionally, (new) moral ideas can drive moral progress.

At the same time, inclusive gains can be lost, rendering moral progress anything but stable. It is a special feature of this book that a substantial part thereof is devoted to moral regression, engaging various neighbouring theories of dehumanisation, human rights, and biomedical enhancement (pp. 218ff.). Buchanan and Powell argue that exclusivist responses occur not only where actual threats exist but also where people merely *believe* they exist – accentuating the ‘cultural transmission of beliefs about out-groups’ (p. 190).

The theory presented by Buchanan and Powell is appealing in several ways. Apart from its explanatory power at large (notwithstanding their concluding endorsement of metaethical realism, p. 387), it does not obliterate previous accounts of moral progress (that emphasise, for instance, the role of moral reasoning or the civilising force of state institutions). It rather provides a glimpse at what a ‘unified theory’ of moral progress could look like: one that takes the multilevel selection model seriously and looks at evolutionary processes on *all* levels, that offers a comprehensive landscape of relevant ‘nature–nurture’ interactions in that context, and that finally supplies us with the full range of interventionist methods we could realistically aim at.

Certainly, more work remains to be done; so far, in many cases, we have little more in hand than speculation. Although Buchanan and Powell are able to convince unprejudiced readers that we know enough not to dismiss the idea of moral progress out of hand, their work also feeds the impression that we still know too little to grasp the full picture. The authors underscore the need for further cross-disciplinary research by providing a list of further questions in the final section of the book. A personal favourite is: ‘What role do ideologies play in driving both moral regression and moral progress?’ (p. 404). As announced on Buchanan’s homepage, the duo is currently working on a sequel to *The Evolution of Moral Progress* which will deal with ‘evolution and ideology’. May they make progress and share their findings with us soon.

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