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Allen Buchanan, *Our Moral Fate* (2020)

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Article abstract

In debates surrounding the biomedical enhancement of human morality, it is widely believed that morality was evolutionarily shaped to be rigidly tribal. Allen Buchanan challenges this assumption by making the case that a plastic morality that responds to our environment would be evolutionarily favored, and thus the best way to shape human morality going forward would not be through biomedical interventions, but by designing better institutions.

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COMPTE RENDU / REVIEW

Allen Buchanan, *Our Moral Fate* (2020)

Guido Calderini[a]

Résumé
Dans les débats entourant l'augmentation biomédicale de la moralité humaine, il est largement affirmé que la moralité a été façonnée au cours de l'évolution pour être rigidement tribale. Allen Buchanan remet en question cette hypothèse en faisant valoir qu'une moralité plastique qui répond à l'environnement serait évolutionnellement privilégiée, et donc que la meilleure façon de modifier la moralité humaine à l'avenir ne serait pas par des interventions biomédicales, mais par la conception de meilleures institutions.

Abstract
In debates surrounding the biomedical enhancement of human morality, it is widely believed that morality was evolutionarily shaped to be rigidly tribal. Allen Buchanan challenges this assumption by making the case that a plastic morality that responds to our environment would be evolutionarily favored, and thus the best way to shape human morality going forward would not be through biomedical interventions, but by designing better institutions.

Mots-clés
augmentation morale, psychologie évolutionniste, débat sur le l'augmentation, design institutionnelle, idéologie

Keywords
moral enhancement, evolutionary psychology, enhancement debate, institutional design, ideology

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The early 2000s were a period of much interest in the possibility, permissibility, desirability, and duty to use biotechnological techniques to enhance human beings. A new front in this "Enhancement Debate" was opened with the publication by Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu of *The Perils of Cognitive Enhancement and the Urgent Imperative to Enhance the Moral Character of Humanity* (1) in 2008. This article made the case that in order to compensate for the risks of technological advancement (e.g., nuclear and biological weapons), we should seriously consider enhancing human morality through biomedical means (i.e., using drugs, genetic therapy, or related means to make us better moral agents). The following years saw an explosion in the literature on moral enhancement (i.e., questions surrounding the ethics, technical issues, practical concerns, political repercussions, and other considerations related to the enhancement of our moral capacities through biotechnology). Allen Buchanan's *Our Moral Fate* (2) is a recent and important contribution to this debate.

Buchanan, who was a central figure in defending the permissibility of enhancements through various seminal publications (3-6) during the enhancement debate of the early 2000s, joined the moral enhancement debate in 2016, publishing alongside R. Powell a chapter in a volume on biomedical enhancement (7), which was later expanded into its own book (8). Surprisingly, although he had previously vigorously defended the legitimacy of general biomedical enhancements, Buchanan's work on moral enhancement breaks with most of his erstwhile allies by challenging the need to pursue such interventions. *Our Moral Fate* is his latest rebuttal to proposals to biomedically boost human morality.

Buchanan starts his book by challenging two basic assumptions that he believes mistakenly frame all debates about the evolution of morality in humans: the *Tribalism Dogma* and the *Cooperation Dogma*. He defines the Tribalism Dogma as the idea that we are inherently tribal due to evolutionary pressures. He then rejects this assumption that human beings are inherently tribalistic as being based on an oversimplified understanding of evolutionary psychology. Proponents of biomedical moral enhancement assume that the Environment of Evolutionary Adaptation (EEA) would give rise to a closed, xenophobic morality because not being tribalistic during the early days of our species would have led to extinction. Buchanan replies that this view does not seriously consider the need for *flexibility* in a dynamic EEA, which sometimes punished overly trusting groups, but sometimes punished a *lack of interaction* with outsiders. Indeed, he presents evidence that, at times, inter-group cooperation was needed for survival, leading to the development of a flexible morality that is shaped by environmental indicators (e.g., cues for disease, overall material abundance, harshness of the natural environment). In turn, the Cooperation Dogma is the idea that because the evolutionary need for cooperation shaped our basic moral psychology, the extent of morality is limited to self-serving interactions. This is an issue because it surreptitiously reinforces the tribalistic dogma by implying that human morality can only extend to cooperation partners, and that moral consideration of non-cooperators is beyond our natural faculties, leading to tribalistic moralities. Buchanan challenges this assumption in two different ways. First, he does not deny that the evolutionary origin of morality probably lies with cooperation but points out that it would be a mistake to equate this evolutionary origin with the extent of its potential. Indeed, he explores how aspects of our morality, such as our ability to internalize moral rules, would lay the groundwork for the universalization of moral principles, leading to an open-ended morality. The author then challenges the cooperation dogma empirically, by pointing to two major historical changes in our morality, which he calls "the Two Great Expansions". The first expansion is the widespread adoption, starting around the 18th century, of the ideal of treating all human beings as equals, regardless of race, gender, disability, or religion. The second expansion is more recent and consists of extending moral consideration to animals and their welfare, even though they are a clear case of non-cooperators. According to Buchanan, these two historical expansions of human morality belie a rigid evolved

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morality based only on cooperation. Thus, although he rejects a strictly tribalistic conceptualization of human morality, he does not deny that humans may sometimes – or even most of the time – express a tribalistic morality. Instead, he claims that evolution would favour a plastic morality that would express differently depending on environmental conditions.

By eschewing the question of biomedical intervention, we may be tempted to see this work as rejecting the moral enhancement debate altogether, but this is not quite the case. Buchanan argues that when human nature is properly understood, such biomedical interventions become superfluous and probably counterproductive. Instead of using drugs or new genes, he proposes that we modify the way in which those genes are *expressed* through *scientifically informed moral institutional design*. Given that our current environment is much more forgiving than the EEA, we can allow ourselves to develop more inclusive and universalistic moral sentiments, a phenomenon he calls *the Great Uncoupling* (of moralities and reproductive fitness). In other words, Buchanan argues that we should scientifically leverage our biology to provide us with moral sentiments better suited to our current environments, but that this should be done through institutional tools. Throughout the last section of the book, he explores these tools by presenting principles such as ideology (i.e., simplified interpretations of the world necessary to operate in it) and niche construction (i.e., the ability to modify our environment, particularly our social environment, in ways that affect how morality, among other features, develops), which he believes play central roles in shaping morality.

Although not as conceptually impressive as some of his previous works, Buchanan's exploration of the evolutionary underpinnings of morality is creative and insightful. It also outlines a less speculative and more biologically informed moral enhancement program, which, although not fully fleshed out, provides direction to this important and timely field of research. Therein lies the importance of this book, not only in the literature of moral enhancement, but philosophy at large.

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