

THE INCLUSIVIST ANOMALY IS NOT AN ANOMALY: A REPLY TO BUCHANAN  
AND POWELL

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## ABSTRACT

J. Joseph Porter: The Inclusivist Anomaly Is Not an Anomaly: A Reply to Buchanan and Powell  
(Under the direction of Jerry Postema)

In their forthcoming book *The Evolution of Moral Progress: A Biocultural Theory*, Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell argue that evolutionary theory cannot explain the inclusivist anomaly—the relatively recent emergence of inclusivist moral commitments such as commitments to abolition or human rights—because the motivations which brought about the inclusivist anomaly are not accounted for by evolutionary theory. I argue, *pace* Buchanan and Powell, that evolutionary theory *can* account for the motivations which brought about the inclusivist anomaly, and that the inclusivist anomaly is therefore not an anomaly after all.

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*“The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.”*

— Ecclesiastes 1.9

## **I. Introduction**

In their forthcoming book *The Evolution of Moral Progress: A Biocultural Theory*, Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell offer a “theory of moral progress,” which (among other things) “characterize[s] the bio-social environments in which especially important true or justified moral beliefs are likely (and unlikely) to occur and become widespread.”<sup>1</sup> Buchanan and Powell are most interested in “one especially important type of moral progress: gains in what [they] refer to as ‘moral inclusivity,’”<sup>2</sup> which they describe as the extension of “equal basic status or some kind of moral standing to classes of individuals that had previously been excluded”<sup>3</sup> or the rejection of unjustifiable “group-based restrictions on membership in the moral community, such as those based on race, ethnicity, gender, species, or self-serving cooperative relationships between groups.”<sup>4</sup> Buchanan and Powell aim to “offer a theory of the conditions under which that kind of moral progress”—namely, inclusivist progress in moral beliefs, norms, concepts, emotions, and

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<sup>1</sup> Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress: A Biocultural Theory* (Oxford: forthcoming) 15.

<sup>2</sup> Buchanan and Powell 21.

<sup>3</sup> Buchanan and Powell 18.

<sup>4</sup> Buchanan and Powell 21.

behavior—“is likely to occur, based on an analysis of the conditions under which it has occurred, in the light of the best available evolutionary thinking about the origins of human morality.”<sup>5</sup> (I shall refer to our moral beliefs, norms, concepts, emotions, behavior, and the like together as our moral *commitments*.)

In the course of offering their theory of moral progress, Buchanan and Powell point out an apparent evolutionary puzzle: “Contemporary morality, as experienced and exhibited by significant numbers of people and embodied in social practices and institutions, is strikingly more inclusive than one would expect if selectionist [or other evolutionary] explanations were the whole story, or even most of it.”<sup>6</sup> Buchanan and Powell do not think that the inclusivist shift in moral commitments beginning in the latter half of the eighteenth century seen in “the abolitionist, civil rights, human rights, and animal welfare movements ... can be explained by the received selectionist account of the origins of morality, nor by alternative evolutionary accounts.”<sup>7</sup> In their view, the emergence of inclusivist morality—the *inclusivist anomaly*, as they call it—requires a non-evolutionary explanation of its own, apart from evolutionary explanations of the origins of (exclusivist) morality.

Buchanan and Powell argue that the inclusivist anomaly requires a non-evolutionary explanation because it constitutes an *untethering* of our moral commitments from their original evolutionary functions: “the achievement of coordination and conflict management within the group and successful competition with other groups in ways that were conducive to individual and/or cultural group fitness.”<sup>8</sup> In their view, this untethering came about because we were

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<sup>5</sup> Buchanan and Powell 23.

<sup>6</sup> Buchanan and Powell 153.

<sup>7</sup> Buchanan and Powell 40, 153.

<sup>8</sup> Buchanan and Powell 400.

“effectively motivated to realize [inclusivist] alterations in our behavior”<sup>9</sup> through the exercise of our moral capacities—not just “irrespective of functional considerations” but often even *in spite of* such strategic considerations.<sup>10</sup> Our inclusivist motivations would be inexplicable, they think, unless we were capable of recognizing and being motivated by inclusivist moral truths *even in the absence of strategic reasons to be motivated by them*. Thus Buchanan and Powell contend that the inclusivist anomaly requires a non-evolutionary explanation because any plausible explanation of the inclusivist anomaly must “advert to *moral* motivations that are not accounted for by evolutionary theory.”<sup>11</sup>

In this essay, I shall argue—*pace* Buchanan and Powell—that evolutionary theory *can* account for the motivations which brought about the inclusivist anomaly, and that explanations of the inclusivist anomaly need *not* advert to motivations unaccounted for by evolutionary theory. In my view, evolutionary theory can account for the motivations underlying inclusivist morality (or “inclusivism”) much as it can account for the motivations underlying exclusivist morality (“exclusivism”). In my view, that is to say, the inclusivist anomaly is not really an anomaly after all.

I shall defend this view by suggesting plausible status-enhancing motivations underlying the inclusivist shift which *are* accounted for by evolutionary theory. I shall begin by laying out more fully Buchanan and Powell’s non-evolutionary explanation of the inclusivist anomaly. I shall briefly discuss my antecedent wariness of such non-evolutionary explanations. I shall then sketch my own provisional explanation of the inclusivist anomaly and defend and fill in that

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<sup>9</sup> Buchanan and Powell 385.

<sup>10</sup> Buchanan and Powell 88.

<sup>11</sup> Buchanan and Powell 174 (emphasis added).

sketch by replying to various potential objections. I shall conclude with some brief remarks on the importance of a good understanding of the inclusivist anomaly.

## II. Buchanan and Powell on the Inclusivist Anomaly

The modest naturalistic goal of *The Evolution of Moral Progress* is

to determine whether and how certain types of putative moral progress are possible, and to assess their limits, within the strictures of our best scientific theories of human moral psychology and culture. ... A further aim of this book is to reconcile normative theorizing about moral progress and the prevailing evolutionary understandings of moral psychology and culture with which they appear to be in tension.<sup>12</sup>

Buchanan and Powell are interested in the possibility of moral progress. In particular, they are interested in the question whether human psychology and social environments constrain *inclusivist* moral progress, which encompasses

the recognition that nonhuman animals have moral standing and the costly efforts to treat them accordingly, the pervasiveness of “universalizing” moral judgments, the existence of a human rights culture that includes significant institutional and legal manifestations, and an implicit shift from a strategic conception of morality as cooperative group reciprocity to a subject-centered one in which individuals who have no strategic capacities are recognized to have moral standing and, in the case of human beings, to have the highest moral status.<sup>13</sup>

In Buchanan and Powell’s view, inclusivist moral progress appears to be in tension with our best evolutionary accounts of moral psychology and culture. The resolution of this tension—the

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<sup>12</sup> Buchanan and Powell 33.

<sup>13</sup> Buchanan and Powell 384.



“reconcil[iation] of normative theorizing about moral progress and the prevailing evolutionary understandings of moral psychology and culture”—is one main purpose of their book.

Three quick clarifications before proceeding any further: First, though Buchanan and Powell often speak of inclusivism and exclusivism as discrete, they acknowledge that

moral exclusivity and inclusivity [are not] discrete character states that can be switched on and off. To the contrary, they are clearly continuous rather than binary features. That is to say, moralities can be more or less inclusive, and they may be inclusive in some dimensions while being exclusive in others, as a result of the complex interaction of biological, psychological, and cultural forces shaping moral development and evolution.<sup>14</sup>

I happily acknowledge the same. Though I often follow Buchanan and Powell in speaking of inclusivism and exclusivism as though they were discrete, I think of “inclusivism” and “exclusivism” as relative terms, and think of the so-called inclusivist anomaly not as the emergence of something categorically new but as the gradual emergence of a more inclusivist moral system from a less inclusivist one.

Second, Buchanan and Powell are interested in moral progress *as such*—as something normatively real—and are thus “committed to the truth of certain normative ethical claims” in their explanation of it even though they “do not offer a normative ethical theory.”<sup>15</sup> I, however, wish to explain what they call inclusivist moral progress without committing myself to the truth of any normative ethical claims; I intend my explanation of the inclusivist anomaly to be compatible with both moral realism and moral nihilism and both moral inclusivism and moral

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<sup>14</sup> Buchanan and Powell 193.

<sup>15</sup> Buchanan and Powell 15. “For example, we assume that slavery and other forms of bondage, as well as discrimination on grounds of gender, ethnicity, or religion, are morally wrong.”

exclusivism. I shall therefore speak in this essay of inclusivist moral *change* instead of inclusivist moral progress.

Third, because Buchanan and Powell develop their explanation of the inclusivist anomaly (and overarching theory of moral progress) over the course of four hundred pages, I cannot do full justice to every subtlety of their explanation. But I do not think that my reasons for rejecting it, or for accepting my own explanation, turn much on any of these subtleties.

### *Buchanan and Powell's Rejection of Evolutionary Explanations of the Inclusivist Anomaly*

Why do Buchanan and Powell think that inclusivist moral change appears to be in tension with evolutionary theory? According to standard evolutionary accounts of the origins of morality in human societies, exclusivism—characterized by “in-group favoritism/empathy and out-group antagonism/antipathy”<sup>16</sup>—was fitness-enhancing for the “small, scattered groups of weakly genetically related human beings competing with other groups for crucial resources” in the environment of evolutionary adaptation (hereafter, “EEA”): the lengthy prehistoric period leading up to the Agricultural Revolution about twelve thousand years ago during which our moral capacities evolved.<sup>17</sup> According to these accounts, early humans who cooperated with ingroup members—while not cooperating with, or at least not treating equally, outgroup members—would have fared better in the EEA than both those who did not effectively cooperate within ingroups and those who cooperated (as it were) “too much” with outgroup members,

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<sup>16</sup> Buchanan and Powell 130.

<sup>17</sup> Buchanan and Powell 80. According to standard characterizations of the EEA, it was an environment in which “small, scattered groups of weakly genetically related human beings compet[ed] with other groups for crucial resources.”

thereby risking attack, disease, and exploitation.<sup>18</sup> Hence exclusivism emerged because it encouraged cooperation with strategically advantageous partners (trustworthy ingroup members) while discouraging cooperation with everyone else. Exclusivism, in short, emerged as a “strategic conception of morality as cooperative group reciprocity” because it approximated a fitness-optimizing “sweet spot” of cooperative behavior.<sup>19</sup>

If exclusivism approximated such a fitness-optimizing “sweet spot” in the EEA, however, then the emergence of inclusivism seems a fitness-reducing, and therefore anomalous, *departure* from this sweet spot—something that cannot be explained by (roughly) fitness-optimizing evolutionary mechanisms alone. What, then, has motivated such a shift? Why have the past few hundred years brought it about?

Buchanan and Powell’s approach to these questions is nuanced. On the one hand, they argue that no “adequate evolutionary explanation has been given for the inclusivist features of contemporary human morality”<sup>20</sup>; on the other hand, they strive to find a place for evolution in their explanation of the inclusivist anomaly and “sketch a model of inclusivist moral progress that is not only consistent with, but affirmatively draws upon and unifies, current biological and social scientific understandings of moral psychology and culture.”<sup>21</sup> Buchanan and Powell thus offer a “naturalistic theory that can account for the ‘inclusivist anomaly’” according to which

evolution has produced ‘adaptively plastic’ moral psychological mechanisms that are configured to prevent inclusivist moral norms and dispositions from developing in certain environments, while allowing

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<sup>18</sup> See especially Buchanan and Powell 81: “[D]ata and theory suggest that morality evolved in a highly competitive intergroup environment in which extending altruism to out-group members would often have been evolutionarily deleterious. The result was the evolution of a highly parochial altruism.”

<sup>19</sup> Buchanan and Powell 384.

<sup>20</sup> Buchanan and Powell 40.

<sup>21</sup> Buchanan and Powell 151-152.

them to flourish in others. ... [T]he view we propose emphasizes that *human beings' evolved moral nature both enables morality in the form of inclusiveness and thwarts it, depending upon environmental factors broadly conceived, including cultural and institutional conditions.*<sup>22</sup>

In Buchanan and Powell's view, whether or not inclusivism emerges among the members of a certain population depends upon that population's environment; some environments foster inclusivism while others thwart it.

Why, then, do Buchanan and Powell reject evolutionary explanations of inclusivism? Buchanan and Powell argue that inclusivism cannot be evolutionary explained because it cannot plausibly be shown to be the selected-for result or byproduct of any evolutionary mechanism such as genetic drift or natural selection—genetic or cultural.<sup>23</sup> Inclusivism, Buchanan and Powell contend, did not emerge simply because it was selected for (for instance, because new ecological conditions made it “fitness enhancing or otherwise advantageous,” as they think Philip Kitcher would say,<sup>24</sup> because it was the byproduct of some other selected-for trait or capacity, or for any other such evolutionary reason. They reject all the candidate evolutionary explanations of inclusivism which they survey in *The Evolution of Moral Progress* as unsatisfactory.

For instance, Buchanan and Powell reject one selectionist explanation of inclusivism according to which it is like a peacock's tail: a hard-to-fake, sexually attractive signal of vigor. “To make this case,” they write,

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<sup>22</sup> Buchanan and Powell 42.

<sup>23</sup> On Buchanan and Powell's view on the scope of evolutionary explanation, see *inter alia* Buchanan and Powell 43: “We [allow] for extending evolutionary explanations beyond genetics, to encompass cultural selectionist explanations.”

<sup>24</sup> Buchanan and Powell 161. “Kitcher ... appears to argue that recent expansions of our moral circle are due to the presence of ecological conditions that make such expansions fitness enhancing or otherwise advantageous.” See Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project* (Harvard: 2014).

one would need to show that (1) culturally acquiring inclusivist moral traits supplies an advantage in sexual competition that outweighs its straightforward costs to fitness outside of the mating context, and (2) that this advantage has resulted in the proliferation of these traits in human populations.<sup>25</sup>

Neither of these claims, they argue, is “plausible enough to warrant serious consideration”—nor are similar claims buttressing other selectionist explanations plausible.<sup>26</sup>

Buchanan and Powell also reject non-selectionist evolutionary explanations of inclusivism such as byproduct explanations, in part because these explanations cannot obviously account for inclusivism’s uneven geographic distribution (not to mention its very recent emergence):

The existence of basic moral adaptations may help to explain why humans exhibit inclusivist moral features while, say, chimps (assuming they lack basic moral adaptations) do not; but this does not explain why some behaviorally modern humans exhibit inclusivist moral features while other behaviorally modern humans do not, since both possess basic moral adaptations. Whatever the crucial difference-makers here might be, they will not be evolved psychological capacities.<sup>27</sup>

To be sure, Buchanan and Powell acknowledge that “the human capacity for norm acquisition and implementation (including motivations for adherence and enforcement) is likely adaptive, and was selected for its ability to coordinate action and support cooperation within groups, with

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<sup>25</sup> Buchanan and Powell 164.

<sup>26</sup> Buchanan and Powell 164.

<sup>27</sup> Buchanan and Powell 168. See also Buchanan and Powell 167: “[I]nclusivist moral features are not plausible candidates for byproduct explanation because they have not reliably accompanied any of the putatively relevant adaptations thought to have arisen in the EEA. For tens or hundreds of thousands of years, human beings possessed the whole suite of cognitive and emotional adaptations that plausibly underpin morality—such as capacities for norm following, perspective taking, preference for consistency in belief, and the parochial altruism characteristic of group-restricted morality. And yet very few human beings exhibited anything approaching the full suite of inclusivist moral features that now characterize morality for many people today until *very recently* in human history.”

specific norms culturally selected for these effects.”<sup>28</sup> But the mere existence of such a capacity, they contend, cannot explain the recentness, degree, and uneven distribution of the inclusivist shift.

Thus Buchanan and Powell conclude that “none of [the main] inclusivist features of contemporary morality can be accounted for by selectionist, sexual selectionist, or byproduct evolutionary explanations,”<sup>29</sup> because most or all of these features seem to “[come] with attendant fitness costs that are difficult to explain on standard evolutionary accounts.”<sup>30</sup> Since the inclusivist shift has been fitness-reducing, inclusivist motivation cannot be accounted for by evolutionary theory.

Two more quick clarifications: First, I do not think that Buchanan and Powell, in arguing that the inclusivist anomaly cannot be evolutionary explained, wish to commit themselves to any particular account of evolutionary explanation. On the contrary, it seems to me that they intend what they say concerning evolutionary explanation to be fairly philosophically uncontroversial: If the motivations for a change in moral commitments like the inclusivist shift cannot be accounted for by evolutionary theory, then that change cannot be explained by evolutionary theory; if they *can*, however, then that change *can* be so explained. I accept both these claims. I take it that my disagreement with Buchanan and Powell in this essay has to do with the sources of inclusivist motivation, and not with the nature or possible scope of evolutionary explanation.

Second, I take it that what Buchanan and Powell mean when they say that a motivation is accounted for by evolutionary theory is simply that it motivates behaviors or other commitments which admit of selectionist, byproduct, or other evolutionary explanations. (Thus our motivation

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<sup>28</sup> Buchanan and Powell 136-137.

<sup>29</sup> Buchanan and Powell 384.

<sup>30</sup> Buchanan and Powell 160.

to drink, for instance, is easily accounted for by evolutionary theory.) Accordingly, Buchanan and Powell reject evolutionary accounts of inclusivist motivation for two main reasons: first, inclusivist commitments consistently go against our strategic interests and are therefore fitness-reducing; second, inclusivism's recentness and uneven spread rule out byproduct explanations of its emergence (since the capacities of which it is byproduct arose long before it did and are shared by contemporary exclusivists).

### *Buchanan and Powell's Explanation of the Inclusivist Anomaly*

We have seen that Buchanan and Powell argue that “inclusivist morality is not amenable to standard evolutionary explanations.”<sup>31</sup> And yet “[a]n explanation is needed of the curious fact that, although human beings apparently began with highly constrained, group-based moralities, many of them have come to have moralities that are much more inclusive.”<sup>32</sup> What, then, is their explanation of the inclusivist anomaly?

One important part of Buchanan and Powell's explanation is what they call the open-ended normativity of the ethical, or “capacity for open-ended normativity” (hereafter “COEN”), a conditionally expressed capacity which has become widespread only recently and only in the environments in which inclusivism has flourished.<sup>33</sup> “[A]ny naturalistic account of the inclusivist shift,” Buchanan and Powell write, “will feature a capacity that we have called *the open-ended normativity of the ethical*. This is the capacity to reflect on and revise our moral norms and

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<sup>31</sup> Buchanan and Powell 182.

<sup>32</sup> Buchanan and Powell 180.

<sup>33</sup> Buchanan and Powell 88.

modify our behavior accordingly, even when doing so is not only not fitness enhancing, but even fitness reducing.”<sup>34</sup>

COEN is not just any of our “capacities for norm following, perspective taking, preference for consistency in belief, and the parochial altruism characteristic of group-restricted morality” which humans acquired “tens or hundreds of thousands of years” ago long before the inclusivist shift took place.<sup>35</sup> Instead, COEN is “the ability to critically reflect on and revise moral norms”<sup>36</sup> for *moral reasons* regardless of subsequent fitness and “to become effectively motivated to realize [concomitant] alterations in our behavior.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, it is the capacity for “valid moral reasoning”<sup>38</sup>—or moral reasoning “*of the right sort*”<sup>39</sup>—untethered from morality’s original fitness-enhancing functions.

Buchanan and Powell argue that only something like COEN can explain the inclusivist shift:

[A] naturalistic account of how inclusive moral commitments emerge despite the evolved parochiality of human moral emotions, judgments and norms, cannot simply appeal solely to capacities for reason or self-scrutiny, nor to strategic self-serving relations between groups. It must identify the conditions under which reasoning capacities are exercised in such a way as to foster inclusivist commitments *even in the absence of strategic motivations*. ... Explanations that advert solely or principally to the modulation of ancestral moral sentiments under modern environmental conditions, without assigning any role to the capacity for open-ended normativity, will not suffice.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Buchanan and Powell 180-181.

<sup>35</sup> Buchanan and Powell 167.

<sup>36</sup> Buchanan and Powell 182.

<sup>37</sup> Buchanan and Powell 385.

<sup>38</sup> Buchanan and Powell 151.

<sup>39</sup> Buchanan and Powell 148.

<sup>40</sup> Buchanan and Powell 151, 183 (emphasis added).



Inclusivist commitments to causes like abolition, human rights, and animal welfare cannot be explained away as “modulations of ancestral moral sentiments,” Buchanan and Powell contend, because these ancestral sentiments were strategically constrained and therefore fitness-enhancing in a way that inclusivist commitments are not.<sup>41</sup> “The fact that inclusivist institutions now extend moral consideration to millions of strangers we will never encounter—namely, our fellow citizens in the modern state—is hard enough to explain given the standard evolutionary account of parochial altruism”; how much more our extension of such consideration to non-human animals, foreigners, and others who clearly are not strategic partners?<sup>42</sup> After all, the extension of such consideration has often seemed costly enough to be strategically disadvantageous. Take British abolitionism, one of Buchanan and Powell’s main examples: When the British government abolished slavery, it paid out twenty million pounds—a sum roughly equivalent to one hundred billion 2018 dollars—to former slaveholders. Or take inclusivist concern for the welfare of animals, another main example of theirs: “The financial cost of enforcing laws for the better treatment of nonhuman animals are considerable, and the willingness of the public to bear it cannot be explained in terms of strategic self-interest.”<sup>43</sup> What could plausibly explain such costly inclusivist commitments and inclusivism’s remarkable strides since the eighteenth century? The only explanation Buchanan and Powell see is that increasing numbers of humans have become “effectively motivated to exercise [COEN] and to act on the results of its exercise, irrespective of functional considerations.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Buchanan and Powell 183.

<sup>42</sup> Buchanan and Powell 180.

<sup>43</sup> Buchanan and Powell 154.

<sup>44</sup> Buchanan and Powell 88.

One key assumption of Buchanan and Powell’s argument is that inclusivist commitments and other commitments which go against our strategic interests (and our ingroups’ strategic interests) are *ipso facto* fitness-reducing. (Thus bearing the financial cost of laws securing animal rights is supposed to be strategically disadvantageous and *therefore* fitness-reducing—and therefore evolutionarily inexplicable, because the motivation to bear such a cost is not accounted for by evolutionary theory.) I am willing to grant (though perhaps not unreservedly endorse) something like this assumption. What I am unwilling to grant, and what I shall argue against, is that inclusivist commitments are in fact strategically disadvantageous.

As we have seen, then, Buchanan and Powell argue that any plausible explanation of the inclusivist anomaly must “advert to moral motivations that are not accounted for by evolutionary theory”: *non-strategic* motivations which can arise only from the exercise of a capacity like COEN. “[E]ven if a selectionist explanation of certain aspects of [inclusivist] morality could be given,” they say, “this would still leave much of contemporary morality beyond the scope of evolutionary explanation altogether.”<sup>45</sup> Therefore any plausible explanation of the inclusivist anomaly must advert to some COEN-like ability to recognize inclusivist moral reasons and be motivated by them to change our moral commitments.

Only certain environments, however, “[foster] the exercise of [COEN],” and thus inclusivism.<sup>46</sup> In Buchanan and Powell’s view, “exclusivist moral response is a conditionally expressed trait that develops only when cues that were in the past reliably correlated with outgroup predation, exploitation, competition for resources, and disease-transmission are detected.”<sup>47</sup> Exclusivist and inclusivist moral response are therefore *adaptively plastic*.

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<sup>45</sup> Buchanan and Powell 137.

<sup>46</sup> Buchanan and Powell 209.

<sup>47</sup> Buchanan and Powell 190.

What, for Buchanan and Powell, explains this adaptive plasticity? In their view, since

such an adaptively plastic moral psychological mechanism ... evolved, there must have been reliable periodic selection pressures generated by both exclusivist-friendly and inclusivist-friendly ecological regimes. ... An evolved moral psychology that included an adaptively plastic capacity to respond to strangers would have been more fitness enhancing than one that was “hard-wired” for exclusion. ... [F]rom the standpoint of both theory and experimental evidence, the adaptive plasticity hypothesis fares better than the “hard-wired” hypothesis.<sup>48</sup>

If different moral responses would have been fitness-optimizing in different environments—if, for instance, certain kinds of cooperation with outgroup members would have been beneficial in some environments but harmful in others—then we have reason to believe that our moral responses evolved to be adaptively plastic. “Full-fledged” inclusivism, to be sure, would never have been fitness-enhancing in the EEA, but a certain degree of “proto-inclusivism” (say, an increased willingness to trade and otherwise cooperate with outgroup members) might have been—in which case, Buchanan and Powell think that an evolutionary account of capacity for open-ended normativity can be told. This capacity’s open-endedness would enable proto-inclusivist responses in certain past environments and, in certain recent environments, full-fledged inclusivism.

What environments, then, foster the exercise of COEN and inclusivism? “Whether the potential for inclusivist morality is realized depends,” Buchanan and Powell contend,

upon a number of factors, including the presence of incentives for developing cooperative relationships with strangers (which markets preeminently provide) and on cultural innovations of various sorts, including communication and transportation technologies that link previously separated groups, techniques for perspective-taking, reductions

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<sup>48</sup> Buchanan and Powell 192, 204, 208.

in parasite threat, and improvements in moral concepts and moral reasoning. ... [A] complex social-epistemic environment is needed.<sup>49</sup>

Such environments, of course, have appeared only very recently:

While evolutionary developmental environments have favored varying degrees of exclusivity over the course of human history, conditions amenable to the exercise of [COEN] and hence to the development of more inclusivist moralities appear to be rare. In particular, they seem to be connected to a range of recent socio-political developments that have taken place predominantly in highly resourced populations. Such developments include (*inter alia*) healthcare and public health infrastructures, reductions in crime, rule of law, property rights, literacy, and the emergence of markets, to name a few. There is an important sense, therefore, in which inclusivist morality is a luxury good.<sup>50</sup>

Thus inclusivism is anomalous because conditions amenable to the exercise of COEN have appeared only recently and (as of yet) in only some parts of the world. Such conditions have made the inclusivist shift of the past few centuries possible by fostering the exercise of COEN, through which large groups of humans have been motivated for the first time in history to go against their strategic interests by taking on inclusivist commitments.

In short, Buchanan and Powell argue that evolutionary theory does not explain the inclusivist anomaly because it does not account for the motivations which brought the inclusivist anomaly about: fitness-reducing *moral* motivations which arose from the exercise of COEN, once environmental conditions made the widespread exercise of COEN possible.

Buchanan and Powell therefore offer two different explanations of exclusivism and inclusivism. Exclusivism, in their view, has a straightforward evolutionary explanation: It was selected for because it was fitness-enhancing. Inclusivism, however, not cannot have such a

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<sup>49</sup> Buchanan and Powell 209, 218.

<sup>50</sup> Buchanan and Powell 212.

straightforward explanation, because it is not fitness-enhancing. Though the emergence of inclusivism is *consistent* with evolutionary theory (if in fact human moral capacities evolved to be adaptively plastic), evolutionary theory alone cannot explain the inclusivist anomaly itself, because any plausible explanation of that anomaly will have to advert to moral motivations unaccounted for by evolutionary theory.

### **III. Reasons for Antecedent Wariness of Buchanan and Powell's Explanation**

Soon I shall offer my own sketch of an explanation of the inclusivist anomaly. Before I do, however, I should perhaps mention and explain my antecedent wariness of Buchanan and Powell's explanation of the inclusivist anomaly, and give some reasons for assigning what could be loosely spoken of as a low prior probability to non-evolutionary explanations like theirs of biocultural phenomena like inclusivism.

There are many things we humans do, feel, and believe which do not admit of any obvious evolutionary explanation. Indeed, many of the things which we do, feel, and believe seem *prima facie* fitness-reducing. Consider ritual practices of human sacrifice once common across the world. Naturally, these practices could be extremely costly; historical anthropologist Ross Hassig estimates that between ten and eighty thousand persons were sacrificed in just one day when the Great Pyramid of Tenochtitlan was reconsecrated in 1487.<sup>51</sup> It is therefore hard to see how such practices could have been fitness-enhancing—especially when children or young women were sacrificed—and hard to see how the motivations underlying such practices could be “accounted for by evolutionary theory.” But even if we do not have an evolutionary explanation

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<sup>51</sup> Ross Hassig, “El sacrificio y las guerras floridas,” *Arqueología Mexicana* 63 2003: 47.

of human sacrifice—I myself do not have one ready at hand—I presume most of us would assent to something like the following:

Certainly practices of human sacrifice seem at first glance to have been very costly and fitness-reducing; and yet such practices were once common across the world. They *must*, therefore, have some kind of evolutionary explanation, even if we do not yet know what it is. Perhaps such sacrifices do not have an obvious selectionist or other evolutionary explanation; still, evolutionary theory must be able at least to account for the motivations underlying them. Many things we do—music-making, stamp-collecting, watching strangers play football—do not have obvious evolutionary explanations, and yet we do not suppose that evolutionary theory cannot somehow account for our motivation to make music, collect stamps, or watch football. We should be wary, then, of too quickly seeking a non-evolutionary explanation of human sacrifice.

Much the same, it seems to me, could and should be said of inclusivism. The inclusivist anomaly is an undeniable pattern of change in the behavior of millions of social primates across several generations; it would therefore seem to cry out for evolutionary explanation. At the very least, I would expect evolutionary theory to be able to account for inclusivist motivation. If we cannot yet give an evolutionary account of inclusivist motivation, then I should like to ask whether there is something about inclusivism that we do not yet understand—rather than simply concluding that no such evolutionary account exists. In particular, I should like to ask whether the inclusivist anomaly is in fact so fitness-reducing as it seems to Buchanan and Powell and whether there exist sources of inclusivist motivation other than the obvious moral ones.

Hence I am antecedently wary of non-evolutionary explanations of the inclusivist anomaly, or of any other pattern of human belief and behavior—“antecedently,” because I assign what I have loosely called a low prior probability to such explanations before examining any of them specifically. And I am especially wary of such explanations when they appear to steer us off the fairly beaten path of evolutionary biology into a thicket of philosophically thorny

questions. Buchanan and Powell's explanation of the inclusivist anomaly seems to presuppose (among other things) a moral epistemology according to which only humans in certain environments can reliably perceive and be motivated by certain (inclusivist) moral facts. Perhaps such a presupposition should not trouble us overmuch. Still, faced with such a moral-epistemologically laden explanation of what is at root a biocultural explanandum, I cannot but wonder whether our inquiry has taken a wrong turn and whether we should not double back and seek some simpler explanatory path.

Naturally I think that we should, and that such a simpler path exists to be found. Presently I shall offer my sketch of it. But, even if my sketch has missed the mark, I doubt that Buchanan and Powell's has hit it. For I expect the true explanation of inclusivism, like the true explanation of exclusivism, to be in the main an evolutionary one, which adverts to motivations that *are* accounted for by evolutionary theory.

#### **IV. My Sketch of an Explanation of the Inclusivist Anomaly**

So much for Buchanan and Powell's explanation of the inclusivist anomaly. What of my own?

Though Buchanan and Powell see the inclusivist anomaly as a fitness-reducing moral shift the motivations for which are not accounted for by evolutionary theory, I myself doubt that this shift could have happened had it not been somehow *fitness-tracking*—reliably (if not necessarily) *fitness-enhancing*—and brought about by (fitness-tracking) motivations accounted for by evolutionary theory. But how could it have been *fitness-tracking*—and, if it was, what motivations gave rise to it?

Here, in brief, is my answer to these questions, and my sketch of an explanation of the inclusivist anomaly:

It seems to me that our motivations for changing our moral commitments are rarely *only* moral motivations of the kind which Buchanan and Powell think arise in us through the exercise of COEN. There are almost always, in addition to such moral motivations, what I shall call *status-enhancing* motivations for changing our moral (and almost all other) commitments—motivations for changing our actions and other commitments in order to improve our status within certain groups (especially our ingroups)—of which we are often only dimly aware. (I use “status” to refer broadly to someone’s sexual attractiveness, prestige, and power. Others, such as Robin Hanson and Kevin Simler, use the word to refer more narrowly to prestige and power alone.)<sup>52</sup> These status-enhancing motivations are of course not mutually exclusive with moral motivations; we often do something *both* because we think it is the morally right thing to do and because we are aware, if only very dimly, that doing it would improve our status among our peers. Thus we strive to be—or at least strive to be thought of as—good relatives, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and citizens not only because we believe that we ought to but also because being thought of as good friends, citizens, colleagues, and the like is status-enhancing and therefore *fitness-tracking* and advantageous in many ways. (Why does enhancing one’s status reliably enhance one’s reproductive fitness? The short answer—which I will soon fill out—is that enhancing one’s status within a group enhances one’s ability to cooperate effectively with other members of that group. We evolved to be status seekers because enhancing our status was a reliable means of enhancing our reproductive fitness.)

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<sup>52</sup> See Hanson and Simler 30-33. Robin Hanson and Kevin Simler, *The Elephant in the Brain: Hidden Motives in Everyday Life* (Oxford: 2018).



Status-enhancing motivations underlie almost everything we do as humans. As Robin Hanson and Kevin Simler (among others) have persuasively argued, our ancestors competed not only for food and other material resources but also for social status; in fact, “our ancestors got smart primarily in order to compete against each other in a variety of social and political scenarios.”<sup>53</sup> “Interacting with an organism of approximately equal mental abilities whose motives are at times outright malevolent,” Steven Pinker writes, “makes formidable and ever-escalating demands on cognition.”<sup>54</sup> Our brains evolved to meet these demands.

One way we evolved to meet these demands is by *signaling* our status to those around us: honestly or deceptively, expensively or cheaply, consciously or unconsciously. (A vain rich man might honestly, expensively, and consciously signal his wealth by driving a 2018 Lamborghini Veneno; a socially unaware rich man might deceptively, cheaply, and unconsciously signal his lack of wealth by driving a used 1997 Buick LeSabre.) In fact, we signal all kinds of information about ourselves in all kinds of ways: through our speech, body language, appearance, actions, possessions, and associates.

The inclusivist shift took place because signaling one’s inclusivist commitments became status-enhancing in certain parts of the world. (Why and how this happened where and when it did are important questions to which I will return in Section V.) Hence the inclusivist anomaly is not a fitness-reducing anomaly but instead a fitness-tracking and therefore non-anomalous change in moral commitments, the motivation for which was status-enhancing and therefore accounted for by evolutionary theory.

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<sup>53</sup> Hanson and Simler 29.

<sup>54</sup> Steven Pinker, *Language, Cognition, and Human Nature: Selected Articles* (Oxford: 2015) 150.

Consider again the peacock's tail (or, more properly, its train) as a usefully analogous explanandum. Peacocks' trains, so the evolutionary story goes, are hard-to-fake, sexually attractive signals of vigor to peahens. Since fitness costs borne by peacocks because of their trains are made up for by the corresponding fitness gains, having extravagant trains is fitness-enhancing for them. Peacocks therefore evolved to enhance their sexual attractiveness in part by displaying their extravagant trains.

We humans have likewise evolved to enhance our status in part by displaying various moral commitments. More generally, we have evolved to enhance our status in part by displaying what Buchanan and Powell would call *ideological* commitments. Ideologies—Buchanan and Powell use the word to refer to systems of belief regardless of specific content—function as

evaluative social maps that orient individuals in their social world by fostering and *being used to signal an entrenched group-based identity*.... According to this functionalist conception of ideology, ideologies are systems of belief that allow for an expansion of the social identity-group well beyond the usual feasible size for empathetic identification and strongly altruistic behavior.<sup>55</sup>

Ideologies, in other words, function as means of creating expanded ingroups. Buchanan and Powell give nationalism as a political example of an ideology, but it seems clear that moral, religious, and many other kinds of commitments can function ideologically, including inclusivist commitments. Inclusivism emerged within certain ideological groups as a status-enhancing signal of compassion, generosity, charity, piety, and other established virtues. Its remarkable spread since the eighteenth century is the result both of economic, technological, and other environmental changes (which have reduced the cost of inclusivist signals) and of the political

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<sup>55</sup> Buchanan and Powell 407 (emphasis added).

successes of inclusivist ideological groups (which have increased the benefits of inclusivist signals).

Therefore the inclusivist anomaly is no anomaly at all. Evolutionary theory, despite what Buchanan and Powell say, *does* advert to (status-enhancing) motivations which largely explain our inclusivist and other ideological commitments. The existence of such motivations accords with a growing body of research suggesting that “moral reasoning is usually a post-hoc construction” shaped by “social and cultural influences.”<sup>56</sup> Much of our ideological life—moral, religious, and political, inclusivist and exclusivist—is motivated to signal our worthiness to various prospective and actual friends and allies. So inclusivism does not require a non-evolutionary explanation like Buchanan and Powell’s.

That, in brief sketch, is my provisional explanation of the inclusivist anomaly and of inclusivist motivation. In what follows, I shall try to fill out this sketch further by replying to several potential objections.

## **V. Objections and Replies**

*Objection:* Why would enhanced status within a group enhance one’s ability to cooperate effectively with other members of that group?

*Reply:* We humans, as Hanson and Simler observe, are “competitive social animals fighting for power, status [i.e., prestige], and sex,”<sup>57</sup> which is tantamount to fighting for

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<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment,” *Psychological Review* 108 2001: 1.

<sup>57</sup> Hanson and Simler 5.

“attention and affection from potential mates, friends, and allies.”<sup>58</sup> Enhanced status, then, is tantamount to enhanced desirability as a sexual partner, friend, and ally, which is tantamount to an enhanced ability to cooperate effectively with members of one’s group—which is tantamount (or at least *was* tantamount in the EEA) to enhanced reproductive fitness. (Recall the importance of effective cooperation to standard evolutionary explanations of exclusivism. It seems to me that effective cooperation is no less important to a good explanation of competition for status, and therefore of ideologies like inclusivism.)

*Objection:* Aren’t you too quick to say that enhanced status is tantamount to enhanced reproductive fitness? Isn’t it possible that high status could become *negatively* correlated with reproductive fitness—if, for instance, smaller families and lower reproductive rates became signals of high status?

*Reply:* Certainly—and especially in modern environments remarkably different from the EEA—our status-seeking “drive” can “misfire” and become negatively correlated with reproductive fitness, just as our sugar-seeking drive can. But the claim that our status-seeking drive is an evolutionary adaptation does not depend on its reliably tracking reproductive fitness *now*; it depends on its reliably tracking reproductive fitness *in the EEA*. “[T]o say that something is an ‘adaptation,’” after all, “is a strictly backward-looking statement—it is a claim about the selective etiology of a trait, not about its present utility or current contribution to survival and reproduction.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Hanson and Simler 37.

<sup>59</sup> Buchanan and Powell 119.

It seems clear to me that our status-seeking drive *did* in fact reliably track reproductive fitness in the EEA. So it seems clear to me that our status-seeking drive is an evolutionary adaptation, even if it no longer tracks reproductive fitness as reliably as it once did.

*Objection:* But what do one's moral or other ideological commitments have to do with one's status, anyway?

*Reply:* Have you ever publicly defended abortion rights in a Southern Baptist church or walked through downtown San Francisco wearing a Trump hat?

Our ideological commitments are some of our most important signals of *loyalty* to various ingroups—not just “purely” ideological ingroups like political ingroups, but also kin groups (if we were raised in secular progressive families, for instance, or conservative religious ones) and ethnic, regional, cultural, and institutional groups. Buchanan and Powell acknowledge that seemingly arbitrary moral norms may serve as “mechanisms for delineating group membership, coordinating group action, signaling cooperative intent, and/or maintaining group cohesion.”<sup>60</sup> There is no reason to think that other norms and ideological commitments may not serve the same functions.

To be sure, as Buchanan and Powell suggest, ideological commitments alone are ineffective signals of one's sexual attractiveness, and perhaps also of one's prestige and power. The *wrong* ideological commitments, however, can easily thwart our efforts to procure sexual partners, friends, and allies. Displaying the “right” ideological commitments, or at least not displaying the wrong ones, is therefore an important means to securing one's status.

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<sup>60</sup> Buchanan and Powell 249.

*Objection:* Inclusivist commitments are almost by definition commitments to *outgroup* members such as foreigners or nonhuman animals. How could such commitments be signals of loyalty to ingroups?

*Reply:* An elderly, female, non-Muslim member of the Democratic Party can display her loyalty to the Democratic Party and many others groups merely by writing a Facebook post in support of young, male, Muslim refugees. A vegan can display his loyalty to other advocates for greater recognition of animal rights—perhaps he works for PETA or simply has several vegan friends—merely by writing a Facebook post in opposition to factory farming. Inclusivist ingroups obviously exist, and there is no incoherence in the concept of an ideological ingroup made up of members with shared commitments to outgroup members. Ideologies, as Buchanan and Powell rightly point out, “draw a line around the expanded group, demarcating the moral community in ways that exclude other groups”—whether that moral community is demarcated by its exclusivist or inclusivist (or other) commitments.<sup>61</sup> So inclusivist commitments clearly can signal loyalty, and other positive traits, to inclusivist ingroups.

*Objection:* All this talk of signaling is far too cynical. Are you suggesting that inclusivists are all insincere? Are you suggesting that abolitionists, civil rights activists, and other inclusivists sought social reforms merely to enhance their status?

*Reply:* I am suggesting neither of these things.

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<sup>61</sup> Buchanan and Powell 407.

I do not doubt that most inclusivists, like most exclusivists, sincerely hold to their moral views, and act as they do in part because of genuinely moral motivations. I doubt only that status-enhancing motivations play an insignificant role in shaping their inclusivist commitments—for I doubt that status-enhancing motivations play an insignificant role in shaping almost any part of almost any human life.

*Objection:* But almost all inclusivists would deny that status-enhancing motivations shape their inclusivist commitments. Are they lying?

*Reply:* I do not say that they are lying. I say that they likely do not fully understand the nature of what Bernard Williams usefully called their motivational sets.

It seems to me a familiar fact of life that we often do, feel, and believe things without fully understanding or acknowledging our motivations or reasons for doing, feeling, and believing them. More specifically, it seems to me that we often focus on our nobler motivations (such as moral motivations) while overlooking our less noble motivations (such as status-enhancing motivations).

Such “self-deception,” as Hanson and Simler argue, has a clear evolutionary explanation. Deceiving ourselves concerning the nobility of our motivations improves our ability to deceive those around us concerning the nobility of our motivations, which in turn improves our ability to signal our worthiness as friends and allies:

Our brains are built to act in our self-interest while at the same time trying hard not to appear selfish in front of other people. And in order to throw them off the trail, our brains often keep ‘us,’ our conscious minds, in the

dark. *The less we know of our own ugly motives, the easier it is to hide them from others.*<sup>62</sup>

As a rule, it is not status-enhancing to admit our status-enhancing motivations to our peers, and in fact it is often uncomfortable even to admit such status-enhancing motivations to ourselves. And yet we clearly have such motivations; after all, competitive social primates that we are, we certainly have no trouble detecting and pointing them out in others. Our brains evolved to help us compete for status effectively and signal our worthiness as (noble and unselfish) mates, friends, and allies. “For the price of a little self-deception,” then, “we get to have our cake and eat it too: act in our own best interests without having to reveal ourselves as the self-interested schemers we often are.”<sup>63</sup>

Hence it is no surprise if less noble and (therefore) less acknowledged motivations shape our inclusivist commitments; such motivations shape almost everything we do. The mass of men, to paraphrase Thoreau, lead lives of quiet self-deception.

*Objection:* Are you saying that inclusivists have not actually exercised their moral capacities when they have revised or abandoned their former exclusivism?

*Reply:* No. Clearly at least some inclusivists—and at least some exclusivists—have come to the moral commitments they adopt by exercising their capacities for moral reasoning. (One reason I doubt Buchanan and Powell’s explanation of the inclusivist anomaly is that I do not see any conditionally expressed moral capacities which only inclusivists, and not exclusivists, have. I do not see any moral capacity that inclusivists have which Aristotle and Augustine did not. If

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<sup>62</sup> Hanson and Simler 5 (emphasis added).

<sup>63</sup> Hanson and Simler 8.



Aristotle and Augustine's moral commitments are bad, I do not see that they are bad because Aristotle and Augustine lacked some moral capacity.)

I *am* saying, however, that we need not conclude, as Buchanan and Powell do, that inclusivists' motivations for adopting their moral commitments have been *only* (or even primarily) moral. For status-enhancing motivations can also account for inclusivists' adoption of their moral commitments regardless of their exercise of their moral capacities.

*Objection:* Displaying one's inclusivist commitments can perhaps enhance one's status *once there exist inclusivist groups to be signaled to*. But your signaling explanation does not account for the *emergence* of such inclusivist groups or the historical *anomalousness* of inclusivism. Why and how did inclusivism emerge where and when it did? Surely signaling explanations alone cannot answer this question.

*Reply:* This, I think, is perhaps the most important objection to my explanation, so I shall not give it short shrift.

As I have said, "inclusivism" and "exclusivism" are relative terms. Though the British abolitionists were inclusivists relative to their contemporaries, they were exclusivists relative to us; by and large, their inclusivism concerning slavery did not extend to their views concerning gender and racial inequality, the nature of marriage, and other contemporary inclusivist issues. (William Wilberforce, however, perhaps the best known of the British abolitionists, helped establish the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.) Their inclusivism had to do first and foremost with an institution (slavery) towards which their contemporaries *and predecessors* were already somewhat ambivalent. The emergence of their abolitionist inclusivism, then, was

not the emergence of something altogether *sui generis*, but of something *more* inclusivist from something *less* so.

In other words, abolitionist inclusivism was an *ideological development* which did not come out of the blue but rather from the remolding and recasting of existing resources within certain ideological traditions—as Anglicanism, for instance, came from the remolding and recasting of existing resources within Roman Catholicism. Such ideological developments are a commonplace of human history. No ideological tradition of any kind is altogether static, and yet ideological traditions, rather like Quinean webs of belief, seem usually to change gradually, marginally, and from within as their existing parts are redefined and repurposed. The abolitionist (and other) beginnings of the inclusivist shift, then, were not anomalous, but rather incidences of typical ideological developments.

But what does an ideological development look like? And what ideological tradition did (eighteenth-century) inclusivism remold? I shall answer these questions by considering this case of British abolitionism. Because Buchanan and Powell consider British abolitionism “arguably ... the first social movement in the modern sense” and one of the best examples of an inclusivist movement whose members’ motivations cannot be accounted for by evolutionary theory, I shall spell out at length my reasons for believing that status-enhancing motivations can largely account for it.<sup>64</sup> I take it that the story I tell about British abolitionism can be retold, *mutatis mutandis*, about other inclusivist movements.

Slavery was hardly a universally lauded practice in Britain leading up to abolition. William the Conqueror forbade the export of slaves from England in 1066,<sup>65</sup> the Council of

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<sup>64</sup> Buchanan and Powell 32.

<sup>65</sup> Internet Medieval Sourcebook, “Laws of William the Conqueror,” <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/source/will1-lawsb.asp>.

London abolished the slave trade altogether in 1102,<sup>66</sup> and by the end of the twelfth century chattel slavery in England had all but disappeared.<sup>67</sup> Much earlier, of course, Aristotle and other ancient philosophers and statesmen had already shown a certain ambivalence towards slavery; and so had the Church, in view of the Christian tradition's many inclusivist or proto-inclusivist themes of universal justice, equality, and liberation. The seeds of British abolitionism were sown in both sacred and secular ethical thought long before they were reaped.

Why, then, were they reaped when they were—centuries after the disappearance of domestic slavery in Britain? My answer to this question draws together three main considerations.

First, as Buchanan and Powell say, inclusivism *is* something of a luxury good. Though I think that Buchanan and Powell exaggerate the cost of inclusivist commitments, they do seem on average more materially costly to signal than exclusivist commitments, and therefore “affordable” only in more prosperous societies. It is therefore no coincidence that the inclusivist anomaly in Britain and elsewhere began with “the spread of market [relations] and the Industrial Revolution” (among social reformers some of whom were very wealthy), or that the British Empire abolished slavery just as it neared the peak of its wealth and might—precisely when it could most easily afford to do so.<sup>68</sup>

Second, abolitionism emerged first and foremost among certain Protestant sects established in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—Dissenters (i.e., non-Anglican British

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<sup>66</sup> Internet Medieval Sourcebook, “Decrees on Sale of Unfree Christians, c. 922-1171,” <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/source/11711atrsale.asp>.

<sup>67</sup> See *inter alia* Pollock and Maitland 39: “Slavery ... existed, and was fully recognized, in England until the twelfth century.” Frederick Pollock and Frederic Maitland, *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I* (Cambridge: 1898).

<sup>68</sup> Buchanan and Powell 26.

Protestants)—whose ideologies emphasized egalitarianism (for instance, in their frequent commitment to congregationalist rather than episcopal polity) more than did Anglican or Catholic ideologies. Indeed, it would be only a slight exaggeration to call British (and early American) abolitionism a movement of Dissenters, and especially of Quakers—whose sect’s very name, “Religious Society of Friends,” of course betrayed their egalitarianism. Though Anglicans made up over ninety percent of the English population until about 1800,<sup>69</sup> many if not most prominent abolitionists were Dissenters by faith. “Leading antislavery agitators” in Bradford, for instance, “included Baptists, Quakers (the Society of Friends had formed their own national abolition committee in 1783) and Unitarians, amongst others”—and much the same could be said of other English cities and towns.<sup>70</sup> The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, established in 1787, had nine Quakers as founding members and only three Anglicans—and at least one of those Anglicans, Granville Sharp, had been influenced in his views by his correspondence with the early Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet.

Dissenters, then, played a disproportionate role in British abolitionism—a role which (I should note) seems hard to square with Buchanan and Powell’s explanation of the inclusivist anomaly. Buchanan and Powell link inclusivism to sociopolitical developments like the rule of law, the emergence of markets, and property rights, which for the most part account only for different *inter*-societal rates of inclusivism, not for different *intra*-societal rates—in particular, different rates among Anglicans and Dissenters. Both Anglicans and Dissenters, after all, lived under the same rule of law in the same commercializing and industrializing society. If the average Dissenter was wealthier than the average Anglican—Quakers were known for the many

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<sup>69</sup> Clive Field, “Counting Religion in England and Wales: The Long Eighteenth Century, c. 1680-c. 1840,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 63.4 2012: 711.

<sup>70</sup> James R.T.E. Gregory, “Historical Perspectives on the Transatlantic Slave Trade in Bradford, Yorkshire: Abolitionist Activity c.1787-1865” 2013: 3.

wealthy bankers, manufacturers, and tradesmen within their ranks—wealth alone hardly guaranteed abolitionist leanings. Instead, abolition seems to have emerged not proportionately among wealthy Britons of all stripes but disproportionately among Quakers and other Dissenters. (When it spread to Anglicans, moreover, it spread to those Anglicans like William Wilberforce who sympathized with Dissenters and with Methodist and other evangelical reformers in the Church of England.) Abolitionism therefore seems to be an eighteenth-century ideological development within Dissenting Christianity—itself an ideological development within Anglicanism—which, catalyzed by favorable economic conditions, drew upon egalitarian and other proto-inclusivist resources within that tradition to remold it.

Third, and most important, abolitionism seems to have emerged within Dissenting Christianity as a status-enhancing competitive demonstration of virtue, which are common across the animal kingdom. Consider, for instance, the competitive altruism of Arabian babblers. These birds

*compete* to help each other and the group—often aggressively so. For example, not only do higher-ranked babblers give food to lower-ranked babblers, sometimes they force it down the throats of unwilling birds! Similar jockeying takes place for the ‘privilege’ of performing other altruistic behaviors.

If the goal of these behaviors is to be helpful, why do the babblers waste effort competing to perform them? ... The answer ... is that altruistic babblers develop a kind of ‘credit’ among their groupmates—what [ornithologist Amotz] Zahavi calls *prestige status*.<sup>71</sup>

Babblers compete with one another for status by helping their fellow babblers, thereby signaling their usefulness and hardihood. Humans likewise compete with one another for status by signaling not only their usefulness and hardihood but also their compassion, piety, and

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<sup>71</sup> Hanson and Simler 21-22.

virtuousness. In eighteenth-century Britain, abolitionist commitments could reliably (if only unconsciously) signal greater virtuousness—even among Anglicans and other non-Dissenters. It is for this reason that such commitments could spread across Britain and later on across the world.

Why could abolitionist commitments signal greater virtuousness? Recall that views on slavery in Britain and the Christian West had always been somewhat ambivalent. Rarely had slavery been defended as a “positive good” (to borrow John C. Calhoun’s infamous phrase); instead, it was more often defended as a necessary evil on grounds better described as prudential than moral. Defenders of slavery, though they were defenders of the *status quo*, were not well placed to claim the moral high ground, and so it is little surprise that abolitionists could effectively signal their greater virtuousness through their abolitionist commitments. Early abolitionists, after all, were not reinventing the (already recognized) virtues of compassion, piety, and the like, but rather demonstrating their *superior exemplification* of them—and demonstrating slaveholders’ inferior virtuousness, coldheartedness, and greed. Thus abolitionists could claim the moral high ground, and therefore the *status* high ground, by displaying their (relatively) inclusivist commitments—thereby all but guaranteeing their eventual success. (Buchanan and Powell begin *The Evolution of Moral Progress* by quoting the Dissenting Christian minister Theodore Parker’s proclamation that the arc of the moral universe is long but bends toward justice. It seems to me truer to history to say that the arc of the moral universe is long but bends toward status.)

Such status competition between disproportionately non-Anglican abolitionists and disproportionately Anglican defenders of slavery seems linked to previous conflicts in Britain like the English Civil Wars, which pitted the disproportionately Dissenting Roundheads against

the disproportionately Anglican Cavaliers. It seems to me no coincidence that abolitionism succeeded as Anglican influence in England was beginning to wane, and likely that at least some abolitionists were motivated by anti-Anglican and anti-Tory sentiments (as, for instance, James Gregory's research suggests).<sup>72</sup> Abolitionist commitments seem to me to have been status-enhancing not only for individual abolitionists but also for certain ideological groups jockeying with other ideological groups for political influence and power.

In sum: Abolitionism emerged within certain Christian traditions as a status-enhancing ideological development under historical and environmental conditions favorable to its emergence and success. Once abolitionist and other inclusivist commitments had become part of recognized ideologies—not just religious ideologies, but political and moral ideologies like liberalism and utilitarianism—later inclusivists could draw upon inclusivist resources within such ideologies to build upon earlier inclusivist successes and follow their forerunners' example by signaling their virtuousness through inclusivist commitments. Inclusivism therefore seems to have benefitted from a kind of positive feedback loop—so much so that new and paradigmatically inclusivist virtues like tolerance and egalitarianism themselves eventually became worth signaling.

Such, in brief, is my account of the emergence of inclusivism, at least in the Anglophone world. The story of inclusivism's emergence on the European continent is somewhat different; in France, for instance, early inclusivism seems to have taken a more irreligious and anti-clerical tack. But I think much the same story I have told about British abolitionism could be told about any other inclusivist movement. Inclusivism emerged as a status-enhancing development within

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<sup>72</sup> See Gregory 3: “[A]ntislavery activity [in Bradford] can be seen ... as part of the awakening of a Liberal party in Bradford. This Liberalism was nonconformist in its religious background, reacting to the domination of the town by an Anglican and Tory elite.”

certain ideological traditions under environmental conditions favorable to its emergence and success—the status-enhancing motivations for which are accounted for by evolutionary theory.

*Objection:* To quote Buchanan and Powell:

It is true that many abolitionists joined the movement at least in part because they had come to a new understanding of what it was to be a Christian, repudiating the traditional acquiescence of Christianity in slavery. *But it would be hard to make the case that this new understanding ... came about primarily if not exclusively through the development of religious thought as a phenomenon independent of the economic, cultural, social and political changes we have emphasized.*

Instead, it is more likely that secular, Enlightenment ideas, along with selection for inclusivist moral responses prompted by the favorable socioeconomic and political conditions of British society noted above, prompted many Christians to reinterpret what it was to be a Christian, focusing the exercise of the capacity for open-ended normativity on the character of their religious identity. ... To our knowledge, no credible contemporary historian of the British abolitionist movement assigns the role of a primary cause to internal developments in Christian thought.<sup>73</sup>

*Reply:* Why would “secular, Enlightenment ideas” have persuaded Dissenters so much more than they did Anglicans? I do not see how Buchanan and Powell could answer this question without acknowledging (among other things) the egalitarian themes already present in Dissenter ideology. I of course freely concede that religious thought, like all kinds of thought, has never been independent of economic, cultural, social, and political changes—nor have such changes ever been altogether independent of religious thought. So I do not see how this concession undermines my account of the origins of British abolitionism.

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<sup>73</sup> Buchanan and Powell 327-328.



It seems to me, moreover, that the path to the Enlightenment was paved by developments in Christian thought like the repudiation of Scholasticism, and that eighteenth-century “secular, Enlightenment ideas” cannot be neatly untangled from eighteenth-century Christian ones. (In particular, the moral commitments of the non-Christian Enlightenment thinkers do not seem to me obviously more inclusivist than those of the Christians.) In other words, the Enlightenment seems to me an ideological development within Western Christian thought. Even if British abolitionism came out of the Enlightenment, then, it still seems to me to have come (if only indirectly) out of the Christian ideological tradition. For the Enlightenment itself came out of that tradition as well.

In the end, it does not seem to me merely coincidental that eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain was “a devout Christian society” (Gregory, 12) or that the most inclusivist countries in the world today are roughly the same countries that make up what was once known as Protestant Europe.<sup>74</sup> It seems to me to be the case—though I do not know how to prove it—that the resources of the Christian tradition (and even more so the Protestant tradition, and most of all the Dissenting Protestant tradition) were especially ripe for inclusivist ideological development. Though these resources are certainly not the only causes of inclusivism, I do not think inclusivism’s uneven geographic spread can be explained by non-religious environmental conditions alone.

*Objection:* Inclusivism has spread far beyond its supposed roots in fringe Protestant sects; since the eighteenth century, it has made steady (if not entirely uninterrupted) cultural and

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<sup>74</sup>Gregory 12. See also Gregory 12-13: “The emphasis on the *religious* dimension to emancipation, for a devout Christian society as early nineteenth-century Britain *was*, was important, and Bradford Baptists, Methodists and other denominationalists were active in missionary activity which involved them in guiding the ‘lately emancipated Negroes to spiritual emancipation’ .... The campaign was seen as a Christian one, against those who would twist the Bible, or justify great moral breaches through the ‘miserable doctrines of expediency.’”

political inroads. Hence, even if your account of the emergence of inclusivism is right, the question remains: Why has inclusivism been so successful, and spread so quickly?

*Reply:* The fringe Protestant sects among which abolitionism emerged have played an enormously influential role in the past three hundred years of Western and global history. Many of the widely respected institutions they founded—including most of the Ivy League, not to mention the United States of America—have aided, abetted, and propagated inclusivism since their founding. Even in the eighteenth century, when they were still subjects of religious discrimination, they and their sympathizers were very influential.

Since then, their influence has only grown, as inclusivist political factions aligned with the Dissenters have defeated their exclusivist rivals in several important conflicts: the English Civil Wars, the rebellion of the American colonies, the North's victory in the American Civil War, and the Allies' victory in World War II, among others. The outcome of these conflicts has usually been increased inclusivist (and Dissenter) influence and success. Inclusivism, then, much like Christianity or Islam, has spread in part through its military and political victories, which have only increased the status-enhancing effect of inclusivist commitments. History, we are told, is written by the victors; one might also say that status is determined by the victors. Had the outcome of any of the aforementioned conflicts differed—had the Axis won World War II, for instance, or the South the Civil War—I expect that inclusivism's spread would have been retarded if not reversed.

One good example of this effect of political and military victory on inclusivist spread, I think, is the post-World War II enshrinement of human rights doctrine in various constitutions. (I choose this example in part because Buchanan and Powell discuss it at some length.) This

enshrinement seems to me more or less the enshrinement of the ideology of the victorious states of World War II—recall that the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council are that war’s five main victorious states (or their successor states)—especially of the state, the United States, which came out of that war least scathed and most powerful.

“The very existence and success of the human rights movement,” Buchanan and Powell argue, are evidence of “a robust, broad-based moral consensus, rather than the result of weaker nations being brow-beaten by more powerful ones into merely ‘assenting’ rather than consenting to a system of human rights.”<sup>75</sup> It seems to me, however, that Buchanan and Powell too quickly rule out another explanation: It was diplomatically advantageous for most states to display a commitment to human rights—what would they have signaled by not displaying such a commitment?—and therefore to vote in favor of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (while frequently and furtively violating that declaration). (As Richard Miller and others have documented, the United States’ offenses in this respect have been especially egregious—especially because the United States has often cited other states’ supposed violations of human rights as a pretext for military intervention.)<sup>76</sup> I doubt whether the “robust, broad-based moral consensus” which Buchanan and Powell describe could ever have arisen without significant social and political pressures from American and other Western political elites, and I suspect that such pressures have done much since World War II to accelerate official the spread of inclusivism. (Buchanan and Powell contend that certain “extremist political elites” can have “a

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<sup>75</sup> Buchanan and Powell 311.

<sup>76</sup> See especially Miller 181-209. Richard W. Miller, *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power* (Oxford: 2013).

dominant interest in provoking exclusivist moral responses in others.”<sup>77</sup> I agree, and only add that certain other elites can have a dominant interest in promoting inclusivism.)

Moreover, economic and technological progress seem only to have accelerated inclusivism’s spread. Besides making inclusivist commitments of all kinds more affordable, economic and technological progress seem also to have reduced the cost of specific inclusivist commitments; for instance, the invention of birth control pills and discovery of antibiotics seem to have reduced the cost of the Sexual Revolution. Since economic and technological progress have been fairly continuous since the eighteenth century, inclusivism’s fairly continuous spread since then is little surprise.

*Objection:* But haven’t inclusivist commitments still been prohibitively costly all along? Couldn’t the British abolitionists have enhanced their status more cheaply by signaling their virtuousness in some more cost-effective manner?

*Reply:* How costly was it for a non-slaveholding abolitionist to advocate for abolition? The British abolitionists themselves did not pay out twenty million pounds to their slaveholding peers. It seems to me that most inclusivists, like most members of almost all ideological groups, display their ideological commitments fairly cost-effectively—without, for instance, lowering their standards of living or significantly disrupting the patterns of their lives. Indeed, most inclusivists, ideological commitments notwithstanding, still clearly prioritize the interests of members of their non-ideological ingroups: neighbors, friends, relatives, and (most of all) themselves. As Buchanan and Powell acknowledge, “the combination of in-group

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<sup>77</sup> Buchanan and Powell 221.

favoritism/empathy and out-group antagonism/antipathy” is still “among the most cross-culturally robust features of human moral psychology” three centuries after the beginning of the inclusivist anomaly.<sup>78</sup>

Naturally, extremely costly inclusivist signals exist—but so do extremely costly signals of all kinds of ideological commitments. Buchanan and Powell have yet to show, I think, that inclusivism is *uniquely* strategically disadvantageous or fitness-reducing: more so, say, than ascetic or socialist or human-sacrificing ideologies. I therefore see little reason to follow Buchanan and Powell in giving inclusivism its own distinct explanation. Inclusivism’s costs do not seem to me very much out of the ordinary.

Furthermore, even if the widespread adoption of certain inclusivist commitments within societies would in the long run decrease their members’ average reproductive fitness, those commitments could still be cheap enough to serve as effective status-enhancing signals for many of their members—in which case those members’ inclusivist motivations would be accounted for by evolutionary theory. Of course, other members of these societies might find such inclusivist commitments prohibitively costly, much as many slaveholders in eighteenth-century Britain must have found abolitionist commitments. But these members’ rejection of inclusivist commitments alone would not suffice to prevent inclusivism’s emergence, spread, and political success.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Let us take stock of what has been said.

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<sup>78</sup> Buchanan and Powell 130.

The inclusivist anomaly admits of evolutionary explanation just as exclusivism does. At least since the Agricultural Revolution, humans have sought to enhance their status in part by displaying ideological commitments, including (more recently) inclusivist commitments. Their motivation to do so has a fairly clear evolutionary explanation: Displaying certain ideological commitments in certain societies could reliably signal virtuousness and (therefore) status, and enhanced status reliably tracked enhanced fitness in the EEA.

Thus inclusivism emerged and spread as a status-enhancing development within certain ideological traditions under environmental conditions favorable to its emergence and spread. So Buchanan and Powell's explanation of the so-called inclusivist anomaly in *The Evolution of Moral Progress* is unnecessary. To explain that anomaly, we need not suppose that COEN exists (even if it does); we need only look to the important status-enhancing functions of ideological commitments. The inclusivist anomaly, then, is not truly an anomaly but the result of environmental changes that have taken place since the Protestant Reformation—first in Europe, and later all around the world. Because (according to my explanation of this anomaly) there were status-enhancing motivations for bringing it about, the motivations for bringing it about are accounted for by evolutionary theory. So my explanation is (at least broadly speaking) an evolutionary one.

I have offered my explanation explicitly as a provisional sketch, many parts of which remain to be filled in or revised. (For instance, I have not yet said anything about the positive utility we receive from our altruistic endeavors—what economist James Andreoni has called the “warm glow” effect—as a partial explanation of inclusivist altruism.)<sup>79</sup> I am confident, however, in all my sketch's broad strokes. In particular, it seems to me that the role status-enhancing

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<sup>79</sup> See for example Andreoni 1447. James Andreoni, “Giving with Impure Altruism: Applications to Charity and Ricardian Influence,” *Journal of Political Economy* 97.6 1989: 1447-1458.

motivations play in our social lives—hinted at, in different ways, by thinkers as various as Glaucon, Hume, and Nietzsche—can hardly be overstated: “[T]he deeper logic of many of our strangest and most unique behaviors may lie in their value as signals” in social competitions for status.<sup>80</sup>

I close with some quick observations about the importance of understanding the inclusivist anomaly.

There are many reasons to want a historically and scientifically informed understanding of the inclusivist anomaly. One which Buchanan and Powell point out is that such an understanding may help us foresee and thwart threats to our societies’ inclusivist commitments. Another (which I have already mentioned) is that the inclusivist anomaly is one of the most striking events in human history—comparable, in my view, to the birth of a new religious tradition.

But perhaps the most important reason to want such an understanding of the inclusivist anomaly is to gain a better understanding of our own inclusivist commitments. If our ideological lives are not to become self-congratulatory or short-sighted, we will need to own up to *all* the status-enhancing and other motivations underlying our ideological commitments, and examine the many non-rational forces which have shaped them. If we do, we may discover that we are not so different from our exclusivist contemporaries, or even our exclusivist forebears. We may discover that there is nothing new under the sun—not even ourselves.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Hanson and Simler 39.

<sup>81</sup> I thank Jerry Postema, Luc Bovens, Geoff Sayre-McCord, and others for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this essay.

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