Skylar Hawthorne

**Modern American Morality**

The central hypothesis of the book The Evolution of Moral Progress, by James Buchanan and Russell Powell, is that morality is adaptively plastic. A plethora of environmental stimuli toggle its continuous expression between inclusivist and exclusivist. Moral progress, in the form of greater inclusiveness, is consequently contingent upon the proliferation of conditions that favor inclusivist morality. Donald Trump is deteriorating these conditions and is therefore causing moral regression.

The environment of evolutionary adaptation (EEA) is the set of reliable past conditions that have caused adaptations. For humans, these conditions favored exclusivist morality. Pathogens and lethal intergroup conflict were rampant, assisting the survival of cooperative groups that excluded outsiders. Since the false judgment that a stranger is friendly entailed greater consequences than the false judgment that a stranger is hostile, exclusivist morality increased reproductive fitness. This makes it seem that morality is constrained to exclusivity by human nature. That since inclusivist morality wasn’t evolutionarily advantageous, it’s merely aspirational. However, four phenomena suggest otherwise.

The belief that morality is an adaptation for cooperation cannot explain four recent expansions of morality. First, many people now consider non-human animals to be worthy of moral standing. This belief, in the past, would’ve caused starvation. It’s not evolutionarily advantageous, but the vegetarian diet is exponentially gaining popularity. Second, moral norms are being universalized across group boundaries. The election of a black president is evidence that racism is on the decline. Furthermore, the United Nation’s Declaration of Human Rights affirmed the existence of ubiquitous rights. While not legally binding, it’s a goal that guides reform. Since it’s inception, subsequent treaties, constitutions, and other laws have aspired to it. The increasing ubiquity of human rights is the third example of human morality expansion. The fourth, and last, is the spread of subject-centered morality. This is the belief that people value in and of themselves, not for their ability to cooperate. For all these inclusivist phenomena, there’s no evidence to suggest that their benefits outweigh their costs. Yet despite their evolutionary disadvantage, examples of inclusivist morality are blatantly existent. Evidently, there’s an ‘open ended normativity of the ethical.’ This is because, in certain conditions, it’s evolutionarily advantageous.

Exclusivist morality doesn’t always increase reproductive fitness. Its corresponding segregation eradicates the opportunity for intragroup beneficence. Conversely, inclusivist morality enables prosocial interactions, such as alliances and trading partnerships, which are advantageous to every party involved. So, while the EEA was replete with conditions that favored exclusivist morality, conditions that favored inclusivist morality did manifest. Under these conditions, groups who could override the propensity to react with hostility toward strangers would have gained a fitness advantage. So the fluctuating duality of conditions optimized the reproductive fitness of a moral system capable of matching both sets of conditions. Therefore, morality is adaptively plastic.

The morality of humanity is like the armor of water fleas - conditionally expressed. When these crustaceans detect a predator in their vicinity, they develop defensive spines and helmets. This armor is burdensome, so it’s generated only when beneficial. This enables an adaptive match across environments. Adaptively plastic morality increases fitness for the same reason. For example, if food is scarce, then sharing is detrimental. Conversely, if food is plentiful, then sharing it can forge beneficial relationships. This moral system allows humans to express the state most appropriate for the present environment. Recently, the conditions that appropriate inclusivist morality have been proliferating.

Sociopolitical developments create conditions conducive of inclusivist morality. Institutions (specifically markets and security arrangements) facilitate peaceful, mutually beneficial cooperation among groups and reduce crime. Agricultural technologies increase the social surplus, reducing the cost of sharing resources with strangers. Improvements in medicine and public health reduce the threat of disease and thus out-group threat. All these developments ameliorate the harsh conditions of the EEA. Unfortunately, Trump is resurrecting these harsh conditions, acquiescing society back into exclusivist morality.

Trump’s rhetoric triggers out-group resentment. He infamously claimed, “[Mexicans] are, in many cases, criminals, drug dealers, rapists, etc,” (Lee). This comment dehumanized the entire race and thus acted to void them of moral consideration. In the past, leaders who’ve provoked genocide expressed similar remarks. By portraying a race as inferior, they excluded the race from the moral circle, therefore inciting violations of basic human rights on a massive scale. Schoolbooks in Nazi Germany, for example, portrayed Jews as cockroaches. While Trump has never likened Mexicans to non-human creatures, he repeatedly paints a deplorable picture of them. This reduces the public’s perception of their moral worth. His attacks on individuals have a similar effect.

Trump condemned Democratic Representative Ilhan Omar for using (arguably) anti-Semitic tropes and called for her resignation (Nguyen). He also blamed a Mexican judge for being biased because of his race (Totenberg). The severity of these attacks is elucidated by the fundamental attribution error. This is the tendency for people to attribute positive in group behaviors to internal character dispositions and negative in-group behaviors to situational factors - vice versa for out-groups. Evolutionarily, false judgments that a stranger is innocuous entail far greater risks than a false judgment that a stranger’s dangerous. Hence, there’s a fundamental asymmetry to overgeneralize in relation to negatively valenced out-group traits. This means that Trumps attacks on these individuals have been generalized to their races. Now, his followers are more likely to believe that all Muslims are anti-Semitic and that all Mexicans are negatively biased against white people. This further stokes the perception of out-group threat. Unfortunately, children are especially susceptible to this fallacy.

Research by Lawrence Hirschfeld found that children have a propensity to assume all members of a given group share a hidden essence that determines how all members of that group behave. This psychological disposition facilitates the development of racist attitudes and behaviors. For many children, the exclusivist zeitgeist Trump’s cultivating is all they’ve ever experienced. It could become indoctrinated into their mentality and perseveringly persist. The salience of exclusivism, the causing factor, would be assuaged by the presence of incentives for developing cooperative relationships with strangers, but Trump’s trade policies are obstructing this.

Trading partnerships are mutually beneficial interactions that are not only enabled by inclusivist morality but also increase it. The ultimatum game, an experiment by Joseph Henrich, found that people from populations with high levels of market integration are more likely to exhibit a commitment to treating strangers fairly. Trump’s trade policies are hindering America’s market integration. He has withdrawn the U.S. from the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (Higgins). These pacts rendered all participating countries equally winsome, promoting their cooperation. Furthermore, Trump has levied steep tariffs on China (Karabell). This started a trade war that has hurt both economies and sown seeds of distrust. All these policies have mitigated the U.S.’s ability to beneficially cooperate with foreign countries. They have created a volatile international environment, which makes it difficult for everyone to cleave to inclusivist moral commitments. Therefore, the hindrance of America’s market integration is fostering exclusivist morality. His obstruction of other cooperative frameworks has a similar effect.

Trump is dismantling institutions that facilitate beneficial cooperation. On the global scale, he has withdrawn the US from the Paris Climate Accord – which all but two countries in the world are a part of (Locklear). Furthermore, he is attempting to withdraw the U.S. from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Barnes). According to Michèle A. Flournoy, a former secretary of defense, NATO is, “The most powerful and advantageous military alliance in history,” (Barnes). By binding together, all country’s involved are stronger than they would be alone. This successful cooperation promotes inclusivist morality. Conversely, its eradication would severe relations with the participating country’s and thus foster exclusivist morality. Trump’s hindrance of cooperation on the national level is having a similar effect.

Trump is disheveling the US government. The turnover rate of his staff is 65%, a record high amount (Trimble). This is the result of his propensity to terminate people (such as the FBI director) and the viability of people to quit working for him (such as the Secretary of Defense). Many positions remain unfilled (Kieth). Some positions that are filled are extremely controversial. A climate-change denier heads the EPA (Boccagno). A sexual assaulter sits on the Supreme Court (Farrow). With the government marred in controversy, it’s unable to effectively function. Consequently, the ways in which it would foster inclusivist morality are being mitigated.

Trump is undermining the public health infrastructure. He is actively attempting to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act. So far, it’s funding has been cut and its expansion has been frozen (Wolf). Now, less people have access to medical care. Since a severe sickness would be financially devastating for the majority of the population, the fear of pathogens has been increased. This is a hallmark characteristic of the EEA that galvanizes exclusivist morality. This characteristic, and others like it, need not be veridical. The mere perception of them is sufficient to actualize their effects. To cultivate this perception, Trump leverages the media.

By influencing the media and other institutions that disseminate information, Trump is exacerbating the acquiescence of exclusivist morality. He knows that the news thrives on controversial headlines so he willingly stirs controversy. This is exemplified by the egregious comments in his opening speech. He openly called Mexicans rapists and every news site reported on it. While not veridical, comments like these provoke the perception of out-group threat and consequently exclusivist morality. Many opinion articles castigate comments like these, but Trump has a strategy to counteract negative publicity.

While only an authoritarian leader has complete control over the media, Trump is exerting influence by publicly criticizing the institutions. He has ridiculed news giants such as CNN and The New York Times, calling the ‘Fake News’ and ‘The Enemy of the People,” (Twitter). The manifold of lies he’s told (9,014 as of 03/03/19) generates distrust in both himself and the news outlets that tell the contradicting truth (Washington Post). Now, the people don’t know whom to trust. To help ensure that people listen to him, Trump exploits cultural evolution.

In humans, each subsequent generation inherits a cultural package that exceeds what could be constructed in a lifetime. Consequently, evolution has selected for traits that facilitate the acquisition of cultural packages. Since learning is a complex and confusing process, we’ve adapted to learn from others. Who we choose to learn from is contingent upon a myriad of cues, such as age. The older one is, the more time they’ve had to acquire knowledge, so age is used as an indicator for a good model. Trump, who’s 73 years old, benefits from this ingrained psychological tendency. Other model-based learning mechanisms also benefit him.

Discovering who’s the best model is difficult, so we pay attention to whom others are learning from. We allow widespread attention to inflict the inference that an individual is worthy of imitation, respect, and admiration. Trump has exploited this psychological heuristic to his advantage. There are thousands of successful real-estate moguls, what made Trump famous is his public appearances. Through his TV show The Apprentice, his many talk show appearances, his wildly popular Comedy Central Roast, and even his mass-marketed book, Trump achieved fame. He created the illusion that he was a star and consequently became a star. By appearing to be someone people wanted to know more about, more people wanted to know about him, and he thus created a positive feedback loop to his benefit. This is known as the Paris Hilton Effect – where one becomes famous for being famous. Upon achieving fame, Trump also achieved ubiquitous influence.

Success in one domain converts to influence in others. This is because the link between an individual’s practice and their success is causally opaque – there’s no single certain reason for it. The success of LeBron James, for example, could be the result of his work ethic, his gear, his diet, or something else. Consequently, LeBron James is heralded in a myriad of domains, such as cars (Kia Motors), audio equipment (Beats by Dre), and even pizza (Blaze). The more the domain of success is valued, the more influence the successful person will have. Since fame is extremely valued in America, celebrities can advertise anything (e.g. Snoop Dogg and Norton Antivirus, Kim Kardashian and Charmin Toilet Paper). We attribute success in one domain to competency in others. This explains why people thought Trump would make a good president.

Trump is a hugely successful businessman. He’s made billions as an international real-estate mogul. Wealth, the American dream, is a trait that’s highly valued. Therefore, Trump’s financial success has enabled him to be ubiquitously influential. Since he was successful as a businessman, people thought he’d be successful as a president, that his financial capabilities would translate to political competence. This strengthened the belief that he’d be a good leader. To actually be a good leader, Trump employs a strategy of dominance.

There are two ways to lead: by prestige or by dominance. The prestigious leader exhibits model traits such as generosity, humor, and tempered arrogance. This makes people want to be like them and thus shift their own beliefs to align with that of the prestigious individual. Trump, however, leads by dominance. He causes subordinates to submit to his will due to inflicting the fear of provocation. He fires those who oppose him. He chastises those who insult him (like SNL). He shutdown the government, holding it hostage in an attempt to secure funding for the wall he desires. His handshakes are unnecessarily aggressive. In general, he exhibits dominant body language like grandiose movements and stern facial expressions. This dominant behavior doesn’t cause preferential mimicry, but that’s not important to him. His base’s beliefs already align with his own and that’s the only group he really cares about. Therefore, dominance is the most effective strategy for him. Amongst his other exploitations of cultural evolution, the Paris Hilton Effect and the convergence of influence, Trump is effectively causing moral regression.

Trump has exploited normal cognitive biases, existing patterns of epistemic deference, and evolved mechanisms of conditional moral expression to further his political agenda. This is inflicting the perception that the environment mimics the harsh characteristics of the environment of evolutionary adaptation (EEA). These characteristics, such as out-group threat, and even the non-veridical perception of them, galvanize exclusivist morality. Inclusivist morality, a ‘luxury good’ facilitated by modern socioeconomic developments, is consequently being rescinded and the morality of America is returning to how it was during the previously more EEA-like conditions. Therefore, Trump’s slogan should be, “Make America exclusivist again.”

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