

Preface

I gasped as I touched the old urn. It was cold to the touch, but surprisingly firm and intact. My gasp was not produced by the urn's temperature but instead from the realization that I had just made contact with a remnant of a shipwreck that changed the course of global history. My students and I were on a tour of the Odyssey Marine Exploration lab in Tampa, Florida, examining some of the cargo of the 400-year-old wreck of the *Buen Jesus y Nuestra Senora del Rosario*. Laden with gold and pearls from the New World, the 1622 sinking of the *Buen Jesus* and other accompanying ships in a surprise storm off the coast of Florida helped to bankrupt the Bank of Madrid. This, in turn, led to the collapse of the Spanish Empire's dominance in the New World. The wreck was discovered in 400 meters (1,312 feet) of water, far too deep for conventional underwater exploration. Exploration was made possible only by using new deep-sea technology created by British engineers to drill for oil in the North Sea.

You're lucky to be alive. Well, I should add, you're lucky to be alive at this particular point in time. New technologies are allowing scientists to produce fascinating discoveries about human beings almost daily, from fields as disparate as archaeology, biology, genetics, neuroscience, anthropology, geology, and even child psychology. Findings from fields such as these are converging to produce a fast-growing, empirically grounded narrative of the emergence of human beings on the planet. It is a remarkable story of survival, endurance, diversity, and adaptation. Though life on earth has existed for millions of years, modern homo sapiens emerged a mere 200,000 years ago in Africa. Other related life forms like Denisovans and Neanderthals evolved prior to and alongside homo sapiens, but eventually died out.

Small groups of homo sapiens began migrating out of Africa roughly 60,000 years ago, likely due to changing climactic conditions. From there, more groups splintered off, taking circuitous routes throughout the globe. Skin lightened as people moved farther away from the equator, an adaptive mechanism that allowed more vitamin D to be absorbed in places where there is less sunlight. Some groups moved east from Africa, along the coast to eventually populate the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Others likely continued across the

Bearing land bridge to eventually inhabit all of North and South America. Though it took thousands of years, it all took place in the blink of an evolutionary eye.

One scientist responsible for drawing public attention to the burgeoning human narrative is National Geographic geneticist Spencer Wells, who shares the human story of global migration with various audiences around the world. As part of the Genographic Project (<https://genographic.nationalgeographic.com/>), Wells invites people to purchase a DNA collection kit from National Geographic. For a modest sum, the identity-protected DNA samples are analyzed using Y chromosome and mitochondrial DNA markers to identify one's individual genographic history. Genetic markers can be used to trace the likely path of one's ancestors, some of whom migrated out of Africa thousands of years ago and across the globe. Many individuals testify to being deeply moved when reviewing the results of their DNA analysis. Information about one's ancestors is personally meaningful, but the ancestral story which connects us to the stream of human history can be equally powerful. Wells' research, and the technology used to reveal genetic histories, is timely. The pace of global migration is quickening, but most people are familiar only with the recent past of their family history.

The ramifications of this new research for human behavior are only now permeating a few subspecialties of Sociology. Early sociologists such as Marx, Spencer, Durkheim, Tonnies, and others were stimulated to think sociologically as they considered the tumultuous history of human beings and large-scale social change. Sociologists have been particularly fascinated with the transition from traditional to modern societies, but much of the theorizing has typically encompassed larger swaths of human history. Some contemporary theorists like Gerhard Lenski continue the fascination with long-term human social evolution, but today the primary focus remains at the point of industrialization. Few consider the vast pools of knowledge from other disciplines that can inform sociological accounts of the past. Cultural anthropologists and, increasingly, evolutionary biologists are stepping in to fill the void.

Sociology has much to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on human origins. More than other disciplines, Sociology emphasizes the creative and dynamic aspects of human social life over whatever innate or "natural" drives that exist. Social structure; the rules created to govern social life, receives a good deal of attention. Though socially constructed, rules and laws can take on a life of their own and exert great influence on human behavior. "Who benefits?" is the siren song of the sociologist to aid in identifying the unequal ways in which institutions, laws, rules, and customs intentionally or unintentionally privilege some people over others. It is perhaps this careful attention to power dynamics that Sociology has rightly earned the title as the black sheep of the social sciences. Theories from other disciplines like Psychology, Economics, and even Anthropology and Biology, too often end up legitimating the status quo and existing social inequalities. Solid evidence notwithstanding, sociologists suspect that inequalities are most often produced through social rather than natural causes, and focus their analysis on socially constructed mechanisms that produce inequity. Such foci are seldom popular with those who benefit from systems of inequality.

Scientists—both natural and social—need to read each other’s work. Potential biases and unstated assumptions in one field can be more easily identified by those working outside of it. Academic work in most Western countries operates in intellectual silos. There are advantages to this system, to be sure. Michèle Lamont’s (2010) book, *How Professors Think*, illustrates the drawbacks. Drawing from her years of service on interdisciplinary funding agencies, Lamont notes how too many intellectuals suffer from *homophily*; a tendency to deem as excellent work which closely resembles their own. This applies both to the way in which academics individually practice their own craft as well as the more general epistemological approaches of a particular discipline. Working in academic silos too easily leads one to the erroneous conclusion that their own discipline offers a *full* explanation of human behavior.

Sociologists are generally loath to incorporate findings from the natural sciences into theories of human behavior. Siding heavily with nurture in the nature-nurture debate, sociological approaches begin with the assumption that human beings are more or less born as a *tabula rasa*; a blank slate. This tendency is no doubt motivated by a focus on social processes that make us who we are, but it also emanates from a genuine aversion to theories used in the past to fuel ideological regimes bent on justifying the cruel mistreatment of others. Political regimes *claiming* biological differences between races, sexes, nationalities, social classes, and other categories of human beings have committed heinous acts; most notably during the Holocaust. If these experiences have taught us anything, it is to reject outright theories of biological or neurological difference until a full body of quality information compels us to conclude otherwise.

Scientists are likewise products of their own culture and prone to be influenced by the dominant cultural beliefs of the time. Tavris’ (1993) book *The Mismeasure of Woman* provides dozens of illustrations of science done poorly. Finding no meaningful differences between men and women, researchers in Biology, Medicine, and other fields conclude that a methodological error in experimentation must have produced artificial results, rather than considering the potential validity of their own data. Satel and Lilienfeld (2013) note similar problems of interpretation in the current wave of studies in neuroscience. Because the implications of natural science findings are so volatile, consumers would be best served to approach such studies with a healthy dose of *negativistic logic*; assuming no theory to be true until overwhelming evidence to the contrary renders such a position as naive. As the signature line of a colleague’s email reads, “Don’t stop at an explanation you like.”

At the same time, sociological approaches to human behavior would be enhanced by making explicit the naturalistic assumptions included therein. It doesn’t take much digging to see that certain biological assumptions are embedded in much sociological work, including that which is constructivist in orientation. Becker’s (1953) classic work *Becoming a Marijuana User*, for example, rightly points out how social processes influence the effects of marijuana. At the same time, Becker’s work implies that the drug must have *some* type of physiological effect. Otherwise, we could expect similar subcultures to be created around, say, the consumption of paper bags or some other random tangible. What is it about

marijuana that motivates groups to create cultures of consumption? Do the effects of the drug in some way frame the manner in which it is consumed or experienced? These qualifications are left unaddressed.

Jack Haas' (1974) research on high-steel ironworkers is another example. Haas describes how social processes are created to essentially test new apprentices to see how they deal with the anxiety produced by the dangers inherent in the occupational work. Implicit in this work is the observation that anxiety *is* a natural response when working in situations where one wrong step could lead to a deadly fall. What kinds of likely behaviors are produced by anxiety? What other features of human chemistry increase or decrease the propensity to feel anxious? How does anxiety influence perception, fatigue, decision-making, or social psychological factors like trust? Biological processes are thus assumed to be antecedent or even intervening in some sociological processes. Making these assumptions explicit could ultimately allow for more sophisticated models of human behavior to be developed by sociologists.

This book is an attempt to synthesize pertinent natural science information in the construction of a sociological theory of morality. It is evident that homo sapiens have evolved over time, that our origins are in Africa, and that we began to colonize the globe roughly 60,000 years ago. Homo sapiens of all shapes, colors, and sizes are of the same family as over 99% of our DNA is identical. Though we today lack more inherent knowledge or "instincts" at birth than other species, a growing body of credible evidence appears to affirm certain behavioral tendencies in humans associated with what we label as morality. What these conditions are, and how they work to inform or provide contingencies for human social behavior, is explained herein. The evidence is consonant with de Waal's (2013:56) assertion that the building blocks of morality are at least a hundred millennia older than current human civilizations and religions.

These findings suggest that religion is a latecomer in the field of morality. If recent global trends continue, religion's influence on issues pertaining to morality in the future may be of limited duration. Despite this, societies with rapidly growing percentages of individuals either non-affiliated with religious organizations or embracing an atheist orientation are not descending into violence and chaos. Every day social life remains ordered, with the vast majority of citizens acting prosocially; respectfully; *morally*. Despite this, researchers like de Waal (2013) and Robbins (2012) fear that science and the naturalistic worldview is inadequate to inspire good behavior as religion does. The position taken throughout this essay is more anthropological. Community life has always been less than idyllic. At the same time, our inner nature, and that of our societal companions, creates a need to construct a moral system which produces more social harmony rather than less. Both past and present societies have created moral systems decoupled from religious beliefs, and have thrived. This observation should offer some comfort to those who fear a descent into chaos as interest in religious orthodoxy and practice continues to wane.

I arrived at an interest in the study of morality in an indirect manner. In receiving an invitation to contribute a book chapter on the globalization of

human rights (Friesen 2011), I grappled to explain why human rights emerged when it did, as it did, and in the form it took. As a sociologist, I was fascinated that representatives from many of the world's major religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions came together and created a document about the treatment of other people upon which all could agree. That an emphasis would be placed on equality, given the thousands of years of growing inequality in increasingly complex societies, was indeed puzzling. I found the constructivist accounts of the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UHR) far from satisfactory. There were too many repeating themes, too many similarities with the past, to suggest that human rights were the result of a more or less *arbitrary* process of meaning construction. Neither did I find satisfying the accounts of political scientists and others such as Beitz (2011), who suggest that human rights are more about an emergent political practice than an abstract normative idea. That *may* have been true at the outset, but human beings do imbue some aspects of their world with meaning. To suggest otherwise would be to miss the point that the articulation of human rights was simultaneously a creative endeavor *and* a link to our evolutionary and social past. It was a reconnection with our human selves and an incredibly optimistic statement about the future. It had a moral tone, set within a surprisingly inclusive moral framework.

I settled on a sociocultural evolutionary approach to understand the emergence of human rights, but soon found that a theory had not yet been developed to treat the emergence of human rights with the full attention it deserved. Much of the sociological literature regarding morality is subsumed under the rubric of the sociology of religion or the nebulous heading of culture. Neither approach fully accounted for the rise of a secular morality, and using religious nomenclature to refer to such (as in *civil religion*) did more to invoke religion-as-metaphor than it did to explain a unique form of social behavior. In constructing an evolutionary perspective on morality, then, I had to first understand how morality functioned in the role of a community, and the environmental changes that accompanied moral transitions. I have sought to explain why and how it is that moral revolutions occur, and why the concept of human rights has so readily resonated with millions of people. This book thus represents an attempt to fulfill a recommendation of the 2009 NSF Funded *Science of Morality Workshop* to develop more theories that explain morality (Hitlin and Stets 2009: 5).

Chapter 1 outlines the dominant understanding of human sociocultural evolution at this point in time. This provides the context for a discussion of moral evolution. Human beings have organized themselves in increasingly large and complex social entities known as societies. While the history of societies is likewise complex and varying, it is apparent that human societies have evolved over time in the direction of simple to complex, and from small to large. Increasing social inequality too has been a theme, though equally fascinating are the numerous institutionalized mechanisms of redistribution that have attempted to address inequality. In taking a cultural materialist approach, I recognize that these broad changes in social organization *precede* changes in culture, of which morality is a part.

How human societies have managed to create a sense of social unity and collective identity is the subject of Chap. 2. Here I introduce the concept of the moral system and attempt to demonstrate the utility of the concept for understanding social unity and integration. Chapter 3 applies the theory of moral systems to traditional societies in an effort to illustrate the environmental pressures that precipitate a morally adaptive change. Chapter 4 draws on recent natural and social science research on morality. It suggests that the recurring moral themes in human beings are a part of our genetic makeup, having evolved through natural selection to become part of the human condition. These studies aid in understanding feelings of outrage, envy, empathy, or connectedness as a response to social stimuli.

Chapter 5 traces the development of secular morality in the form of a modern nation-state. Nation-states offer the potential of tolerance for diversity, but their collective power and nuclear weaponry have brought about new threats of widespread death and destruction. The chapter goes on to explain how these dangers, realized in the Holocaust and in India's struggle for independence, set in motion the pressures that led to the emergence of human rights. The potential for human rights to serve as a moral system is still being realized. The final chapter engages in social forecasting, describing two possible future scenarios as moral systems continue to evolve. If change is the constant, we can anticipate evolutionary change in moral systems to continue.

A final biographical note: Good ideas are sometimes rejected, not because of the validity of their observations, but because of their implications. I do not mean to imply that the ideas in this volume are necessarily good (though I hope they are), but I am aware that there are times when our own beliefs prevent us from seriously considering the full amount of evidence available. There are times when religious faith enables people to see things clearer, and other times when it inhibits us from seeing all there is to see. Faith is complex. As Marty (1996: 14–15) so keenly observed, “Religion motivates most killing in the world today... Religion contributes to most healing in the world today.” Both of these statements are true. Equally telling is how our own assumptions often influence how we receive Marty's two observations. Persons of faith are more likely to downplay or ignore the first, while secularists are more likely to downplay or ignore the second. In reality, *both* statements are true.

In any case, my intent here is *not* to deride or criticize anyone's beliefs, but instead to make an honest attempt to come to terms with the evidence available to us. If it matters to you, I grew up in a religious home and even attended an evangelical Bible college for 4 years. These were some of the best times of my life. I like to believe that I experienced some of the best that religion has to offer. We loved deeply, forgave frequently, and compelled each other to be better people than we were the day before. At the same time, experiences that I had while continuing my college education clearly indicated that some information was being ignored by my religious community. That it took the Catholic Church 350 years to formally apologize for persecuting Galileo for his observation that the earth revolves around

the sun is, to me, nothing short of embarrassing. At some point in my education, I realized that truth had to be prioritized before faith. I reasoned that if God was real, God would be revealed in truth. And if not, what business did I have in believing in things that were not true?

One moral lesson I internalized as a kid was the importance of honesty. *Good science*, as a way of knowing, is honest; sometimes brutally so. You have in your hands an honest attempt to induce from the data available at this moment in time a theory of morality. What sense you make of this information, and how you deal with it, is ultimately up to you. We are all on our own journey of discerning truth from falsity. Know that I deeply respect yours.

Tampa, Florida, October 2014

Bruce Friesen

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