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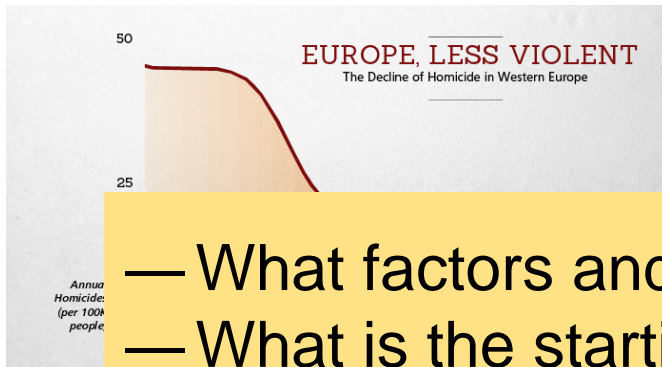


# **Cultural moral progress despite biological moral decline?**

## **An empirical and ethical investigation of the notion of “moral progress”**

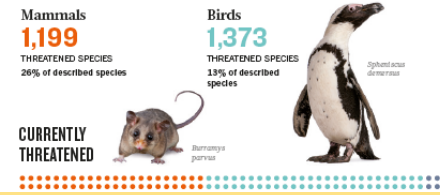
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# Moral progress – moral decline? A conflicting picture

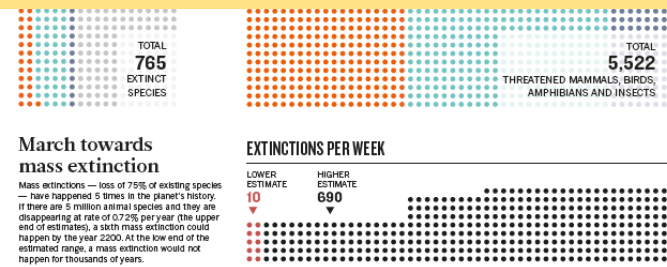
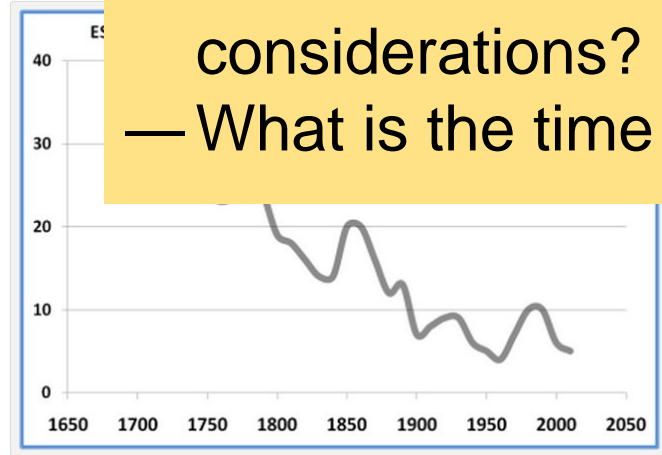


**Life under threat**

Thousands of species are currently deemed to be threatened, but the true number of species at risk of extinction may be much higher. Estimates suggest



- What factors and phenomena do we target?
- What is the starting point or baseline for our considerations?
- What is the time scale?



Violence against humans (Pinker 2011)

Violence against nature (Nature 2014)



## Contents

- “Biological” moral progress
- “Cultural” moral progress
- Tensions between biology & culture: parenting practices
- Is there an inevitable conflict between biological and cultural moral progress?
- Way(s) out of the dilemma(s)



## “Biological” moral progress

The “natural history” of morality - an evolutionary perspective (cf. Christen & Alfano, 2013)

Converging evidence: The «natural history» of the human species goes along with some «behavior patterns» that we can easily connect with moral concepts (generosity, cooperation, equality, sharing, etc.)

- The lifestyle of small-band hunter gatherers (SBHG) requires generosity and sharing due to extreme mutual interdependence for survival, thriving and dispersal → human morality as the result of advanced adaptation (cf. van Schaik et al., 2013)
- Cultural evolution → increasingly complex societies. BUT it is still reasonable to assume that the «biological heritage» is part of our human nature
- This biological heritage is not fixed, but can change fast (epigenetics)

Christen M, Alfano M (2013). Outlining the Field – A Research Program for Empirically Informed Ethics. In M Christen, J. Fischer, M. Huppenbauer, C. Tanner, & C. van Schaik C (Eds.), *Empirically In-formed Ethics. Morality between Facts and Norms. Library of Ethics and Applied Philosophy* (pp. 3-28). Berlin: Springer.



## “Cultural” moral progress

Growing complexity of human societies:

- Broadening of temptations
- Broadening of ways of wrongdoing (and doing the right thing)

Morality is situated in a social world of actions, judgments, negotiations and other kinds of expressions. This social world has its own history, its evolution has been driven by various factors. Consequences:

- Moral acts, norms, virtues etc. are subject to fuzziness regarding
  - their moral nature: not clear for all acts, norms, etc.
  - the stability (across societies and during history) of the condemnation of some behaviors, e.g., murder of innocent people vs. slavery

Thus, moral evaluations of given actions differ regarding both inner-societal agreement and evaluation stability. Also, there is the issue of time scale, with culture acting/working faster than biology.



## “Biology”, “Cultural” and the “is-ought”-problem

When pointing to “biological roots” as well as “cultural practices” of human morality, philosophers usually point to the “is-ought-fallacy”, i.e., that (in a nutshell) facts do not lead to norms without normative premises (the statement “humans do x” does not automatically lead to the statement “doing x is the right thing to do”).

In our argument, we are not saying that the “biological baseline” (“SBHG-ethics”) is per se the “right ethics” irrespective of the cultural change humanity has experienced in the last decades.

What we are saying, however, is that the moral intuitions that guide our moral judgments...

... do have both a biological and cultural “foundation”.

... and culture and biology interact regarding these foundations, e.g., through epigenetic processes.

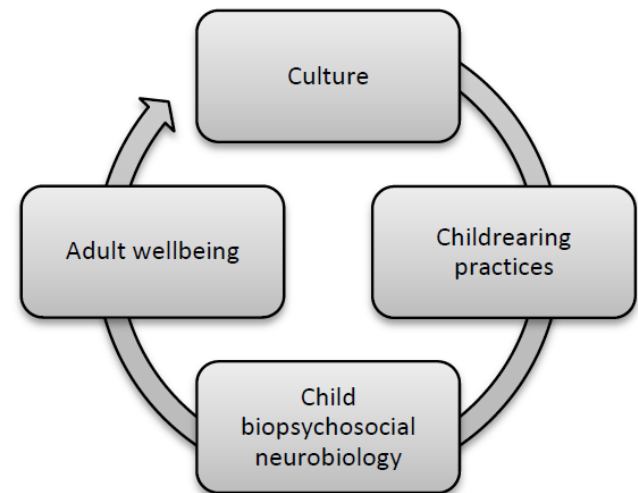


## Tensions between biology & culture: parenting (1)

Bringing biology and culture together in the epigenetics of parenting:

- Humans = immature, educable and ready for cooperation at birth
- Parenting was designed to match basic psychobiosocial needs
- In our 99% SBHG history, humans did not move against Nature  
→ match between culture (parenting practices) and biology (basic needs of children)
- Some cultures diverged from this match, leaving morality stunted, with all the consequences we see around us (which we now think are "normal"; Narvaez, 2014)

Narvaez, D. (2014). *Neurobiology and the development of human morality: Evolution, culture and wisdom*. New York: W.W. Norton.





## Parenting Practices and Child Development: Positive vs. Negative Touch Behavior

Physical Touch and affection have long lasting health effects:

- Prevent excessive stress
- Prevent hippocampal dysfunction
- Prevent eventual depression

Skin to Skin contact with infants promotes:

- Healthy sleep cycles
- Adaptive behavioral arousals
- Exploratory activities
- Social and cognitive functioning
- Calming

(Narvaez, 2014)







## Negative Touch: Spanking as an Example

Recent review of research (Gershoff, 2013):

“Spanking predicted increases in children’s aggression over and above initial levels [of aggressive behavior]” and “in none of these longitudinal studies did spanking predict reductions in children’s aggression over time” (p. 134).

\*\* Instead, **spanking predicted increases in children’s aggression.**

- Stable and well-established negative relationship between aggression and moral development (e.g., reviews by Frick & White, 2008 or Eisenberg, 2000)
- This relationship holds also for bullying and cyberbullying (e.g., Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012)

Gershoff, E. T. (2013). Spanking and child development: We know enough now to stop hitting our children. *Child Development Perspectives*, 7 (3), 133-137.



## Tensions between biology & culture: parenting (2)

Two “main systems” that could emerge:  
Culture of Detachment vs. Culture of Companionship (Narvaez, 2014)

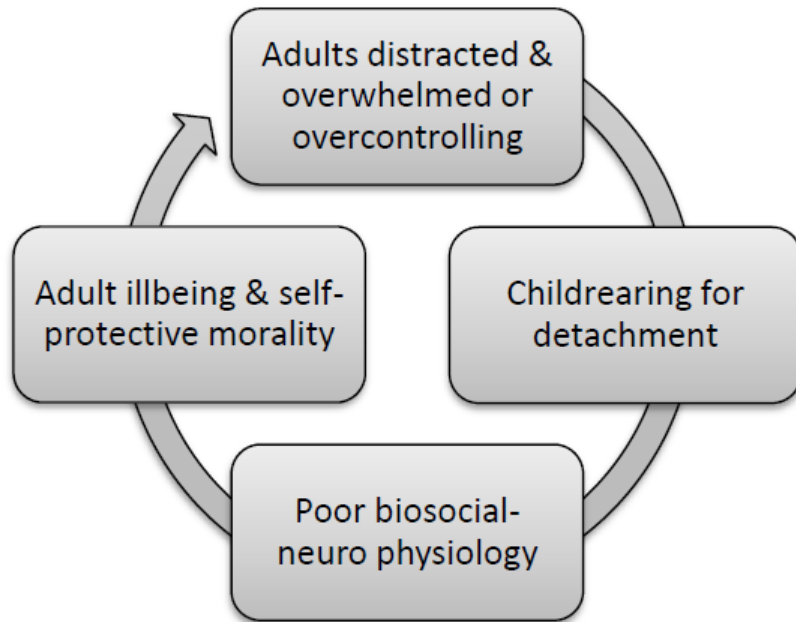


Figure 9.1 Culture of Detachment

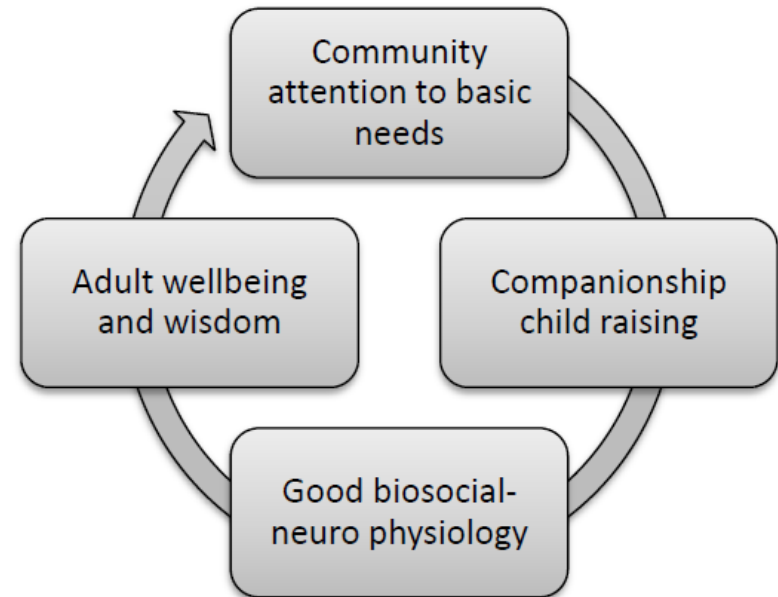


Figure 9.2 Culture of Companionship



## Tensions between biology & culture: parenting (3)

Cyberbullying as a topical example

Biological component:

Child is displaying self-protectionism with externalizing behavior (aggression) due to a social stress response, due to e.g. inappropriate caregiving (lack of positive touch, experience of negative touch, low empathy)

Cultural component:

Being dominant is encouraged by violent media, by parents who "bully" babies by not providing their needs, by school cultures who make children feel unsafe or unwelcome. School culture → often highly stressful and competitive, lack of constant support from elders/mentors. Online culture → sense of isolation and power



## Tensions between biology & culture: parenting (3)

Cyberbullying as a topical example

Biological component:

Child  
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bab  
child

Possible solution: Immerse children in social support from the beginning to

- build a more prosocial neurobiology
- establish a social-cultural life that maintains a communal imagination mindset (Narvaez, 2014)

→ Meet children's biopsychosocial needs...

stressful and competitive, lack of constant support from elders/mentors.

Online culture → sense of isolation and power



## An inevitable conflict between biology and culture?

A few conclusions:

- Framing the problem from only one perspective (biology or culture) is not helpful.
- Culture and biology do not represent a dichotomy or irreconcilable frameworks. They interrelate.
- We should avoid simplistic statements like
  - “Our current culture is so far removed from our heritage that this heritage does not provide any orientation at all”
  - “We have to go back to nature, and then everything will be fine”

Our biology may be maladjusted to modern life conditions. Does this mean that we need to change our culture or change our biology? There are also normative issues involved here.



## Way(s) out of the dilemma(s)

Reframing the initial problem of assessing moral progress → focus on the interaction of cultural and biological systems

Reconciliation of culture and biology by pursuing moral wisdom

- Various traditions of moral wisdom: e.g., traditional, primal
- Primal wisdom of indigenous societies/communities as a contrast to our Western worldview
  - Core: social embeddedness of humans from the cradle to the grave (and beyond) → we are all members of a common self
  - Grow babies and children into wisdom (bottom up, no teaching)
  - Nature as offering safety and subsistence → gratitude, responsibility
  - ...
- Wisdom traditions as offering a pathway towards change
- Aim: restore our inherited human virtues



## Way(s) out of the dilemma(s)

Reframing the initial problem of assessing moral progress → focus on the interaction of cultural and biological systems

Reconciliation of culture and biology by pursuing moral wisdom

- V *When one is raised outside Eden, one becomes alienated from nature and one's own nature, disposing one to move against nature instead of with it. Parents who do not respect their baby's built-in needs (e.g., for constant touch and emotional warmth) teach the baby to disrespect him/herself and nature and undermine the optimal development of his/her neurobiological systems.*

— ...

- Wisdom traditions as offering a pathway towards change
- Aim: restore our inherited human virtues



Thank you for your attention!



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## What is “moral change” and “moral progress”? (1)

“Morality” in its broader sense: A system of norms, rules, virtues and justification systems that determines for a community of humans (groups, societies) what the “good life” or the “right action” is.

→ The notion of “moral change” can refer to a multitude of aspects:

- Some norms, rules, values, virtues etc. change in importance or are even replaced by others (e.g.,: norms related to sexual behavior)
- The meaning of norms etc. change (e.g.,: from a distributional to a procedural understanding of “justice”)
- The application of norms etc. to specific contexts changes (e.g.,: a more extended group of humans falls under a specific norm as in the case of slavery abolition)
- Norms etc. are no more considered to be “moral” norms etc. (e.g.,: religious duties)
- ...



## What is “moral change” and “moral progress”? (2)

Given this complexity, we may focus on behavioral results that are comparably “easy” to measure and relatively undisputed regarding their moral relevance.

Of particular importance: harm towards others

Indicators of “positive life” (the good life)