

Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society | Nicholas Christakis

March 26th, 2019

I do not mean that genes are the blueprint. I mean that genes act to write the blueprint. A blueprint for social life is the product of our evolution, written in the ink of our DNA. — Nicholas Christakis

INTRODUCTION

Nicholas Christakis, MD, PhD, MPH, is a sociologist and physician who conducts research in the areas of social networks and biosocial science. He directs the Human Nature Lab. His current research is mainly focused on two topics: (1) the social, mathematical, and biological rules governing how social networks form (“connection”), and (2) the social and biological implications of how they operate to influence thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (“contagion”). His lab uses both observational and experimental methods to study these phenomena, exploiting techniques from sociology, computer science, biosocial science, demography, statistics, behavior genetics, evolutionary biology, epidemiology, and other fields. To the extent that diverse phenomena can spread within networks in intelligible ways, there are important policy implications since such spread can be exploited to improve the health or other desirable properties of groups (such as cooperation or innovation). Hence, current work in the lab involves conducting field experiments: some work involves the use of large-scale, online network experiments; other work involves large-scale randomized controlled trials in the developing world where networks are painstakingly mapped. Finally, some work in the lab examines the biological determinants and consequences of social interactions and related phenomena, with a particular emphasis on the genetic origins and evolutionary implications of social networks.

WHY DO I CARE?

I have become increasingly intrigued by what appears to be a resurgence of interest by the public in questions of sociology, evolutionary psychology, and moral philosophy. Sam Harris, Jordan Peterson, Eric Weinstein, Jonathan Haidt, and others have been beneficiaries of this trend, perhaps because the ideological left seems to have taken the approach of trying to mandate or legislate its way towards a new ethical template for society. Their approach feels out-of-step with many of our liberal values, and so, this seems to have sparked a crisis that these aforementioned academics and intellectuals are actively addressing. It's also unclear how much the actual templates that are



being proposed are of concern, or if it's mainly the mandates and shaming that are at issue.

This seems to happen every generation or so, perhaps because each new generation needs to decide for itself how it relates to the past and to its cultural inheritance. Inevitably, some of this is just about youth and the need to rebel against the old, but some of it is also about progress and building a society whose laws and practices more accurately reflect the changing social norms and values of a new generation.

There also appears to be a genuine crisis in our sense of life's meaning. In some sense, this "crisis of meaning" may be part of a long process of individuation that has come about in western society since the protestant reformation. The speed of technological change in the face of declining social institutions only serves to exacerbate this trend, but it's not something entirely new. The transcendentalist and New Thought movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries are just some examples of society trying to grapple with changes in the world around them that cannot be explained by or find a home within the narrow confines of an expiring mythology or by the cultural norms of the time. Maybe this "political correctness stuff" is really just the is-ought dynamic process at work. Perhaps the resurgent interest in the works of the aforementioned thought leaders is about wrestling with the fuzzy question of what "ought" to be.

GREEK ROOTS

Erika — You have a dedication of sorts at the beginning of the book. You write: "The world is better the closer you are to Erika." **Q:** What impact or influence did your wife Erika, have on this book and on your writings about the importance of play?

Eleni, Alexandros, & Pappous — Our mothers share the same name, but it may also be that our fathers share the same name as well. **Q:** Is your father's name "Alexandros?"
*** We both had socialist grandfathers who tried to indoctrinate us into becoming adherents of PASOK.

Να οι Αμερικανοί! — **Q:** Why did you share the story of your mother taking you and your brother Dimitri, into the crowds of Greeks celebrating the fall of the Junta in 1974? **Q:** What did she mean when she pointed at you and your brother and yelled, "There are the Americans!?" **Q:** Was this experience on your mind during your confrontation with students in that infamous incident at Yale? **Q:** How has being a Greek-American informed your understanding of personal and group identity?

Pine Cones — Your story of playing with the Turkish boys in the island of "Πρίγκηπος" reminded me so much of my boyhood in Greece. Imagining pinecones as exploding grenades and retrieving of projectiles in order to further stock up on our ammunitions. I



cannot help but imagine that these are sweet memories for you as well. **Q:** Why do you think that Greece served as a well-spring for your personal anecdotes in this book? **Q:** Was your emphasis on childhood a vehicle for expressing the biological basis for this “blueprint” you write about?

HOSPICE

Death & Dying — I was surprised to learn about your background in palliative medicine and your work as a hospice doctor. **Q:** What drew you towards this field? **Q:** How much of an influence was your experience with your mother’s illness and early passing? **Q:** How did this experience influence your development as a human being and how has it informed your choice to search for the roots of a “moral blueprint?”

THE SOCIAL SUITE

The capacity to have and recognize individual identity

Love for partners and offspring

Friendship

Social networks

Cooperation

Preference for one’s own group (in-group bias)

Mild hierarchy (relative egalitarianism)

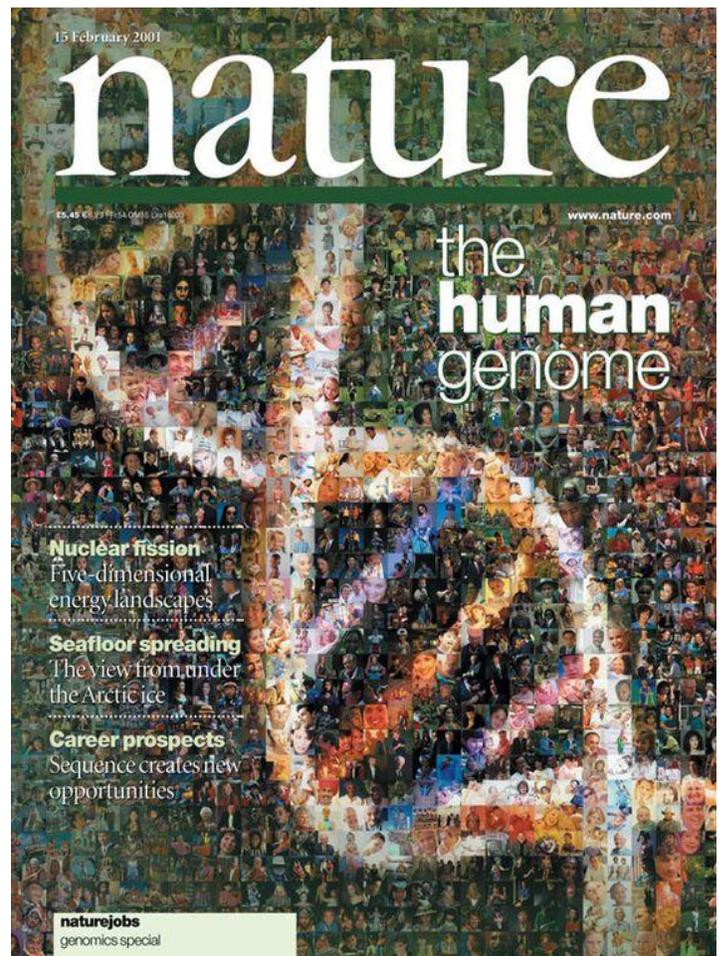
Social learning & teaching

THE ARGUMENT

Is-Ought Problem — It seems that we are living during one of those periods that comes about every generation or so, where some individuals in society look at the way things are, compare them to how they feel things ought to be, and then proceed to wrestle with the distinction in an effort to create a new order or set of values that more accurately reflect the feelings and needs of a new generation. **Q:** How does your work intersect with this social phenomenon that we are experiencing? **Q:** How do approach the is-ought problem? **Q:** Do you consider yourself a ethical naturalist?

The Argument — **Q:** What is the argument that you are putting forward in this book? **Q:** What compelled you to investigate this matter or to write a book about it?

The Conclusion — It seems that you have two main conclusions. One is that our differences are small and arbitrary, but our similarities are deep and universal. The second is that the universals that drive our similarities arise from a common, evolutionary “blueprint” that is fundamentally prone towards creating “good societies.” **Q:** Do I have this right, and if so, what’s the significance?



Culture — Human beings are not born to speak English, Mandarin, Arabic, or any of the other countless languages that have come and gone throughout antiquity, but our capacity for language is something we are born to do. **Q:** Is culture something similar? **Q:** What is culture? **Q:** Are humans able to create an infinite variety of cultures, or is this capacity bounded by some set of parameter? **Q:** Is culture an “exophenotype” and can you explain what that is?

Nature vs. Nurture — One of the themes you speak to in the book has often been framed as the “nature vs. nurture” debate. **Q:** I wonder, might this framing be incorrect? **Q:** Is it even possible to speak of nature and nurture as two competing forces? You devote a significant amount of time in the book putting forward all the different ways in which our environment shapes our genes and how our genes shape our environment. In fact, you make the point that genes and the environment are both shaped by forces emerging from within and from outside of ourselves. The environment is shaped by what we typically think of as nature, but it is also shaped by other people with whom we interact. Likewise, we are phenotypically shaped not only by our own genotypes, but by those of others with whom we interact (case of the chickens). **Q:** How do you think of this dynamic?

COMMUNITIES

Shipwreck Archipelago — My favorite part of the book is Chapter 2, where you look at cases of individual shipwrecks that happened over the span of 300 years from 1552 – 1866. These cases offer a wide variety of outcomes that seem difficult to explain. For example, I would have guessed that resource scarcity would have been strongly associated with dysfunction, violence, etc., but this doesn't seem to have been the case. **Q:** Can we go through some of these individual cases? **Q:** What conclusions can we draw about our blueprints from these various experiences?



Intentional Communities — Q: Can we go through some of these cases? (communes, religious communities, cults, etc.) Q: What conclusions can we draw from these various experiences?

Artificial Communities — Q: Can we go through some of these individual cases? Q: What conclusions can we draw from these various experiences? Q: What were the advantages and disadvantages of studying these types of communities as opposed to natural ones?

Imaginary Communities — Q: What was the purpose of studying fictional utopias and dystopias?

Crime Families — Q: Have you ever done any research into mafia families and organized crime? I often feel that these social/political arrangements are more rudimentary and better reflect how humans organized themselves in less civilized, less evolved settings where violence was a regular tool of enforcement.

ROMANTIC-SEXUAL LOVE

Pair-Bonding vs. Social Monogamy — My *second* favorite chapter in the book is Chapter 5 on love and relationship between the sexes. Q: What is the distinction between pair-bonding and monogamy? Q: What are the most common types of relationships formed by humans across various societies and tribes? Q: What are the various types of relationships and what accounts for the numbers?

Selection Pressures — Q: What do we know about the preferences that men and women express for one another and if any of these are universal?

Fertility Theories — Q: What are some variations in how different groups understand the process of fertility? (example of polyandry in Hadza, Turkana, and Na societies where sperm is like clay and cobbled together or where the woman has the seed and only needs to be watered.)



HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONS: WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

Friends & Enemies — **Q:** What can we learn about human love and mating from the animal kingdom? **Q:** What can we learn about friendship? **Q:** How and why do we make enemies? **Q:** Have you seen the movie “Castaway?” **Q:** Was Tom Hanks’ character’s relationship with Wilson (the ball) a reflection of our need for friendship or just a need to feel one isn’t alone?

Human-Animal Bonds — I’ve always been fascinated by our capacity to form bonds with animals. I read a book some years ago written by the late conservationist Lawrence Anthony, about his experience with a group of elephants that he reluctantly accepted on his Thula Thula game reserve in Zululand, and was moved to learn years later that these animals were said to have mourned his death in a fashion similar to how they mourn the deaths of their own kind. **Q:** What can you tell us about human-animal bonds? (Jane Goodall and David Greybeard) **Q:** What do you think is going on when elephants or whales appear to be ceremoniously mourning their dead? **Q:** Are these cultural practices and is it possible that they are grappling with the mystery of life and death similar to how we humans do through ritual and religion?

Identity & Theory of Mind — **Q:** What do we know about identity in animals and what does this tell us about the role of identity in humans? **Q:** How important is identity in forming human societies?

Elephants & Whales — **Q:** What can you tell us about the behavior of whales and dolphins? How intelligent are they and how do they compare to elephants and chimps?

Group Conflict & Cooperation — **Q:** What do we know about group conflict and cooperation? **Q:** What are some examples of this in animals? **Q:** How important is punishment?

Culture in Animals — **Q:** Do animals have the capacity for culture and if so, where do we see it?

Domestication of Animals — **Q:** What studies have been done in order to explain the domestication process of animals and how this impacts their phenotypes? (e.g. Dmitry Belyayev’s Siberian foxes)

Domestication of Humans — **Q:** What studies have been done to explain our own domestication? For example, humans are WAY LESS violent than they used to be. **Q:** What accounts for this change in human behavior?

Humans and the Natural World — **Q:** What is our relationship to nature? **Q:** Do you believe that humans have been deprived of the natural world, and that this is something we need in order to live more balanced, healthy lives?



SCHISIM OF THE BODY POLITIC

Moral Panic — **Q:** Is it fair to say that we are going through another one of these periods in our history where new norms around behavior and ethics are being established?

Q: What are the forces driving this?

Q: Is this simply a reflection of changing power dynamics?

Politics — Something you didn't really cover in the book was politics and the relationship between our innate abilities to form culture and what that means for how we govern ourselves. **Q:** Is there some sort of ideal political order in your view, based on our biology?

Good Society — **Q:** So, what constitutes a "good society?"

MISCELLANEOUS

Group Love & Hate — **Q:** Can we love our own group without hating another?

Slippery Slope — Something I'm curious about is our capacity to do evil on the path towards trying to

satisfy certain moral objectives. In other words, someone like Elizabeth Holmes may, in fact, have been motivated initially by higher ideals, but eventually found herself committing serious crimes. Elon Musk may be another, though less egregious example. **Q:** How do we think about these things? **Q:** How do we think about moral dilemmas?

General Artificial Intelligence — **Q:** What are your thoughts on the developments in AI and the role that scientists and academic like you can play in helping to advance the field in an ideal direction?

Genomics — **Q:** How will continued advances in genomic research, as well as the engineering of the human genome impact developments in your field? **Q:** How will they impact the social suite?

Moral Dilemma — **Q:** Are you concerned about the state of our politics?

Zeitgeist — **Q:** How do you think about spiritual changes to the society?

Yale — **Q:** What was that experience at Yale with the students like for you?

QUOTES:

I am not saying that differences across societies are based on our genes. Rather, I am saying that the similarities across societies—instantiated in the social suite—are based on our genes. — Nicholas Christakis

Even if our genes do not explain cultural variation, they can explain cultural universals. — Nicholas Christakis

