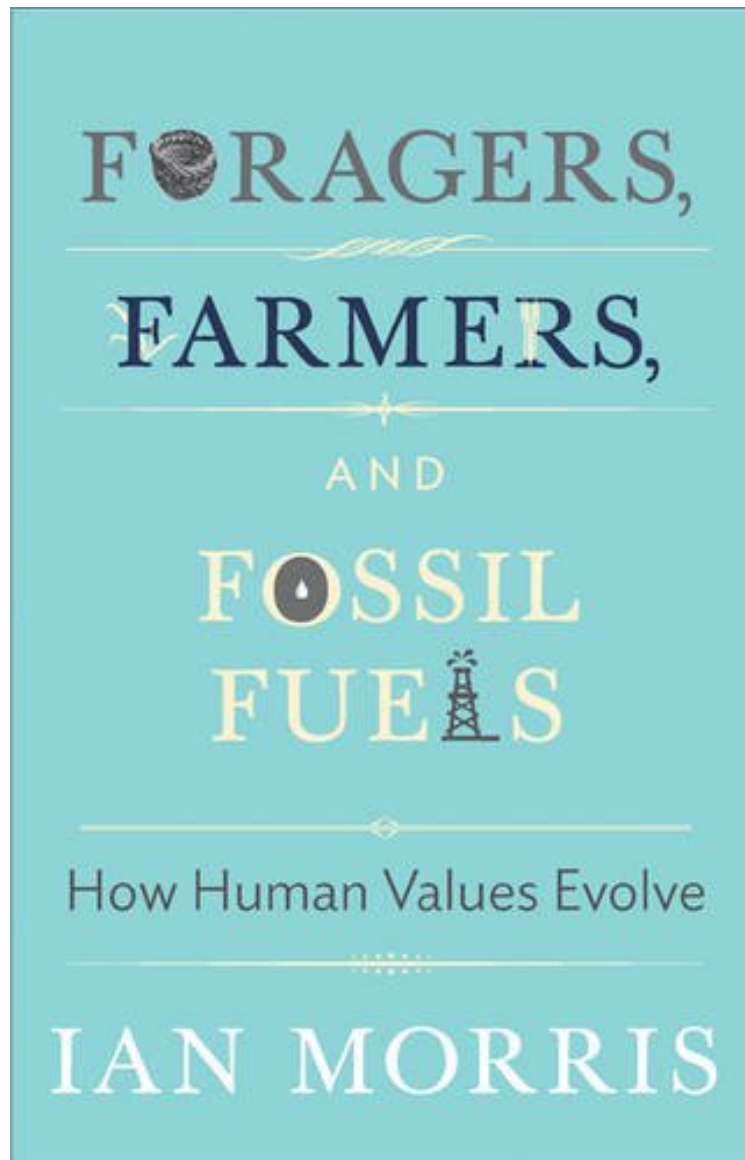


(Library ebook) Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values Evolve


Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values Evolve

Ian Morris

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Ian Morris : Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values Evolve before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values Evolve:

26 of 27 people found the following review helpful. An oddly structured bookBy RogerThis is a very strange book. It is better described as a poorly communicated thesis, a set of responses by others to the thesis, and then a response where the author finally gets his points out.In brief, Morris suggests that core human values are evolutionary

adaptations, but that these values are somewhat flexible and culturally adaptive. He then divides human history into three realms or phase transitions defined primarily by our rate of energy capture -- foragers, farmers and fossil fuel societies. Then he goes into three specific values which differ dramatically between the phase transitions -- propensity to use violence, egalitarianism and gender equality. In the first set of chapters he lays out his facts. To those familiar with evolutionary psychology it will seem pretty obvious. Then a series of people, obviously not familiar with evolutionary psychology or cultural evolution theory tear into Morris' ideas. In general they miss the point by a mile. It is like hearing creationists argue with an evolutionary biologist. Then, in chapter 10, the book gets good. Morris finally lays out exactly what his thesis is clearly and explicitly. Here are my thoughts: 1). I am not sure why he focuses on these three values. Are these the only ones which differed dramatically? Are these the only ones he is interested in? Or are they the only ones that support his thesis? 2). On violence it seems he conflates in-tribe/ state and between-tribe/ state violence. I think these are separate phenomena which require separate analysis. 3). On egalitarianism, he similarly conflates material equality with hierarchical or political dominance. Again, I am not sure why. 4) Morris suggests that each age gets the values it needs. It seems to me that a better explanation is that humans value dominance for themselves and that based upon the social context they are forced to settle for equilibriums. Foragers would love to all be alphas. However, in a world of effective weapons and easy exit where nobody wants to be a beta, the equilibrium point for effective social groups is egalitarianism. Similarly, each gender would love to be dominant of its counterpart. In Farming societies, men were able to attain the upper hand, and women were forced to submit to thrive. In forager societies this is less true, and modern societies with high energy capture and high standards of living and state security nets and appliances which free women from housework, this is simply no longer true. The same applies to violence. We may be fine with violence when it serves our needs. Problem is that this creates a struggle and zero sum dynamic. The equilibrium point in forager societies is to maintain peace within the tribe but to fracture and splinter with uncontrollable violence between tribes. In farmers, without exit freedom, tied to the land with some specializing in violence, the natural equilibrium is hierarchy, with the elite caring for their human livestock. In modern liberal states, the optimal equilibrium is networks of voluntary trade and egalitarian rights which shrivel up in environments of violence. I would agree with Morris that our values are contextually adaptive. I do think that we greatly rationalize and tailor them to conditions. Those in hierarchies rationalize their position, those in violence rationalize and tailor and so on. 7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Illuminating Argument On the Origin of Value Systems By Anne Mills This is broad brush history of the most interested kind, examining how human value systems arose, and what caused them to change. To survey so wide a scope in such a limited space (this is not a long book) of course risks over-simplification and over-schematization. But Morris is aware of these risks, and presents a compelling argument despite them. The first part of the book presents Morris's central case: that a human value system reflect the constraints on the society that possesses that value system. Specifically, he focusses on "energy capture" -- how many kilocalories a day the average person in a society can command. Initially, when humans were hunter/gatherers, this was very low, creating small populations that needed large ranges to feed themselves. Such cultures tend to be egalitarian and quite violent. As people gradually domesticated plants and animals, the amount of energy that an individual could command jumped, and the evolution into agrarian societies produced a shift in values, to a more hierarchical and less violent structure. Finally, when people gained control over fossil fuels, the amount of energy each member of society could command surged again. The value structure changed rapidly, to a more egalitarian and even less violent model. In the second part of the book, various commentators give their opinions of Morris's arguments. I was disappointed in this section: many of the arguments seemed to slide by Morris's own case, without much contact. For example, one commentator proposes a "real" value system towards which people strive, without explicitly rejecting Morris's argument that value systems arise from economic and cultural conditions. Things improve in the final section, in which Morris restates his case, rather more explicitly. This is an odd format, and a short book (particularly given the scope of the subject) but I found it fascinating. On the strength of that, I am now going to read one of Morris's other books, to see if it is as good. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Painting with a paint roller By j a haverstick This book deals with huge topics very broadly drawn. Morris admits as much. Perhaps the main strength of the book is the very honest self-criticism the author gives as he goes along. The commentaries included are given and dealt with openly and honestly. It makes for thought provoking reading. I don't have much to add here as far synopsis goes. I think the prior reviews are really very excellent! You should read them before buying the book, especially the positive two. The reductivist, scientific analysis of human values I find interesting, but, ethically, beside the point. Reminds me of the last chapter of Sociobiology where Wilson, after, reducing values to evolution, makes an impassioned plea for us to be environmentalists! Yo! At least Bertrand Russel bit the bullet, saying his own values just happened to be the result of his class and upbringing and had no "intrinsic" further validity. Atwood, one of the respondents (a philosophy teacher) to Morris makes the point by suggesting that the act of valuing, since it can be done well or ill, must have some proper object, so the "relativity" suggested by Morris can't be the whole story. Actually, if you read carefully, Morris is all over the place when it comes to the objectivity of value, suggesting more than once that there may be some values proper just to humans in general in addition to humans in some stage of social development. Of course, this would still be a naturalistic account of ethics. But Atwood's analysis is really too

clever by half. The point was more directly made a century ago by G E Moore. Given any social or natural (or evolutionary) definition of "good", we can still meaningfully ask is that really good. Therefore the reduction has failed. But that's a philosopher's comment. I find these evolutionary and archeo-anthropological books very informative on many different levels despite my moral/mystical inclinations at the highest level. If you do, too, you'll really like this book. Clear and easy enough to read on vacation. The format of presentation, critique and response is great. Philosopher, anthropologist, historian...take it to the beach this summer! Still, as an exemplar of the current thinking, hitting all the buzzwords and all the contemporary tropes, this is a very interesting book. It certainly gives the reader a lot to think about re: human history and social development. I thought it was very fun to read in that way and would recommend it for vacation reading. It's certainly not difficult.

Most people in the world today think democracy and gender equality are good, and that violence and wealth inequality are bad. But most people who lived during the 10,000 years before the nineteenth century thought just the opposite. Drawing on archaeology, anthropology, biology, and history, Ian Morris explains why. Fundamental long-term changes in values, Morris argues, are driven by the most basic force of all: energy. Humans have found three main ways to get the energy they need from foraging, farming, and fossil fuels. Each energy source sets strict limits on what kinds of societies can succeed, and each kind of society rewards specific values. But if our fossil-fuel world favors democratic, open societies, the ongoing revolution in energy capture means that our most cherished values are very likely to turn out not to be useful any more. *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels* offers a compelling new argument about the evolution of human values, one that has far-reaching implications for how we understand the past and for what might happen next. Originating as the Tanner Lectures delivered at Princeton University, the book includes challenging responses by classicist Richard Seaford, historian of China Jonathan Spence, philosopher Christine Korsgaard, and novelist Margaret Atwood.

"Excellent and thought-provoking. . . . More important, by putting forth a bold, clearly formulated hypothesis, Morris has done a great service to the budding field of scientific history."--Peter Turchin, *Science*"A provocative explanation for the evolution and divergence of ethical values. . . . In the hands of this talented writer and thinker, [this] material becomes an engaging intellectual adventure."--Kirkus" A very good and enjoyable read."--Diane Coyle, *Enlightened Economist*"Stimulating."--Russell Warfield, *Resurgence Ecologist*"I couldn't more warmly recommend. . . . [This book is] the product of a lifetime's personal experience, mixed with a vast body of research, then distilled through the hand of a gifted wordsmith. It's a book that will help you understand how values--and with them, the world we know today--came to be, and how they evolved through time. . . . Most of all, *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels* will show you that apart from a few biologically 'hardwired' ones it's the daily churn of society, not some ultimate authority or moral compass, that dictates our values--that's a very liberating realization."--Ian Morris, *ZME Science*From the Back Cover"Ian Morris has thrown another curveball for social science. In this disarmingly readable book, which takes us from prehistory to the present, he offers a new theory of human culture, linking it firmly to economic fundamentals and how humans obtained their energy and resources from nature. This is bold, erudite, and provocative."--Daron Acemoglu, coauthor of *How Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*"Ian Morris has emerged in recent years as one of the great big thinkers in history, archaeology, and anthropology, writing books that set people talking and thinking. I found delightful things in every chapter of *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels*, interesting enough that I found myself sharing them with family over dinner. The breadth of reading and the command of the subject are just dazzling. His major argument--that value systems adapt themselves to ambient energy structures, in the same way that an organism adapts to its niche--is fascinating."--Daniel Lord Smail, author of *On Deep History and the Brain*"This is an important and stylistically excellent book written from a sophisticated materialist perspective. It is eminently readable, lively, and with clearly stated arguments explored in a systematic fashion. In a sense, it follows up on Jared Diamond's work on agricultural origins, and it parallels Steven Pinker's book on warfare in depicting a world that is culturally evolving in a certain direction. *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels* should have a serious impact."--Chris Boehm, author of *Moral Origins: The Evolution of Altruism, Virtue, and Shame*About the Author Ian Morris is professor of classics and a fellow of the Stanford Archaeology Center at Stanford University.