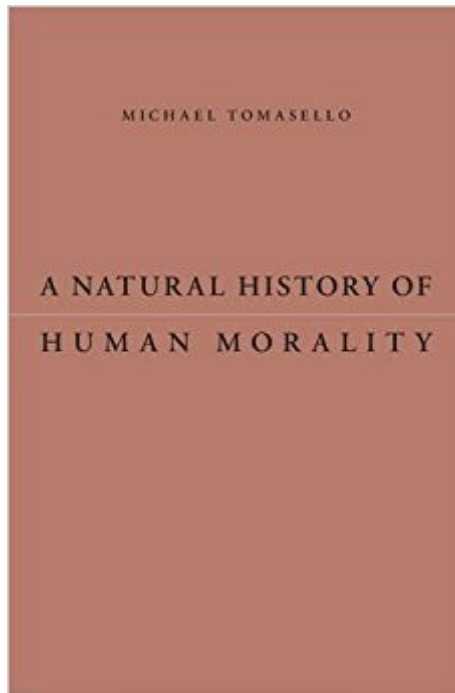


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A Natural History Of Human Morality



Synopsis

A Natural History of Human Morality offers the most detailed account to date of the evolution of human moral psychology. Based on extensive experimental data comparing great apes and human children, Michael Tomasello reconstructs how early humans gradually became an ultra-cooperative and, eventually, a moral species. There were two key evolutionary steps, each founded on a new way that individuals could act together as a plural agent – “we”. The first step occurred as ecological challenges forced early humans to forage together collaboratively or die. To coordinate these collaborative activities, humans evolved cognitive skills of joint intentionality, ensuring that both partners knew together the normative standards governing each role. To reduce risk, individuals could make an explicit joint commitment that “we” forage together and share the spoils together as equally deserving partners, based on shared senses of trust, respect, and responsibility. The second step occurred as human populations grew and the division of labor became more complex. Distinct cultural groups emerged that demanded from members loyalty, conformity, and cultural identity. In becoming members of a new cultural “we”, modern humans evolved cognitive skills of collective intentionality, resulting in culturally created and objectified norms of right and wrong that everyone in the group saw as legitimate morals for anyone who would be one of “us”. As a result of this two-stage process, contemporary humans possess both a second-personal morality for face-to-face engagement with individuals and a group-minded “objective” morality that obliges them to the moral community as a whole.

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Customer Reviews

Tomasello is convincing, above all, because he has run many of the relevant studies (on chimps, bonobos and children) himself. He concludes by emphasizing the powerful influence of broad cultural groups on modern humans. (Michael Bond New Scientist 2016-03-12) If you are after a definitive guide to explain how humans became an ultra-cooperative and, eventually, moral species, this must be it. Evolutionary anthropologist Michael Tomasello has followed his last book, *A Natural History of Human Thinking*, with another hard hitter. (New Scientist 2016-01-02) This is an extremely worthwhile addition to the literature on the evolution of morality. It is well written and strikes an excellent balance between easy accessibility and nuanced and novel ideas. This book will appeal to students and researchers from a range of disciplines. (Richard Joyce, author of *The Evolution of Morality*) This is an important synthesis of the ideas Tomasello has been developing over a number of years, extended with an offer of a philosophically relevant genealogy of morality. Readers will learn much from this informed review of the extensive literature on the evolution of morality, a substantial part of which consists of the major contributions Tomasello and his colleagues have made. (Philip Kitcher, author of *The Ethical Project*)

Michael Tomasello is Co-Director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany.

Tomasello's much acclaimed works address the perennial question of what makes human thinking unique, by using evidences drawn, mostly, from experimental devices of his making at the Max Planck Institute; settings meant to compare child's (toddlers and preschoolers) and apes' skills at spatial, instrumental and social cognition. The thesis he builds and sustains is, at core, Piagetian : our most cherished feats (notably language and cumulative culture) are contingent products of our hypersocial tendency to share goals and intentions with others through collaborative activities, comprising role-switching and joint commitment. *A Natural History of Human Thinking* offered an extensive account of the most likely evolutionary pathway going from individual intentionality, to joint and collective intentionality, while showing what objectivity, normativity, and perspective-taking (notably the view from nowhere) owe to the latter form of intentionality, and while updating the practical (use based) language theory that Tomasello is championing against Chomsky (from 2003

onward). A Natural History of Human Morality is, pace Tomasello, a companion to the former. It builds on the same two steps evolutionary process to show what changes in the proximate psychological mechanisms have occurred to get from chimpanzee's sense of sympathy and instrumental helping (for kin and friends), to our moral ought at treating other group members (be it humanity) as equally valuable, contra our self-, or more closely delimited other-, regarding interest. According to the more global thesis that is supported throughout, viewing evolution by natural selection as an individualizing, conflict bolstering force that renders altruistic and moral acts all the more unlikely (if not miraculous) is tantamount to endorse too limited, hence ill-guiding, premises (p.14). Hereafter I give each chapter a detailed summary, before indulging in two critical remarks. In "The Interdependence Hypothesis" Tomasello states which cooperative patterns are commonly found in nature. The distinction between morality of sympathy / morality of fairness is then made clear as being human specific, with a view to what amounts to their respective lack, and hinging on, obligations. The remaining part of the chapter sketches the overall thesis of the book, and gives an insight to the evolutionary meaning that can be given to the mutually conflicting character of our three inherited moralities (comprising our joint morality of collaboration). "Evolution of morality" is about picturing what cognitive, social-motivational, and self-regulation psychological mechanisms our last common ancestor with chimpanzees is likely to have had (6 million years ago); picture drawn from observations of wild and captive chimpanzees (mostly) and bonobos. Tomasello first delineates which of the multi-level selection theories available is best suited to fit his focus on the evolutionary changes in the proximate psychological mechanisms (kin selection - gene level; group selection - social group level; mutualism and reciprocity - individual level). He shows how mutualism, and an interdependence based concept of cooperation, can better account for (a) the motivational stability and (b) the initiating act of cooperation among individuals, than the classical, tit-for-tat, altruistic reciprocity (theorized by Thrivers) does. Notions of partner choice/control, and social selection (even "biological market") are brought to bear (18-9). The "stakeholder model" (Roberts), "group augmentation" principle (Clutter-Brocke), and emotional reciprocity proves helpful to overcome the reciprocal altruism's shortcomings, and to change the cost-benefit calculus in a much significant, and needed, way (p.17). As for chimpanzees' sociality, Tomasello takes position mid-way between Silk and Jensen, and Franz de Waal (p.36). The breadth and limits of Chimpanzees's sympathetic feelings, skills at intention reading, at instrumental helping, at coordinating and at choosing partners (friends or coalitionary partners) are carefully documented, and shown to be enmeshed in an overall matrix of dominance and physical competition over foods and mates. Overall, as further demonstrated by both an adapted version of the ultimatum game, and

by a counter-experiment to that of Brosnan et al. (the capucin that was made famous on youtube for throwing a cucumber back to the experimenter), with the proper control condition setted up, chimpanzees have no sense of fairness. To suggest what new psychological ingrediens were needed to get there, and to pave the way for the remaining part of the book, Tomasello brings some of philosopher David Hume's insights into the picture. "Second-Personal Morality" depicts the first evolutionary step made by early humans (2 millions years to 150 000 years ago) beyond apes, against the background of ecological transformations and new adaptative challenges : global cooling, desertification, greater competition over ressources amidst terrestrial apes. Theses changes allegedly made mutualistic cooperative foraging urgent and obligatory, on a daily basis, so that agents had to become both tolerant in the sharing of food, good at coordinating, communicating, sharing goal, attention, commitment, creating common ground understanding of role ideals, filling their role, excluding free riders, sharing fairly, socializing their instrumental rationality, evaluating their potential cooperative partner, and managing their cooperative identity (knowing, through a self-other equivalence perspective on things, that they, too, are being evaluated as cooperative partners). Whoever failed at these would have been selected against and left to starvation. Prior self-domestication (described with reference to works of B. Chapais, 2008 *Primeval Kinship: How Pair-Bonding Gave Birth to Human Society*), and S.B. Hrdy, 2009, *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding*) is taken as a necessary to get early human on the way to an increase sharing of intention. Social adaptations to obligate collaborative foraging acted as the main evolutionary driver of human essential, and distinctive, moral traits : (1) expansion of sympathy beyond kin and friends to collaborative partners, blossoming in a concern for partner welfare, through altruistic and paternalistic helping (you > me); (2) sense of self-other equivalence, impartiality, respect, deservingness and fairness while dividing the spoils, while addressing a cooperative partner, and while protesting for unequal outcomes (you = me), (3) explicit joint commitment prior to joint intentional activities, acting as an external arbiter, as a view from the upper, agents took to judge their partner's and their own behavior, fostering guilt for wrong doing, and a sense responsibility (we > me). All this evolved skills would have not required verbal communication to emerge, would have occurred within limited, face-to-face interactions, leaving the social group outside of the collaborative dyads quite ape- (if domesticated ape-) like. Throughout the chapter, Tomasello cite many studies showing that contemporary child and apes skills differ at joint intentionality, cooperative communication, partner choice and control, joint commitment, in ways that support his evolutionary hypothesis. "Objective morality" is built on the same pattern as "Second-Personal Morality" : ecological changes foster new in social relations of increased, obligate

mutualistic cooperation, with proximal psychological mechanisms (cognition, social-motivation/interaction, self-regulation) evolving extra features to meet the new challenges. From ecological, the relevant adaptive puzzle became demographic, at around 150 000 ago years ago, before modern humans spread out of Africa. Thanks to their successful collaborative dyads, groups grew large enough to bump into one another, thereby igniting conflicts over resources and territory. Interpersonal, common-ground knowledge proved insufficient to coordinate group members cognitively beyond a certain threshold (presumably the 'Dunbar number'). Groups began to split while retaining a tribal hinging. Similarity in behaviors, followed by similarity in the dressing and bodily markings, allowed for demarcating ingroup / outgroup, who to trust and who to help / who to distrust and keep at bay. With its groupal components gathering on different occasions (feast, wedding, warfare), the tribe, its survival and maintaining, became the one, big, collaborative commitment (common goal level) that agents were born in. Conformity became a necessity. Sympathy grew into loyalty, personal common ground into group-level, hence cultural, ground, through additional means along the behavior and dressing similarity, namely conventionalization, social normative control, and intentional pedagogy. Agents could commonly assumed their cultural peers were commonly knowing the right ways. Following and enforcing rules toward one's relational vis-à-vis, and toward third party became part of each agent's cultural identity. Cultural common ground would have allowed a fully, group-wide, self-other-equivalence way of understanding situations. Group members self-identified with their tribe's making, taking this supraindividual cultural "We" as a standpoint to relate with others, to build and manage their social-personal identities. Cultural agent typically engaged in reflective endorsement, judging their own moral judgments, and judging people "for how they judged the nonconformity of others" (p.108). Cultural agents also felt guilt for past judgements that proven misguided and false after being seen right and just, and lent themselves to creative interpretation of their new and unpredictable ways (be it light norms deviation) in order to ground these in the shared values and common justificatory scheme of the group. Easing the "transactional cost" to third party punishment may have been the upshot of creating institutions, meaning status function and deontic status. It may have accounted for the sacralization of institutions as already envisioned by Durkheim (likewise for solidarity by similarity in behaviors). The advent of sedentarisation with the domestication of plants and animals, around 10 000 years ago, brought even larger demographic growth, plus immigration of foreign cultural groups, and with them new coordination problems that were met by contemporary humans's (up to the present) specific cooperation enforcing layers : second-order laws, and organized religion. Cultural group selection, acting from between and from inside groups, is purported to make sense of how

our different, inherited moralities (our different voices) are conjoined and displaced throughout times : you > me concerns (morality of sympathy), you = me concerns (morality of fairness), we-concern (cultural, legal, religion, group-minded morality). The moralisation of social norms beyond mere conformity is presented as resulting from the grounding, within a growing portion of a population, of the former norms to second-personal, sympathy and fairness, natural morality. Tomasello puts special emphasis in claiming that conforming to norms does not itself make morality; only relation among equals, underlain by feeling of responsibility, deservingness and concern for welfare does. The differential level of grounding of norms into second-personal morality could help, together with cultural group selection, explain why group delimitation (who counts as one of us?), and group of reference reference ("which 'We' must we identify to?") changed so much though times and places. In "Human Morality as Cooperation-Plus", Tomasello re-states what distinctive features second-personal, and groupal thinking has, and what, in terms of "distinct set of biological adaptations" (p.137), make them qualitatively distinct. The alternative theories of human morality and cooperation are on offer are reviewed ; theories that fall under one of three broad categories : evolutionary ethics, moral psychology, gene-culture coevolution (p.137). Despite their meaningful contributions, each has specific lacking that help Tomasello credits his theory of being more comprehensive and beget more explanatory power. Further sections of the chapter synthesizes each the evolutionary steps that have been hypothesized, before restating how interdependence can account for ape's instrumental cooperation evolving into human's genuine, moral-adaptive motivation at helping and treating I and You on the same plane. The question of how biological adaptations to shared intentionality express themselves through development in social contexts is addressed. A specific attention is given to how contemporary children, cross-culturally, appear to first behave morally through their interaction engine, second-personally, without acknowledging any group reference as being the "shared expectations of "our" social group", before age three, at which age they both engage in conformity, rule enforcing, and show cultural variability in their decision and actions. Concluding remarks are responding to Homo *Œconomicus*-type objections to the natural history of morality as being mistaken, for not putting self-interest at the steering wheel, and for being rosy in hypothesizing that humans are "evolved biologically to value others and to invest in their well-being" (159). Another objection responded to amounts to defining equality among human as the recent output of Enlightenment. In all, *A Natural History of Human Morality* is a powerful, dense book that is likely to set cognitive and moral psychology to new heights. I would nonetheless join Moll's (2016) review of the 2014 book by pointing one issue that pertains to the causal scheme underlying Tomasello's thesis : 1. ecological changes 2. bring new, urgent and obligatory mutualistic

cooperative activities (foraging, group-defense), 3. which triggers new cognitive adaptations for shared intentionality. When agents envision their self and others from the standpoint of their new plural agent "we" (common / cultural goal level), they reframe their own self-control in terms of what "We" commonly know and expect (Tomasello goes as far as to say agents relinquish their self-regulation to the supraindividual entity), and they discover their mutual roles, perspectives, responsibility and self-other equivalence. But how did 2.), being new social-cooperative relations could possibly hang together? Since these new relations were ongoing prior to cognition, were agents behaving without knowing? I should also point out that it is unclear how much innate skills are necessary to make Tomasello's overall hypothesis true; whether we take innate as not-learned, or learned through a specialized, mandatory mechanism. One simple answer would be to equate every unique features that child have and apes don't have with innate knowledge or motivation, but that would likely lead to a long list (bestowing on Tomasello the same flaws of the nativist approach he endeavored to overcome, from *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* on). Tomasello do not engage in discussing this issue as such. He admits of all the morality traits he describe as being structural adaptative, that is, as being the outcome of a functional mechanism not dedicated to uniquely moral thinking. With the self-other equivalence described as a "spandrel" of the dual level structure inherent to joint intentionality, we are left with joint intentionality as the only innate mechanism, designed in the two steps of second-personal and cultural commitment. When looked closely, neither of these two steps seems to involved a lot more than what the early human and modern human were realizing, understanding, finding - be it that they were interdependent, held accountable, evaluated by others, and so forth. The most likely (if not the only) way that learned (understood, realized) things are transmitted is through culture. So the question becomes : where, if necessary, should we admit of self-regulatory, social-interactive, and cognitive (joint intentional) skills that are not learnable, teachable, and that needs biological inheritance ? As Carol Dweck already mentioned in her commentary to *Why We Cooperate*, the young age of children can not be taken too quickly as a proof of their lack of learning.

Very well done

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