

Michael Tomasello
A Natural History of Human Morality
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In his most recent book *A Natural History of Human Morality*, Michael Tomasello analyzes the evolutionary history of human moral psychology. In this well-structured and easily understandable work, he employs the same two-step model that he proposed to explain human thinking in his 2014 work *A Natural History of Human Thinking*. He starts from the assumption that morality is a species-unique form of cooperation made possible by the specific cognitive capacities humans are equipped with. His aim in this book is to provide an explanation of how changes in ecological conditions influenced the development of psychological traits which, based on the proximate mechanisms of cognition, social interaction and self-regulation, came to be associated with human feelings of sympathy and fairness, and led to increasingly complex forms of social organization and cooperation.

This two-step approach hypothesizes an evolutionary escalation of cooperative models of social collaboration, based on an expanded sense of shared intentionality. Each step is signaled by a change in the ecological conditions for survival which in turn increased the degree of interdependence between individuals, thereby requiring further adaptation of social organizational skills. The first step occurred because of the need for collaborative foraging which fostered a second-personal sense of sympathy and fairness. The second step entailed the development of cultural practices and an agent-independent morality which enabled organization of the activities of the group for competition with other groups.

In its most basic form, human morality is expressed through feelings of sympathy, which entail an altruistic interest in the well-being of others. These feelings originate in the parental care of offspring and can possibly be extended even to non-kin members. This is the most direct and simple form of cooperation: for a sympathetic act to occur, selfish motives must be overcome.

The morality of fairness, on the other hand, is a more complex form of cooperation, requiring the achievement of a balance between cooperative and

competitive motives among a number of individuals. The notion of “deservingness” is central, and it is accompanied by a series of attitudes aiming to praise or punish the behavior of others and the self.

Tomasello’s analysis starts from a discussion of the “interdependence hypothesis”, i.e. the idea that the individual is embedded in a complex network of interdependencies, where each member depends on the success of the group for survival and reproduction. This helps him tackle the problem of finding an adequate psychological explanation for the causal origin of evolutionary stable forms of cooperation, such as kin and group selection, mutualism and reciprocity. Since reciprocal altruism fails to provide a plausible explanation for the reasons why an individual should act altruistically in the first place, since there is always the risk that an altruistic act may not be reciprocated, Tomasello proposes considering such prosocial behavior as a form of social investment in the future. Because humans are reciprocally interdependent, single altruistic acts are not motivated by the contingent recipient’s response. They are rather driven by an indirect advantage to the altruist who cares for the well-being of other group members whom she also depends on.

The success of cooperative strategies also required the development of mechanisms of partner control, partner choice and social selection, in the attempt to punish or avoid non-cooperators. This process naturally favored the groups composed of more cooperative individuals.

Tomasello begins his analysis by considering the last common ancestors of humans and other great apes, who lived around 6 million years ago. In order to explain the social life of our ancestors, he relies on experimental research on great apes such as chimpanzees and bonobos. Even though these species live in complex social groups, each individual tries her best to outcompete the others in order to gain privileged access to resources by exerting her dominance. Collaborative efforts, therefore, are limited to those aiming to form strong coalitionary bonds with other individuals, both kin and nonkin, in order to provide support in social competition against other groups or within the same group, where the most desirable partner is simply the most dominant. Such bonding practices comprise preferential grooming and food sharing towards potential coalition partners, with the aim of fostering emotional reciprocity of sympathetic motives. The psychological traits of

cognition, social motivation and self-regulation that the motivational mechanism of sympathy requires for collaboration, were then developed for the ultimate purpose of competing for dominance. Since great apes depend on each other only in limited contexts, such as mating, there is no possibility for them to develop broader social skills. Even if a primitive form of sympathy is therefore present, experimental results show a complete lack of concern for fairness in dividing resources.

Tomasello sets the first step towards the evolution of human morality around 2 million years ago, when early humans developed a more prosocial attitude due to the emergence of obligate collaborative foraging. In the absence of viable alternatives for survival, the hunting of large game led to an increased need for collaboration. Partner choice was directed towards those individuals who were most collaborative and helpful, since members of these partnerships felt the instrumentally rational pressure to help each other in order to achieve their common interests.

The kind of cooperation required to perform collaborative foraging activities was based on the joint intentionality of a collaborating dyad, based on a mutual sense of strategic trust. Their shared experience of focusing attention and efforts towards a common goal, created a personal common ground that defined the social relationship between the two individuals and provided them with the understanding that failing to perform what was required by each partner's role-specific ideal simply meant joint failure.

They thus formed what may be called a plural agent, sharing a sense of "we" that defined their role ideals in a partner-independent way. The capacity for role reversal allowed each partner to take the perspective of the plural agent, where each partner was equally important in terms of achieving their joint goal. Even though the recognition of self-other equivalence was not in itself a moral act, it served to shift the motivations for helping collaborative partners from strategic to more impartial ones, that involved a genuine care for their well-being, and formed the base for the development of a sense of fairness.

The mechanism of selection of the most collaborative partners was thus driven by the evaluation of the social image that each individual created of themselves while cooperating with others. This process in turn produced a sense of personal identity, derived from the understanding

that "I" am being evaluated in the same way that "I" evaluate others. Since each individual needed to be seen as a collaborative partner in order to survive, the most important way to express a second-personal commitment to a joint activity was by communicating to a potential partner the willingness to collaborate towards a joint goal, treating them with equal respect and deservingness while demanding the same. This kind of collaborative communication act allowed the formation of a joint commitment to the normative authority of the plural agent created by their shared goal.

In this way, partners allowed each other to sanction unequal treatment and sub-optimal performance of the task role ideals defined in the name of the joint agent "we", feeling such second-personal protests to be legitimate. Not dividing the spoils fairly could be justified by "us" judging my poor performance, where "I" see this punishment as deserved and express my guilt if "I" want to retain my identity as a collaborative partner. The motivation behind an equal division of the spoils was thus motivated by a sense that responsibility and respect were due to the equally important partners in the context of a joint collaborative activity.

In the course of this explanation, Tomasello frequently relies on empirical research with young children up to 3 years of age to show that children seem to display a basic form of fairness in performing joint commitments. Similarly, he argues, early humans were capable of a basic second-personal form of morality of sympathy and fairness towards collaborative partners.

The last step in the evolution of human morality, according to the author, occurred around 150,000 years ago, when different tribal groups began competing with each other and interdependence played a broader role in the survival of modern humans. In this context, it was fundamental for each individual to clearly display their group identity, signaling their membership to a particular culture. Sympathy therefore evolved to a form of loyalty between individuals belonging to the same group, who displayed this identity via a shared cultural common-ground that defined their habits and particular ways of obtaining resources, communicating, and planning collective action.

The organization of collective intentionality through such conventional cultural practices, values and beliefs, therefore, defined the cultural identity of the group, and led to an agent-

independent perspective which established “objective” cultural role ideals, in the sense that every member belonging to that culture recognized them as a legitimate product of their co-authorship. This “objective” character of cultural conventions clearly appeared in practices of intentional pedagogy, where an elder imparted shared epistemic notion about the particular ways of organizing activities in the cultural group with a younger member, speaking with the authoritative voice of the collective formation.

The recognition of the “objective” status of cultural conventions promoted more complex forms of partner choice and control, performed through conventionalized forms of punishment that “objectively” established the good and the bad, anticipating conflicts and facilitating cooperation. The moral character of such norms was not inherent, but was instead grounded in second-personal moral motives of sympathy and fairness. Conforming to social norms thus added an additional layer of motivation for cooperation beyond second-personal morality, providing the means for cultural identification and group coordination and control, especially in the form of cultural institutions. Moreover, the possibility for articulated linguistic exchanges allowed the group to keep track of an individual’s social reputation. Group members thus not only conformed to cultural norms, but also actively enforced them, punishing any violation on behalf of third parties.

Additionally, these collective commitments legitimated cultural norms for moral self-governance, creating a sense of obligation to the “objective” shared values and beliefs. Since uniformity of judgement, mine and others’, is the hallmark of a cultural sense of identity, members’ evaluation of each other’s conduct extended also to their own and others’ judgements. If an individual failed to live up to the cultural expectations tied to her role, her identity as an in-group member of that cultural group was at stake. In order to preserve it, she had either to show a sense of guilt, recognizing a fault in her previous judgement, or to provide a justification based on the group’s shared values. These mechanisms of self-regulation thus rendered cultural groups collective agents whose survival success depended on a higher organizational ability than rival groups, leading to a process of cultural group selection. Starting from around 12.000 years ago, when human groups adopted a sedentary lifestyle relying on agriculture as the

main survival strategy, law and religion constituted additional means of cultural organization. This draws a picture of human morality based on the cooperative rational organization of shared intentional goals, motivated by different ecological and social conditions.

In the last chapter of the book, Tomasello discusses the relationship between his theory and other approaches that address the same subject matter. He considers the views put forward by evolutionary ethics, moral psychology and gene-culture coevolution, and provides a brief assessment of their limitations and how his proposal tries to overcome them.

From a philosophical point of view, Tomasello’s evolutionary account of human moral psychology in terms of cooperative strategies and the notions they rely on is consistent with a metaethical constructivist theory. Such an approach could then arguably find a precious ally in the reconstruction offered by Tomasello, strengthening and broadening its arguments also on the basis of empirical evidence.

Alessio Gerola

Filippo Domaneschi, Carlo Penco
Come non detto. Usi e abusi dei sottintesi

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Il non-detto è un mago della parola: riesce a infiltrarsi laddove nessuna formula esplicita potrebbe arrivare. Nella realtà del quotidiano, impegnati a concentrarci su ciò che c’è e che ci occupa già di per sé molto tempo, pochi di noi fissano sull’agenda appuntamenti con chi non c’è. La filosofia del linguaggio esplora poco il non-detto: predilige concentrarsi su ciò che è presente e, per così dire, visibile nella comunicazione; a ciò che è assente, la cui importanza ha risvolti anche sul piano psicologico, dedica poco spazio di azione. È, invece, ciò che hanno fatto Filippo Domaneschi e Carlo Penco nel loro ultimo saggio: hanno afferrato il non-detto alle prese con i suoi magheggi e l’hanno costretto a rivelarci qualcosa di più sui suoi meccanismi nascosti.