

## Review

*A Natural History of Human Morality.* By Michael Tomasello. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. 194 pages. US \$36.00 (Hardcover).

Human capacity for moral judgment is possibly among the most intriguing features in our distinctive nature. No wonder that many studies, in a more scientific style, are trying lately to shed light into that trait to better explain its origins, evolution, and current functioning. This attempt clearly connects with former ones, born from the Enlightenment program, and always aimed at providing a rational and autonomous foundation for moral values, breaking with religious or other traditional inspirations.

The present book is clearly inscribed in a recent tradition of evolutionary studies trying to cover several human features, an expanding scientific program aimed at providing more accurate and parsimonious explanations about human social phenomena. Tomasello is an evolutionary anthropologist working at the prestigious Max Planck Institute in Germany, who moves in a very interdisciplinary area, and possesses a good knowledge of the philosophical and social traditions that have dealt with moral issues.

Several aspects in the ongoing research around human morality, especially in this new book, become highly relevant for the current dialogue between science and religion. In the following lines I will try to outline such relevance, in an exercise of theological reception and discussion of current scientific proposals.

The book follows a former one by Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Thinking* (2014), and attempts to build a broad theory to describe the process that brought us—from our hominid ancestors—to the human capacity for moral judgment and behavior. The central thesis is that such a process started at the level of dual relationships and joint tasks, giving rise to attitudes of cooperation and a “we” awareness, which was further evolving at the group level toward more objective social rules, broadly shared by populations with identifiable boundaries.

The thesis is articulated through five chapters, and follows a quite straightforward path through human evolution, a history that starts with the study of primates, a field where Tomasello is an outstanding authority. After the introductory chapter, the second chapter deals with great apes and their very limited cooperative attitudes. His description paints a very poor panorama, where dominance and eventual collaboration for some hunting activities cannot yet be fully recognized as human cooperation. Such development probably took place much later, during the hominid evolution, and could work at the level of joint activities in what the author labels “second personal morality.” It is interesting how the proposed model resorts to the well known method of relating human evolution to children’s development. Tomasello infers some parallelism between both processes, or at least he finds evidence in studies on toddlers and two-to-three-year-old children’s ability to collaborate in several experimental games, and the difference those abilities make when compared with adult apes. In short, if children not yet able

to use language can be taken as a proxy of pre-*sapiens* hominids, an approximate view can be obtained on how that evolution proceeded.

The main step in the described process was the possibility of cooperation at various levels between individuals. Many mechanisms were surely involved in that ability, which led toward a sort of mutual recognition, involving intuitions about who deserved trust and could become a partner to share in many key survival activities. Those useful encounters and sharing activities gave rise to a sense of “we” and a consequent generalization of trust and expectations, now being extended beyond the restricted interpersonal interaction, but confined inside an identity group. The clue is more “interdependence” than “reciprocity,” and a broader perspective that moves beyond strategic thinking towards a greater sense of social belonging and increasing responsibility towards mates or those who could be identified as in-group members.

The process clearly points in the next stages toward an extension of the private expectations, encompassing every group member and giving rise to objective norms, which have been fixed and transmitted through cultural means. Culture was indeed contributing critically to the culmination of the process, giving rise in due time to social rules and laws, and eventually to moral values that were enforced by religious beliefs and rituals. This dynamic can be understood in sheer evolutionary terms: groups reaching higher moral standards—that is, able to recognize neighbors as equal and sharing one’s own interests—could outperform other groups less able to reach such a high cooperative level. The idea is that human morality can be perceived as an evolutionary achievement whose utility, in survival and reproductive terms, can be easily identified.

Tomasello devotes the fifth chapter to a discussion with alternative contemporary theories about origins and evolution of human moral aptitude, to better show connections and his specific contributions to the ongoing developments in this area of research. In very schematic hints this chapter reconstructs moral evolution as a story with its own plot and moves on toward full-fledged morality. The author manages to connect his view with a number of philosophical and social theorists, quoting the main modern names—Kant being the only surprising exception—and showing how social contract and related theories arising in modern times can be updated using recent evolutionary insights.

Tomasello’s efforts are praiseworthy. They deserve deep analysis and reflection, especially from theologians. Indeed, a theological tradition identifies human moral capacity as a natural feature, some ability inscribed in human original constitution. From this point of view, proposals trying to fill the gaps and better describe how morality could have arisen to produce a special moral conscience must be welcomed, as connected to medieval and earlier sources. However, some doubts still arise in that finely grained natural history. To start with, not everybody will be convinced about the described path bringing—through evolutionary mechanisms only—our rise to complex and highly articulated moral codes as we know them nowadays. Some steps proposed by Tomasello appear dubious, and some conjectures appear too hypothetical. Even at the methodological level, many readers could question the proposed analogy between human evolution and children’s development; children are often very selfish and possessive. Ask most parents and caregivers. And the quoted experiments seem as though they

reflect exceptional subjects and situations. The steps linking different stages seem quite plausible, but we lack enough evidence to build the theory in a more solid way.

From a more theological perspective, besides the points already mentioned about natural moral conscience, the idea of morality being born from face-to-face interactions, and from a deep sense of interdependence resounds with biblical topics built on the central role played by the covenant between Yahweh and humans. This appears as quite evident when revisiting the successive attempts to renew and improve a broken relationship between God and Israel. In that context, morality derived from deep covenant or ‘contractual’ experiences, and not in an autonomous way, and Israel’s religion could grow together with a maturing moral process. Thus, Tomasello’s scarce and partial attention devoted to religion in the moralizing process becomes less convincing, a topic that has received extensive attention in the last few years and is summarized here in a few pages (131–33).

The main question, from my own formation, concerns the apparent “happy end” that crowns the narrated story, and that justifies the optimistic tone in the book’s conclusion. Evolution ends triumphantly, bringing out the best of the human species. This is hardly convincing when the empirical reality and the historical record are considered. The question of evil, and the difficulties humans encounter in following the “moral law”—as Kant already observed—still persist, and place a big question mark to a program that seems to reflect wishful thinking. Theology can be seen, in contrast, as much more faithful to reality, and hence, paradoxically, “more scientific.”

LLUIS OVIEDO

Full Professor of Theology, Antonianum University, Rome, Italy  
loviedo@antonianum.eu.

#### REFERENCE

Tomasello, Michael. 2014. *A Natural History of Human Thinking*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.