



# Why We Cooperate

*Michael Tomasello*

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**Understanding cooperation as a distinctly human combination of innate and learned behavior.** Drop something in front of a two-year-old, and she's likely to pick it up for you. This is not a learned behavior, psychologist Michael Tomasello argues. Through observations of young children in experiments he himself has designed, Tomasello shows that children are naturally--and uniquely--cooperative. Put through similar experiments, for example, apes demonstrate the ability to work together and share, but choose not to. As children grow, their almost reflexive desire to help--without expectation of reward--becomes shaped by culture. They become more aware of being a member of a group. Groups convey mutual expectations, and thus may either encourage or discourage altruism and collaboration. Either way, cooperation emerges as a distinctly human combination of innate and learned behavior. In *Why We Cooperate*, Tomasello's studies of young children and great apes help identify the underlying psychological processes that very likely supported humans' earliest forms of complex collaboration and, ultimately, our unique forms of cultural organization, from the evolution of tolerance and trust to the creation of such group-level structures as cultural norms and institutions. Scholars Carol Dweck, Joan Silk, Brian Skyrms, and Elizabeth Spelke respond to Tomasello's findings and explore the implications.

## Why We Cooperate Details

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# From Reader Review Why We Cooperate for online ebook

## Heather says

Fascinating and excellent short read. Outlines some great research with infants and apes in regards to cooperation and altruism. Also has a valuable "forum" section in the back with responses and rebuttals.

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## Toby says

An interesting addendum to the notion of "shared intentionality" and the emergence of culture is the following paper (chapter) by evolutionary biologist Randolph Nesse:

Nesse RM. Social selection and the origins of culture. In: Schaller M, Heine SJ, Norenzayan A, Yamagishi T, Kameda T, editors. Evolution, culture, and the human mind. Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press. p. 137-50, 2010.

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## Robert says

Concise and thought-provoking distillation of the current debate over what makes us unique as humans -- the first part uses comparative studies with primates to make the case that we *are* in fact unique in our social interactions, while the second part offers a possible evolutionary trajectory for how we got here. I found the second part marginally more novel and interesting, largely due to its discussion of the social norms and institutions that facilitate a shared intentionality.

I saw another reviewer disappointed that the eponymous question was never decisively answered. That's worth a note, I think. While Tomasello makes an excellent and well-supported argument, he's not arrogant enough to claim that he's reached the final, eternal solution. The field is young and many experiments still need to be conducted to conclusively settle the claims at play. Many popular books by scientists in young fields serve more to espouse specific, idiosyncratic research programs than to capture the overall state of the debate. By writing carefully and including a forum in which equally distinguished contemporaries have responded with counterpoints, Tomasello avoids this ego-move. For those who enjoy watching science develop in real-time, this is an exciting document.

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## Ann Douglas says

Based on a series of lectures that the author gave at Stanford University in 2009, this tiny volume explores two key ideas: (1) how children learn to cooperate and (2) why human beings choose to cooperate. Intended for an academic rather than a mainstream audience.

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## **Kim Olson says**

A glimpse into why human beings cooperate with each other, this book is bolstered by plenty of research. Citing studies of very young children, Tomasello makes a convincing case that human beings are hard-wired toward not just cooperation, but altruism. He compares research on children to that of other primates, who don't seem to be nearly as prone to help one another. The last part of the book comprises essays by peers who are engaged in the same investigation, who both agree with him and--in some cases--disagree on various points and share their own contentions.

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## **Richard says**

Tomasello has written a short, sweet technical introduction to his theory of cooperation, which is a pretty hot topic in cognitive circles these days. The book was adapted from a series of lectures (Stanford's 2008 Tanner Lectures), so it isn't as heavily footnoted or quite as academic in tone as an academic journal article, but it doesn't spend quite as much time on background and basics as a typical pop-cog book. Still, it does cover a lot of territory in its short length (only 172 pages, with pretty big margins).

Tomasello explores cooperation with several different comparisons. He is most famous for comparing infants and toddlers to young chimpanzees, but that is just one aspect — he also explores cross cultural differences, for example. Children and chimps, however, are a very intriguing place to start, which is why the New York Times leaned heavily on his work in the December 2009 article *We May Be Born With an Urge to Help* (well worth reading).

He focuses on two basic phenomena (p. xvii):

- (1) Altruism: one individual sacrificing in some way for another; and
  - (2) Collaboration: multiple individuals working together for mutual benefit.
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## **Maria says**

Really interesting stuff on humans social behavior.

If you read the book, I suggest that you don't skip the Forum where other researchers comment and give critique to the content and conclusions of the book. I especially found the second part written by Carol S. Dweck very interesting and giving.

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## **mike says**

I once abandoned a fiction book after the author closed a chapter with this line: "And that was the last good day." The book had made me miserable up to that point a third of the way through. I didn't want to spend another week being made even more miserable.

Here we have a non-fiction book with a fine premise, a promising opening, and then rapidly diminishing returns. Just as I wonder to myself, "Is this worth finishing?" comes this bombshell:

"Through processes that we do not understand very well, mutual expectations arise.... I will not pretend that I have any fundamentally new answers to this, one of the most fundamental questions in all of the social sciences: where do these cooperative norms come from and how do they work?"

He goes on to elaborate, but as suggested by the above, we get speculation, not education.

This book is called "Why We Cooperate." It was on page 89 that I discovered the reader would not find out.

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### **Christopher Russell says**

My first psychology book and I thought it was informative past just strongly worded anecdotal opinion. Last chapter written by author is short but thoughtfully summed up the piece.

The forum chapters - where guest scientists wrote their peer reviews of the author's work - was more dense, but ultimately interesting to me.

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### **Arlette Sjerp says**

I put this book on my wishlist because I attended a lecture on this topic by Tomasello a while ago. Though the research described is interesting enough, the writing style is a bit too scientific to read purely for leisure. I guess I could have known that, though, seeing as this is a Boston Review Book.

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### **Shannon Appelcline says**

The cover of this book promises that it might be a light book, but sadly it's not. Instead this is a book about very in-depth research on cooperation, especially as it relates to humans and great apes. The result is somewhat interesting, though not that interesting to read. The book is then padded out with even less interesting discussions by others in the field.

Overall: definitely some interesting and well-supported ideas here, but not a particularly vibrant book. I mostly skimmed it.

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### **C says**

Tomasello has come to my attention from two sub areas of interest. The first was Axel Honneth's poorly developed book on reification. According to Honneth, Tomasello has empirically demonstrated that infants have an ontogenetic faculty of deep empathy and recognition of fellow human beings. But most of us know that adults don't have much empathy for other people, and have a hard time 'recognizing' the other (think the entire Republican party). For Honneth this is the new starting point to develop a theory of reification.

I also watch a lot of NOVA specials, and frequently the Max Planck institute for social research is featured with some amazing experiment regarding chimpanzees and/or toddlers. This is the institute that Tomasello works for.

Having been piqued by his research I picked up *Why We Cooperate* which, in only 100 pages, sets out to develop an interesting thesis. He begins with the question: was Hobbes or Rousseau right? Are we born nasty, and brutish, and hardly concerned with others, or are we born angelic and since fallen from grace due to the evolution of civilization? Tomasello is not as radical as Rousseau, he won't damn all of civilization, but he's convinced that we are born mostly altruistic, cooperative, and empathetic (i.e., he sides with Rousseau). He highlights about a dozen studies that reveal just how compassionate and innately concerned children are. He doesn't speculate much on why humans lose their ability to be altruistic, but he does show nearly conclusively that altruism is innate, and not learned. If anything is learned over time, it's how NOT to be altruistic. Society deprives us of our angelic nature. There is one study that really highlights this. If very young children see someone carrying a stack of books and bumping into a door, they know to walk over and open the door for the person (you can youtube these studies). It doesn't matter if the child is alone in the room, or if the parent is there prodding them along, the child always opens the door (meaning this isn't parent directed altruism). But, if the child is given a reward for opening the door, they are less likely to open it a second time, and a third time, and so on. The more rewards they get for doing a good deed, the less inclined they are to do the deed again. The speculation is that the act has initial intrinsic value, but once the intrinsic value is substituted for some material value, the act loses its worth. This is exactly the OPPOSITE view of man that most people, especially economist and politicians, hold. They all believe people need material and monetary motivation to keep doing good things. What is actually happening is that people are constantly being 'rewarded' for acts they would have done anyway, and are now losing the inclination to do them for the right reasons. If you reflect on this point for all of ten seconds, it quickly becomes apparent just how rotten capitalism is.

In order to quell doubts that Tomasello isn't painting a romantic picture of human-beings, he conducts the exact same studies on chimpanzees. Although they're not completely unconcerned, their ability to share, and conduct altruistic acts, is far less prominent than humans. This leads him to believe that there is some evolutionary advantage to our innate altruism. Although, I don't think the chimpanzee studies much matter one way or the other regarding human altruism (and some of Tomasello's critics contend this point frequently, i.e., these ape studies are superfluous and not as informative as he thinks).

Toward the end of the book things become too speculative for my taste. Evolutionary Psychology often seems like a complete pseudo-science once it starts abstracting back before civilization. Comparing humans to chimpanzees, Tomasello tries to give an evolutionary account for our unique set of altruistic traits. None of these speculations are wholly empirical, and always abstractly hypothetical. I don't think it much matters why we evolved these traits; the real important question is why are we no longer exercising them, and what's the cause?

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## **Jimmy Pryor says**

This is a short, little book. But, it's packed with interesting ideas.

Tomasello's basic proposition, as I understand it, is that humans cooperate because we have an ability to share intentions, in a symbolic space, and we like to be helpful by sharing information.

He tries to tease apart three different types of altruism, or helpfulness, two of which we share with other great apes. The third, which we do not share with apes, is informative helping. He refers to experiments done with children of various ages from about six months and onward. The results seem to indicate that children of about 14 months of age can infer what the intentions of an adult are, and will spontaneously inform them of where a tool is that they need to enact their intentions. E.g. point to a hidden stapler for an adult that was previously engaged in stapling.

The book benefits from comments from other scientists at the end on the points on which they concur and differ from Tomasello. Joan Silk, Carol Dweck, Brian Skyrms and Elizabeth Spelke are the commenters.

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### **Rebecca says**

This book has a lofty goal -- explaining how human altruism and cooperativeness developed, given that our closest relatives in the animal kingdom aren't altruistic or cooperative -- but only manages to barely skim the surface of the issue. This book is actually a collection of lectures that Tomasello gave, with some short commentary from other scholars at the end. The only problem is, there isn't much new ground covered here compared to Tomasello's other work. If you want a more in-depth coverage of the evolution of communication, cooperation, altruism, etc., I'd recommend reading one of his other books, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*. That being said, this book would make a good introduction to Tomasello's research for people who don't know about it -- and since it's so short, it's a pretty painless way of gaining exposure to the field.

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### **Mark says**

Quick read but will make you realize how much of human nature we think we know and take for granted when we are much stranger creatures than we ever consider. Especially pushes back on jaded and cynical views of human nature when one considers we are by far the most cooperative animal we know of so far.

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