

V Aspects of our Moral Sensibility I: Cooperation; The Moral/Conventional Distinction

Tomasello's *Why We Cooperate*

Basic idea: we are born as natural cooperators; we then come to refine that into something that is more reciprocal.

Evidence for natural cooperation:

Helping At 18 months, children will help an adult; this behaviour is cross cultural, is shared with chimpanzees. Reward will actually diminish helping behaviour, suggesting that it is intrinsically motivated (some background here: Deci and Ryan on intrinsic motivation; the theory of cognitive dissonance.) In contrast, empathy increases the behaviour. Children's pointing seems to involve theorizing about what the other person wants: when asked to fetch the battery at 20 months, subjects fetched the further battery, not the one that was already there. (Background here: ascription of desires; ignorance; false belief.) Compare Hamlin, Wynn and Bloom: children less than a year old expect puppets to prefer other puppets that help them over those that hinder them; and they prefer to play with the helper puppets.

Informing At 12 months infants will point to a stapler to show an adult where it is. Other primates very rarely point, and then only with humans and as an imperative.

Sharing Children are not so good at this. But they will provide for others when there is no cost to themselves, unlike chimpanzees: the pull board experiment with chimps and children of 25 months; children pull to help others, chimps pull randomly. (NB: this looks rather more like helping than sharing.)

Evidence for later reciprocation:

(i) from around the age of 3, children help and share more if the others reciprocate. Chimpanzees, in contrast, show no obvious sense of fairness: they 'cooperate' in the ultimatum game for the least reward (beware of the early studies here on capuchins).

(ii) at least from the age of 3 children are sensitive to norms, and they are norm enforcers.

Further: non-human primate societies work using kinship relations and direct self-interest; human are involved in mutualism that looks more like a stag hunt than a prisoners' dilemma. That is, there are two dominant strategies—both cooperate or both defect—and cooperation brings a higher pay-off (though you do badly if you cooperate and everyone else defects; then you would do better to defect). Young children positively enjoy cooperation, unlike chimps. Getting ongoing cooperation requires three things: an ability to coordinate; norms, which we have already mentioned; and trust. (Other relevant work here: Tom Tyler's findings that people are much more likely obey the law when they think it is fair and benevolent, even if it harder on them.)

The Moral/Conventional Distinction

From a young age, (around 3) children start to make distinctions within the norms between those that are moral and those that are conventional. Typical sort of paradigm: take two norms that they endorse: you should say ‘excuse me’ if you burp at the dinner table; you shouldn’t hit younger children; then ask them whether, in a society in which these behaviours were allowed, it would really be ok for them to do them. For examples like the first they say ‘yes’; for examples like the second, they say ‘no’.

There is some controversy over quite how universal this distinction is; certainly the *content* of what counts as conventional and what counts as moral differs across different societies. (For a brief summary see Kumar 2015) But the following features do seem to group together for the ‘moral’ cases:

- (1) serious
- (2) general
- (3) authority-independent
- (4) objective

And if told that some of these features obtain, they tend to assume that the others do too.