



The Birth of Ethics: Reconstructing the Role and Nature of Morality

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Reply to Michael Tomasello's Commentary

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Abstract and Keywords

Michael Tomasello's commentary suggests that the genealogy traced in *The Birth of Ethics* does not pay sufficient attention to the cooperative infrastructure on which language realises and does not give it sufficient importance in explaining the emergence of ethics. The challenge he raises is more plausibly read in a moderate way, as a claim that the narrative should have given a greater place to the role of our naturally cooperative, jointly engaged dispositions. The facts adduced by Tomasello in documenting our cooperative nature may be admitted, and are implicitly recognized in the book, but in explaining how ethics might have emerged in their absence, the account throws light on the essential nature of ethics. The challenge might be read in a more radical way as a claim that language is not needed at all in explaining the emergence of ethics. But in that form it is not very plausible, as the narrative at which Tomasello gestures would not explain the appearance of distinctively ethical concepts.

Keywords: Language, cooperation, joint action, emergence of ethics

Philip Pettit It is a privilege for a philosopher's speculations on how ethics might have emerged among our kind to enjoy the notice and commentary of one of the leading figures in the actual prehistory of ethics. My own belief is that philosophy is best pursued, when possible, in interaction with more empirical studies, and I am delighted to have the opportunity to situate *The Birth of Ethics* in relation to Michael Tomasello's work, as that is reflected in his commentary. There are differences between us, to be sure, but they are not differences of the kind associated with blank stares or embarrassed head-scratching. Engaging

philosophically and empirically negotiable matters, they are the stuff of which progress in any field is likely to be made.

The two approaches

It is important to understand the difference of aim between Tomasello's (2016) prehistory of ethics, as elaborated recently in *A Natural History of Human Morality*, and my genealogy or reconstruction. His concern is with the historical exploration of the origin of ethics. And so, he looks at the actual situation and psychology of our early forebears—under “an imaginative reconstruction” of these (2016, 154)—and seeks to identify a way in which ethics might possibly have emerged among our ancestors. My concern is with the philosophical explanation of the nature of ethics. And with that in mind, I seek to identify a human **(p.348)** situation and psychology, realistic if fictional, that would have reliably triggered its emergence.

While his aim is primarily historical, and mine primarily philosophical, our enterprises are deeply connected. If he is right, after all, then that is likely to have philosophical implications for the nature of ethics. And if I am right, then that is likely to have historical implications for how ethics actually emerged.

What is the main divide between us on the terrain where our claims meet? On the starkest reading—not the only one possible, as we shall see—the difference turns on whether ethics or morality presupposes the use of natural language. If it does not then that has implications for the nature of ethics; if it does, as my argument maintains, then that has implications for the origin of ethics.

Might we claim, even on that stark reading of the difference between us, that we each identify sufficient conditions for the appearance of ethics, without having to reject the claim of the other? No: this easy route to reconciliation is closed. The reason is that if a pre-linguistic infrastructure of cooperation were sufficient for the evolution of morality, then the fact that it might also emerge out of interactions requiring language would not teach any lesson about its essential nature. It would imply, in terminology introduced in chapter 1, that the account I defend, which requires language to exist prior to morality, fails to meet the constraint of being naturalistically economical or parsimonious. Or at least it would imply this, on the assumption, which we may concede for purposes of argument, that the two accounts would direct us to rival candidates for the referents of prescriptive terms.

Tomasello's challenge

Tomasello comments at the end of his remarks that the points he makes might be taken to support one of two challenges for my approach. The first is that it is not possible to “base an account of human moral evolution in acts such as reporting whose normative dimension is aimed at truth” (344). I entirely agree and so don't take this to be a challenge to **(p.349)** my position. As he himself

says earlier in his commentary, "Pettit recognizes the important role of cooperation as background for the evolution of human morality" (334).

It is the second challenge that I shall take as his core complaint. This, in his own words, is that I have "not elaborated to the degree needed the cooperative infrastructure underlying any account based in linguistic interactions" (344). While I recognize the role of cooperation, as he acknowledges, the complaint is that "this recognition receives only unsystematic treatment . . . and its role is never made explicit" (334).

But this complaint itself can be understood in either of two ways. First, as a moderate claim that while linguistic interactions of some kind are needed for the emergence of ethics—this is not entirely ruled out by a reading of his book—I need to say more on the role of cooperation either to help explain ethics itself or to explain the role of language in relation to ethics. Or second, as a radical charge that once cooperation is placed more systematically and explicitly in the picture than it is under my account, then the need to invoke language in the explanation of ethics vanishes altogether. The radical charge is supported by what I described earlier as the starkest reading of the difference between us.

The issue of how to construe Tomasello's charge is underlined by a remark in his commentary on the division of spoils and the ethical question it must have raised for our forebears. Having sketched his own account of how our predecessors would have come to think ethically about that exercise, and presumably come to regulate it, he makes the following observation. "It is noteworthy in this context that in dividing resources, as a central ethical challenge in the evolution of human morality, language is not centrally involved" (338). On the first reading of his challenge to me, language is involved in the appearance of ethics but is not as important as I make it out to be. On the second, it is not necessarily involved at all.

Before addressing the challenge in either version, I should make two points in clarification of the debate. The first bears on Tomasello's claim that "the complete story" about ethics must go beyond a second-personal morality of the kind envisaged so far to the "common set of cultural practices" and norms that are likely to emerge in any society (**p.350**) whatsoever (342). We agree that wherever there is a morality there are bound to be social norms in existence that attract moral approval; this is an important theme in chapters 5 and 6 of my book. Hence, I do not comment in these remarks on the claim about their being necessary for a complete story about ethics; there is nothing there that divides us. I focus instead on the more basic moral ideas—in his view, ideas of a second-personal morality—that moral norms presuppose.

The second point to note is that the question about the relation between language and morality arises, whether language is taken to be essentially verbal

or to involve mainly gestural and related signs. My presentation is made on the assumption that those in Erewhon have a verbal language from the very beginning of the narrative, albeit a language mainly used for reporting purposes. While that assumption makes the narrative easier to present, however, it is not strictly essential.

Thus, I can accept a suggestion that Tomasello makes that the avowal or pledge associated with a joint commitment, say to go net-fishing together, may be communicated gesturally; I do not take this to show that "language is not necessary for a joint commitment." "If we have previously net-fished together," he says, "a simple head nod at the appropriate time of day in the appropriate direction should suffice" (340). I agree entirely, since a nod will be of no use whatsoever except among agents who have achieved a means and a medium of communication—some form of language, however rudimentary—in the sense of communication characterized early in chapter 2.

The moderate version of the challenge

I find it more congenial to understand Tomasello's challenge in the first, moderate fashion, if only because it makes the common ground between us quite extensive. And in response to the challenge in that version, I would make three conciliatory points.

The first is that I acknowledge the plausibility of Tomasello's (2016) main claims in the course of my book, accepting that it is likely that mother nature pre-empted calculation about the rationality of **(p.351)** cooperation and that it "selected our forebears for the presence of proximate psychological mechanisms triggering mutual cooperation and reliance quite spontaneously" (41). While having no expertise in the area, I am happy to go along with the claims he makes about this selection; he bases those claims mainly on the cooperative dispositions that children display, even before they reach the age of three.

The second point I would make is that while my narrative about the fictional world of Erewhon does not assume that inhabitants are born with this proclivity to cooperation, it makes methodological sense not to rely on such an assumption. The assumptions about agents and their circumstances that argue for the emergence of ethics, as I say in the book, should "offer a firm basis on which to predict the actions and adjustments of the protagonists" (40), and should be "realistic or, if not fully realistic, . . . should not rig things in favor of the development of ethical concepts and practices" (42). A willingness to postulate cooperative predispositions might seem to rig things in this way, at least to many critics, and would not constrain the predictions of the narrative sufficiently; cooperative predispositions might be posited at will.

Those considerations led me to try to argue for the likely appearance of ethics under the assumption that the inhabitants of Erewhon are relatively rational and self-regarding in their thinking. A further advantage of that approach, so I

suggested, is that ethics must look all the more central to human life for the fact that it would even appear in a worse-case scenario. "What nature would generate in the dry wood of Erewhon, it is all the more likely to have generated in the green wood of our actual history" (41).

The third point I would make in response to the moderate version of the challenge softens the second. While the methodology adopted supports a more individually opportunistic picture of the psychology of Erewhonians than applies to human beings—this, on Tomasello's own image of human psychology—the picture adopted does still endorse many of the elements that he stresses. True, the protagonists in the narrative, even if they are moderately altruistic, "primarily desire the promotion of their own welfare and that of their kin" (33). But nonetheless "they are able to rely on others, and able to get others to rely on **(p.352)** them". Moreover, "they have the capacity in pursuing mutual reliance, first, to exercise joint attention, consciously focusing on data they take to be available to all, and second, to act jointly with one another in pursuit of shared goals". And finally, "they are able to build on those capacities and use words in the communicative fashion of natural human language" (33).

The radical version of the challenge

The radical version of Tomasello's charge almost certainly exaggerates the difference between us, but it has the merit of directing attention to a crucial issue in debates about the origin and nature of ethics. This is the question as to whether language is essential to morality.

One reason for thinking that language is not necessary for ethics or morality might be based in a conception of ethics as essentially a matter of behavior or attitude. On this way of thinking, the fact that any creatures behave in a way that answers to recognized, ethical standards, or display a corresponding sensibility, is enough to show that ethics has already made an appearance among them. And it suffices to show this, so the line goes, even if those creatures have no conception of the standards; no idea of their demands across different situations; and no sense of complying with such demands.

Like me, however, Tomasello does not take any pattern of behavior or feeling—even a highly altruistic pattern—to imply in and of itself that the creatures who conform to it have entered ethical space. Thus, agents count as having an ethics, not by virtue of just acting in certain ways, out of certain dispositions, but by virtue of acting in those ways because of thinking in broadly ethical terms. This is implied in his commentary, when he says that "to be ethical," your action toward another "must be done for the right reason" (338). You must act out of "a sense of 'ought'," as he puts it in the book (2016, 84), that does not reflect "just a preference or an emotion."

On the radical version of the challenge, what Tomasello holds is that the pattern of cooperation that he charts in the book, and summarizes **(p.353)** in his commentary, is sufficient before the advent of language, or at least independently of language, to make sense of how our forebears would have developed both ethical habits of thought and ethical habits of action—ethical concepts and ethical practices.

The plausibility of this challenge depends on the plausibility of the account at which he gestures in explaining the origin of ethics, where this is read as denying language any role. It may be useful, then, to review the main elements in that account, as summarized in his commentary, and to ask whether a story built around such elements could suffice, independently of language, to explain the emergence of ethics.¹

1. In the relevant period, from about four hundred thousand to one-hundred and fifty thousand years ago, our ancestors lived in world of obligate collaboration in foraging; unlike other primates, they faced a choice of working together or dying alone.
2. In this world, they were selected for “a new social psychology” in virtue of which they became ‘capable and motivated to form with a partner a joint agent “we” that could act together and also know things together in joint attention and common ground’ (336).
3. After the experience of one or another form of collaboration, say in hunting antelopes, “partners came to understand together” certain “role-ideals: “standards that anyone had to meet if the joint agent was to achieve its joint role” (336).
4. These “socially shared standards,” which were necessary for the success of all the partners in a venture, “exclude not only incompetence but uncooperativeness”; and this, despite the fact that they are “instrumental,” “not really ethical” (337).
5. The “complement to working together collaboratively” would have been a form of trust that “in the end we will be able to divide the spoils in a mutually satisfactory way” (338).
- (p.354)** 6. Would this division have been ethical in character? Only if it was established, not in an exercise where the partners each pursue their self-interest, but “for the right reason” required in ethics: viz., that “I understand my partner to be equally deserving as myself” (338).
7. There are two considerations that combine to explain why our ancestors would have been led to divide the spoils of collaboration for the right, ethically relevant reason; these become apparent when we ask about how things present to me or you in the sort of situation they faced.
8. First, in that type of situation, I see others, in line with “the basic structure of joint intentionality,” “as beings like myself,” playing reversible roles under common role-ideals; I do not acknowledge such

equality as a result of "a desire or preference" but by way of observing "the facts of the matter" (338).

9. Second, "this bloodless judgment of equality turns into a judgment of equal deservingness once collaborators feel the need to bond together to exclude do-nothing free riders from the spoils, which they obviously have done nothing to deserve" (338).

10. On this account, the motive that keeps me responsive to the perceived deserts of a partner is not that I want a good reputation with others—not that "I care what they think of me"—but rather that "I care what we think of me." For if I offend, "it is 'we' who object, or, more precisely, one of us as a representative of our 'we' " (338–39).

This original and intriguing story, abstracted from *The Natural History of Human Morality*, surely captures important developments among our ancestors that would have contributed to the emergence of ethics. But I find it hard to see why the story, taken independently of linguistic and conceptual initiatives, would have required people to think in the fashion that is distinctive of ethics.

The crucial premise in the argument, involving points 8 and 9, is that the participants in any joint venture would have seen one another as symmetrically positioned with themselves, and would have seen **(p.355)** free-riders as different. The crucial move in the argument, then, is the transition from that presumptive fact to the conclusion that participants in the venture would have seen one another as deserving, indeed equally deserving, of a share in the spoils and, by implication, would have seen free-riders as undeserving.

Let that move pass, and the parties involved would certainly have occupied ethical space. They would have access to the ethical property of desert and been in a position to introduce related concepts like those of proper and improper behavior, fair and unfair treatment, just and unjust exclusion. And equally, therefore, they would have been positioned to regulate their own and one another's behavior by deploying such concepts.

But why is the crucial move in the argument supposed to be persuasive? Why does the crucial premise not argue for the development of suitably cooperative behavior without arguing in addition for access to the concept of desert and its cognates?

It may well be unsurprising that in the situation described participants should have become disposed to divide the spoils among themselves, whether equally or not, and to exclude free-riders. They might have been naturally selected for that disposition, for example, assuming that the advantage to the group constituted a selectional pressure; it would have created this sort of pressure to the extent that members survived or failed individually, depending on whether the group as a whole survived or failed. And even in the absence of such group selection, our

ancestors might have been naturally selected for the required disposition in the manner in which Tomasello assumes that they were selected in general for cooperative traits.

In any case, putting natural selection aside, we can imagine processes of social selection under which the regularity associated with dividing spoils and excluding free-riders might have emerged and stabilized. Reputational pressures alone would explain why members of the group would have rejected as partners those who had not divided the spoils in the past, for example, or even those who had done nothing to help eject free-riders (Brennan and Pettit 2004).

Tomasello maintains in his commentary that reputational pressure will not support stable cooperation, if it is “in constant competition with **(p.356)** my selfish motives: I will cheat if I can get away with it” (339). But that need not be a problem for such a story of social selection.

Selfish motives do not have to be very powerful on his own view of how our ancestors were selected for cooperative dispositions. Besides, he argues that reputational pressure is going to be more stabilizing if it is pressure brought to bear by a collaborative group or community: if it is applied by “one of us as a representative of our ‘we’ ” (338–39). And there is no reason why our story cannot appeal to this, without relying on the prior introduction of ethical concepts. Something close to communal pressure figures prominently in any story, including that which I myself tell, where reputation gets spread by testimony, so that it can become a matter of common belief, manifest to all, that certain individuals are not reliably cooperative.

Thus, there are familiar mechanisms of natural and social selection for why our ancestors in Tomasello's scenario would have evolved suitably cooperative behavior. In particular, there are familiar mechanisms for explaining why they would have tended to divide the spoils of foraging appropriately, and to help to eject free-riders. But there are no mechanisms that I can see to explain why, over and beyond this, they would have begun to think in a novel, prescriptive fashion, developing concepts like that of desert and its relatives. For this reason, I resist the radical version of the challenge discussed.

Detente

It is important to recall at this point, however, that the moderate version of the challenge is much more likely to be that which Tomasello would defend. His central claim, on a plausible interpretation, is that those who make language a prerequisite of morality, as I do, may not recognize that what language achieves in making ethical concepts available, it achieves only because of a dense infrastructure of joint activity. My response, sketched earlier, is that while I might well have given more attention than I did in the book to this

infrastructure, I do concede its importance, and I acknowledge it as fully as my worse-case methodology allows me to do.

(p.357) Not only am I happy to make this concession to Tomasello. I should also acknowledge in conclusion that the sort of narrative I tell might profitably take a different form, in light of the points that he emphasizes about the centrality of joint activity. It is plausible in light of his argument that joint action may come on stream for members of our species as naturally and primitively as individual action. And if we start from a community in which it is second nature, perhaps even first nature, for members to do various things together, then the move to avowal and pledging may be much more straightforwardly explicable than in my account, and the appearance of a prescriptive stance may be much more readily intelligible.

In order to appreciate this, it may be useful to return to some points briefly invoked at the end of chapter 1 about joint action. Many of the things we do with both hands, we do without knowing what we do with either hand taken separately. While we each know how to tie our shoelaces, for example, using both hands at once, few of us know how we move our individual hands in doing so. As this is possible across limbs, something similar is possible across individuals. Thus, while you and I may be able to tango together, we may have little idea of what we individually do in performing the tango (Pettit 2017). Not only may it take two to tango; it may also take two to establish the know-how on which tangoing relies.

Tangoing is a joint activity in which we involve ourselves, at least after practice, as in a basic action; we can do it intentionally, but, as in the shoelaces case, we do not do it intentionally by means of doing anything more basic intentionally (Hornsby 1980). Tomasello's picture of our forebears in the period when ethics arose suggests that joint activities of the same kind may have been absolutely basic for them. They may have found it entirely natural to do various things intentionally together, as children in his studies find this natural, without being able to see the joint action as the aggregate product of what as individuals they intentionally do. Learning would have been required for achieving basic joint activities, of course, but only in the way in which it would also have been required for achieving individual ends.

(p.358) If we move to a picture in which the protagonists in our narrative about ethics begin from such a scenario, then it may be possible to recast the narrative I tell. The recasting would preserve the role of avowing and pledging, and maintain its importance for the emergence of a prescriptive stance. But it would develop the story without relying as much as I do on charting the rational adjustments of relatively self-seeking agents; it would reduce the part played in

my narrative by *homo economicus*. I cannot explore that possibility here, but I see it as a destination that looks more plausible in light of this exchange.

Notes:

(1.) For a consideration of the many more steps of argument itemized in Tomasello's book, and for a critique of the claim that they would have sufficed to ensure the presence of an ethics, see Pettit (2018b).

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