



Why We Cooperate (Boston Review Books)

By Michael Tomasello



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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.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Tomasello, codirector of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, shares his theories on how human cooperation evolved and suggests it is a defining characteristic of our species. To test the innate quality of cooperation in human interactions, Tomasello studies the cooperative behavior of preverbal children, generally 12 months to 24 months in age, and compares their behavior to that of apes in similarly structured experiments. The results are remarkable, demonstrating that even preverbal children have a natural predilection to cooperate and help others. Chimpanzees, on the other hand, especially where food is concerned, tend to act in ways that increase their own individual gain. Tomasello's writing is followed by contributions from four other leading scientists—John B. Silk, Carol Dweck, Brian Skyrns and Elizabeth Spelke—whose comments are illuminating, and while they do not fully agree with Tomasello, they all agree that [h]is cutting edge theory and research has altered the face of developmental psychology by merging cognitive and social development, historically quite separate fields. The book (which originated as a lecture series at Stanford) is generally dryly scientific, but the fascinating approach to the question of what makes us human renders this a singularly worthwhile read. (*Oct.*)

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Review

"The work of Tomasello and his colleagues provides the best and most exciting point of entry into a literature that will certainly shape philosophical debates for the years to come." -- **Mattia Gallotti**, *Cambridge University Press*

"... the fascinating approach to the question of what makes us human renders this a singularly worthwhile read." -- *Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

Michael Tomasello is Codirector of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany. His books include *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, *Constructing a Language*, and *The Origins of Human Communication* (MIT Press, 2008).

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Corrina Sutton:

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