

Hard-Wired to Cooperate

Humans are naturally inclined to cooperate and create social norms, the foundation for building commons.

By [David Bollier](#)



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Do humans have a natural propensity to form commons? That is certainly one way to interpret recent findings by scientists studying the innate behaviors of babies. It turns out that very young children show a natural willingness to help other out and cooperate.

While all of us have healthy dollops of ego and selfishness, experiments have shown that children have an almost reflexive desire to help others even before parents and culture begin to shape those instincts. The cooperative impulse can be seen in children across cultures, and it is a trait that our closest evolutionary ancestor, primates, do not have. In one experiment, for example, when an adult pretends to be searching for lost objects, infants will start, 12 months old, to point at the “lost” objects.

These are some of the findings of [Why We Cooperate](#), a new book by Michael Tomasello, a developmental psychologist and co-director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany. An account of the book by Nicholas Wade was published in today’s [New York Times](#).

Tomasello’s book, which studies the capacity for cooperation among young children, helps “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.”

Besides innate propensities to cooperate and help, children at age three learn how groups of people create rules for group behavior. (Sounds a lot like commons-building to me!) A key concept in this process is what Tomasello calls “shared intentionality.”

Shared intentionality “is close to the essence of what distinguishes people from chimpanzees,” writes the *Times*. “A group of human children will use all kinds of words and gestures to form goals and coordinate activities, but young chimps seem to have little interest in what may be their companions’ minds.” Based on these findings, Dr. Tomasello believes that the best parenting methods are those that help children discover the logic of social cooperation: “Children are altruistic by nature,” he writes, but because they are also selfish, parents need only push a bit on the cooperative side of things.

“Shared intentionality” is arguably the factor most ignored in prisoner’s dilemmas experiments. Test subjects rarely have the chance to communicate freely with others, develop a certain relationship of

trust, and come to an agreement about how to proceed — i.e., “shared intentionality.” Not surprisingly, most prisoner’s dilemma experiments conclude that humans are selfish and calculating, and that collective action and cooperation is improbable.

Dr. Tomasello believes that shared intentionality is the foundation of society (and I would argue, the commons), because it allows social norms to emerge. It also provides the means for punishing those who flout those norms. In terms of evolutionary science, cooperation offers a competitive advantage over individual competition because it tends to produce more impressive results: more food can be gathered or hunted, greater safety can be achieved, more ambitious projects can be implemented.

I was fascinated to learn that the extraordinarily large “sclera,” or whites of the eyes, in human beings is an evolutionary trait that aids cooperation. The sclera enables people to track the gaze of other people and coordinate their own behaviors accordingly. All species of primates have dark eyes with very little sclera, but the sclera of humans is three times larger than any primate. This makes it easier to track a person’s gaze. As the *Times* put it, “Chimps will follow a person’s gaze, but by looking at his head, even if his eyes are closed. Babies follow a person’s eyes, even if the experimenter keeps his head still.”

Dr. Tomasello believes that tracking other people’s gaze evolved “in cooperative social groups in which monitoring one another’s focus was to everyone’s benefit in completing joint tasks.” Once cooperation was seen as mandatory for survival, people developed social rules, ways of enforce the rules, language to help coordinate activities, and norms to honor altruism.

Times reporter Wade cites another recent book that seems to confirm and expand upon Tomasello’s findings. *The Age of Empathy*, by Dr. Frans de Waal, a primate specialist, believes that “empathy is an automated response over which we have limited control.” We are hard-wired to reach out to each other and empathize.

What then accounts for all the aggressive, anti-social behavior that one sees in contemporary life? Dr. de Waal sees such behavior as connected to cooperation; we often behave in nasty ways to those outside of our local group as a way to strengthen our internal group cohesion.

Cooperation, then, is for “insiders,” aggression for “outsiders.” Which nicely states the moral drama that humans have been engaged in for millennia: Is the stranger worthy of our love and respect? Are we our brother’s keeper? One might argue that our moral development as a species is all about expanding the circle of who is to be considered “one of us.”

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