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Prospects and Limitations of Michael Tomasello's Natural History of Becoming Human

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Summary: Being one of most influential anthropologists of contemporary times, Michael Tomasello and his groundbreaking evolutionary approach to a natural history of human beings are still to be received by theological anthropology. This article aims at evaluating the prospects and limitations of Tomasello's natural history of human ontogeny from a philosophical and theological perspective. The major advantages of Tomasello's approach are a new conceptual perspective on the mind-brain problem and a possible detranscendentalization of the human mind which leads to an intersubjectively grounded anthropology. At the same time, evolutionary anthropology struggles with the binding force of moral obligations and the human ability to interpret one's existence and the world in a religious way. This article thus offers a first theological inventory of Tomasello's account of evolutionary anthropology which praises its prospects and detects its limitations.

Keywords: Theological Anthropology, Evolutionary Anthropology, Michael Tomasello, Philosophy of Mind, Philosophical Theology

Zusammenfassung: Michael Tomasello kann als einer der einflussreichsten Anthropologen der Gegenwart gelten. Seine bahnbrechenden Studien zu einer ‚Naturgeschichte der menschlichen Existenz‘, die in den umfassenden Rahmen einer ‚Evolutionären Anthropologie‘ eingebettet werden, sind allerdings von der theologischen Anthropologie bisher kaum rezipiert worden. Dieser Artikel bietet einen ersten Versuch der Einordnung der Chancen und Grenzen von Tomasellos Ansatz aus philosophischer und theologischer Perspektive. Die Hauptvorteile von Tomasellos Ansatz bestehen zum einen in einer begrifflichen Neuorientierung in der Debatte um das Leib-Seele-Problem sowie zum anderen in der Grundierung einer intersubjektiven Anthropologie durch die Detranszendentalisierung des menschlichen Geistes. Zugleich hat die evolutionäre Anthropologie jedoch kon-

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zeptuelle Defizite, wenn es um die Erklärung der bindenden Kraft moralischer Pflichten sowie des Vermögens der existenziell belangvollen (und potenziell religiösen) Selbst- und Weltdeutung menschlicher Existenz geht. Dieser Artikel bietet somit eine erste theologische Bestandsaufnahme von Tomasellos evolutionärer Anthropologie, die ihre Potenziale für die theologische Anthropologie konturiert und zugleich ihre Grenzen auslotet.

Schlüsselwörter: theologische Anthropologie, evolutionäre Anthropologie, Michael Tomasello, Philosophie des Geistes, philosophische Theologie

One of the enticing new disciplines in the scientific world can undoubtedly be found in evolutionary anthropology. The basic idea of evolutionary anthropology consists in an application of a Darwinian framework of evolutionary theory to the major question of anthropology – What is Man? Michael Tomasello may be regarded as the most influential thinker within this field. Apart from the conventional amount of highly specialized journal papers, he has published six monographs which condense his anthropological approach and tell a ‘natural history’ of core human abilities.¹ However, Tomasello’s approach has not been thoroughly received neither in theological nor in philosophical anthropology.²

This article aims at overcoming the widespread disregard for evolutionary approaches in theological anthropology. It argues that a reception of Tomasello’s approach may be beneficial for an encompassing anthropology as the genealogy of human abilities may help to further our understanding of these abilities. Tomasello’s approach promises to be fruitful and innovative in at least two major areas of (theological) anthropology. First, it may offer a new, inductive perspective on the mind-brain-problem by circumventing the classical division between monistic and dualistic approaches. Secondly, it may offer empirical validations of intersubjective theories of human self-consciousness, thereby helping to detranscendentalize idealist theories of self-consciousness and to find middle ground between idealist and materialist conceptions of human beings.

These refreshingly innovative anthropological insights notwithstanding, Tomasello’s approach has some crucial limitations when considered from a theo-

1 Cf. Michael TOMASELLO, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, Cambridge/London 1999; *Id.*, *Origins of Human Communication*, Cambridge 2008; *Id.*, *Why we cooperate*, Cambridge 2009; *Id.*, *A Natural History of Human Thinking*, Cambridge/London 2014; *Id.*, *A Natural History of Human Morality*, Cambridge/London 2016; *Id.*, *Becoming Human. A Theory of Ontogeny*, Cambridge/London 2019.

2 For first attempts of a theological reception, cf. Gregor ETZELMÜLLER/Christian TEWES (eds.), *Embodiment in Evolution and Culture*, Tübingen 2016.

gical perspective. I will point out two areas which are not given proper attention in his approach: first, the peculiarity of strong normative claims cannot be wrapped up in their evolutionary role as cooperation-enablers; and secondly, the core human ability of interpreting one's existence in a meaningful (and possibly religious) way is not being taken into account at all by Tomasello.

By outlining these prospects and limitations of Tomasello's approach, I do not claim to have comprehensively assessed the theological relevance of Tomasello's thinking for theological anthropology. Rather, it is the aim of this paper to initiate further debates between theological and evolutionary anthropology as both branches of anthropology may profit from an interdisciplinary dialogue: From the perspective of theological anthropology, it is unwise to ignore the astonishing achievements of evolutionary anthropology. From the perspective of evolutionary anthropology, it would be methodologically precarious to assume that it is possible to answer the question 'What is Man?' without considering other branches of anthropology, such as philosophical or theological anthropology.

In the following, I will reconstruct the main pillars Tomasello's natural history of becoming human (I). After this basic introduction into the methodology and results of his research, I will elaborate on its prospects (II) as well as its limitations (III) from the perspective of theological anthropology. I conclude with an ambivalent result: Although there are some serious limitations to evolutionary anthropology, it should be more prominently considered in research within theological anthropology.

I. Michael Tomasello's Natural History of Human Social Cognition

Tomasello's approach to anthropology is summarized in his most recent monograph 'Becoming Human', which he himself regards as a "theoretical framework for organizing and explaining the research that my colleagues and I did from 1998 to 2017."³ It is his basic idea to use ontogenetic experimental research on small children and apes to tell a 'natural history' of the mental faculties of humans. A better understanding of the interdependencies of the origins of these human capabilities could help to further our understanding of these capabilities themselves and to model their anthropological significance more precisely. Tomasello's core thesis, which runs through all his publications, states that new forms of coopera-

³ TOMASELLO, *Becoming Human*, ix.

tion and rudimentary social formation have enabled primitive humans to develop the capacity of *shared intentionality*: “In this view, humans’ abilities to cooperate with one another take unique forms because individuals are able to create with one another a shared agent ‘we’, operating with shared intentions, shared knowledge, and shared sociomoral values. The claim is that these abilities emerged first in human evolution between collaborative partners operating dyadically in acts of joint intentionality, and then later among individuals as members of a cultural group in acts of collective intentionality.”⁴

Tomasello suggests a threefold division of the concept of intentionality – he distinguishes between individual, joint and collective intentionality. *Individual intentionality* is a flexible, individually self-regulated and cognitive way of dealing with things in the world which already requires impressive cognitive abilities such as the use of categories, schemes and models, the ability to draw instrumental conclusions as well as causal and intentional conclusions or a certain ‘internal self-observation’, i.e. an understanding of oneself as an intentional actor. Interestingly, experimental studies show that this form of intentionality is not a unique selling point of man – great apes are able to carry out the complex processes mentioned and to understand themselves and others as intentional agents as well. Tomasello therefore concludes that “great apes can solve complex social problems, just as they solve complex physical problems, by assimilating key aspects of the problem situation to a cognitive model (...) Our conclusion is thus that in the social domain, as well as the physical domain, what the great apes in these studies are doing is thinking.”⁵

At the same time, however, it should be noted that individual intentionality of great apes is always at the service of outcompeting others. Great apes always use their abilities to their own benefit as efficiently as possible – Tomasello also refers to the cognition of non-human primates as “Machiavellian intelligence”⁶. Human cognition, on the other hand, is usually based on cooperation. The core question is, of course, how these differences developed in an evolutionary process. Tomasello’s major idea states that essentially, there were two evolutionary steps that led to the development of man’s central cognitive faculties.

The first evolutionary step took place about 400,000 years ago, when early man evolved from the last common ancestor of humans and apes. The result of this evolutionary step was the development of an intermediate form of shared intentionality which Tomasello calls *joint intentionality*. Joint intentionality goes

4 Ibid., 7.

5 TOMASELLO, *Natural History of Human Thinking*, 24.

6 Cf. *ibid.*, 31.

beyond individual intentionality in that attention and action can be directed towards a shared goal across individuals. Cooperation partners have to be informed about circumstances that are conducive to the common goal – in order to achieve this, however, both a second personal adoption of perspectives and a common background are important prerequisites. Although there are no conventionalized signs or cultural artefacts yet – it is always the concrete second person in her role as particular partner in cooperation – it can be maintained that at this stage, a new type of second person thinking emerges, enabling socially recursive conclusions and second personal self-observation.⁷

However, joint intentionality alone does not allow for the cognitive abilities of modern human beings as it lacks the capacity to conventionalize, institutionalize or objectify human thinking. Therefore, Tomasello postulates a second evolutionary step around 200,000 years ago which resulted in *collective intentionality*. Collective intentionality comprises all essential aspects of human thinking. Tomasello notes that “modern human individuals came to imagine the world in order to manipulate it in thought via ‘objective’ representations (anyone’s perspective), reflective inferences connected by reasons (compelling to anyone), and normative self-governance so as to coordinate with the group’s (anyone’s) normative expectations.”⁸

It is therefore the ability to abstract cooperation contexts beyond concrete cooperation partners that becomes decisive. This ability unfolds into different cognitive abilities. Members of a group now share not only a concrete second personal background, but also a cultural common background that contains a multitude of implicit assumptions and evaluations. This enables an actor-neutral or transpersonal evaluation of the actions of group members. Hence, it is only at this point in our evolutionary development that misconduct towards third parties can be sanctioned – this uniquely human practice has, in line with this assumption, never been observed in great apes. Thereby, a new perspective of human thinking occurs which cannot only switch to the concrete perspective of the counterpart, but also to that of the generalized other: “We are not talking here about an individual perspective somehow generalized or made large, or some kind of simple adding up of many perspectives. Rather, what we are talking about is a gen-

7 Cf. TOMASELLO, *Natural History of Human Thinking*, 59: “In all, what we have at this point in our evolutionary story of human communication is individuals attempting to coordinate their intentional states, and so their actions, by pointing out new and relevant situations to one another. This relies on their having a certain amount and type of common ground, and it requires, further, that the interactants make a series of interlocking and socially recursive inferences about one another’s perspectives and intentional states.”

8 TOMASELLO, *Natural History of Human Thinking*, 81.

eralization from the existence of many perspectives into something like ‘any possible perspective’, which means, essentially, ‘objective’.⁹ Tomasello draws the conclusion that the shift towards collective intentionality marks the full development of human cognitive structures which enabled the emergence of cultural symbols, conventions and institutions in the first place. He calls this form of thinking “objective-reflective-normative thinking”¹⁰. This thinking is *objective* because it can take on an observer-transcendent perspective independently of individuals and contexts. It is *reflective* because it can draw pragmatic and formal conclusions and is thus embedded in a single web of inferential conclusions within which reasons for assertions can be made explicit, and which has been internalized as the social practice of giving and asking for reasons. And it is *normative*, because the generalized normativity from the identity of the group leads to a normative self-control that is independent of the direct observation and second-person assessment of concrete others. Tomasello can therefore state at the end of his natural history: “Human thinking has now become collective, objective, reflective, and normative; that is to say, it has now become full-blown human reasoning.”¹¹

In his most recent book, Tomasello further elaborated on his shared intentionality hypothesis by identifying “eight ontogenetic pathways – four cognitive and four sociomoral – that most clearly distinguish humans from their nearest great ape relatives.”¹² These eight uniquely human traits are all rooted in the ability of ‘collective’ or ‘shared’ intentionality. The first and most important uniquely human skill is social cognition (1) – human beings understand that there are several different but equally legitimate perspectives on the same thing, which allows for the idealized ‘objective’ perspective on things. Thus, social cognition “fundamentally transforms great ape cognition by turning straightforward cognitive representations into perspectival cognitive representations.”¹³ From these very basic abilities, human beings have “evolved new forms of communication built out of them”¹⁴ in that they developed a diverse set of conventional and symbolic languages (2) which allow for abstract representations of “whole situations as propositions”¹⁵. These two core cognitive abilities in turn allow for instructed learning of a certain common cultural ground (3) and cooperative thinking (4), i.e. the ca-

9 TOMASELLO, *Natural History of Human Thinking*, 92.

10 *Ibid.*, 4.

11 *Ibid.*, 123.

12 TOMASELLO, *Becoming Human*, 9.

13 *Ibid.*, 90.

14 *Ibid.*, 91.

15 *Ibid.*, 132.

capacity to intersubjectively acquire skills such as giving and asking for reasons as well as making use of these skills in solving problems cooperatively with peers. Human cognition is unique not because it offers a sophisticated ability of individual thinking (great apes display this ability as well), but rather because “individual thinking becomes socialized or enculturated.”¹⁶ At around six years of age, young children’s thinking is therefore characterized as an “interconnected web of beliefs [which] is created during dialogic interactions with others involving perspective-shifting discourse, [...] coordinated decision-making, and the giving of reasons, both to others and to oneself.”¹⁷

Along these four cognitive skills, Tomasello identifies four sociomoral skills rooted in shared intentionality – a genuine openness for joint *collaboration* (5), a strong orientation towards *prosociality* (6), an internalized obligation to follow *moral norms* (7) and the ability to establish an individual *moral identity* (8). At some point during their ontogenetic development (usually around five to six years of age), children start to ‘scale up’ their joint commitments with others to a more group-minded sociality, leading to an understanding “that others were evaluating them as cooperative partners, and indeed they came to evaluate themselves as well, leading to a new sense of moral identity that normatively self-regulated all their social decision-making.”¹⁸ According to Tomasello, the hypothesis of shared intentionality does thus not only lead to a unique form of *human cognition*, but also to a species-unique form of *human sociality*.

To conclude, Tomasello presents us with a ‘natural history’ of both human cognitive and sociomoral skills. He describes two evolutionary steps which enabled human beings to develop their unique abilities, the first being the step from individual to joint intentionality, and the second being the step from joint to collective intentionality. Collective (or shared) intentionality “represents the ability of human individuals to come together interdependently to act as single agent [...], thereby creating a fundamentally new form of sociality.”¹⁹ Thus, a highly developed form of community constitutes the uniqueness of the human being by virtue of an ‘ultra-social’ capacity for cooperation, which first and foremost produced the cognitive faculties of the human being.

Having outlined the basics of evolutionary anthropology as presented by Tomasello, I now turn to a philosophical and theological assessment of this approach.

16 Ibid., 188.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 189.

19 Ibid., 342.

II. Prospects of Evolutionary Anthropology

For philosophical theology, evolutionary anthropology offers interesting and innovative insights. Exemplarily, I will show the relevance of evolutionary anthropology in two major areas of theological anthropology – the mind-body-problem and transcendental theories of self-consciousness.

The mind-body problem is devoted to the question of how the mental and the physical relate to each other. However, the debates about the different varieties of monism (be it some form of reductive naturalism or physicalism, be it some form of idealism or panpsychism) and dualism (be it a Cartesian substance dualism or a form of property dualism) are widely diversified. It seems unlikely that one of the positions will turn out to be the rationally superior one. My impression is rather that each metaphysical position – be it some form of dualism or some form of monism – accumulates more and more problems and difficulties over time. The objections to an ontological dualism cannot be dismissed, but there are equally striking objections to naturalistic reduction programs.

In this argumentative stalemate, a ‘natural history’ of central human abilities, such as Tomasello’s exemplary proposal, could now offer an innovative perspective. Evolutionary anthropology does not subscribe to the conceptual preconditions of the entire debate, but rather questions its implicit assumptions by denying that it makes sense to make conceptual distinctions at all between the mental and the physical. Instead of a comprehensive reduction of human abilities to the exclusively material (or exclusively mental) basis of the world, an approach based on evolutionary anthropology considers it more interesting and promising to tell an evolutionary story of the origin of specifically human abilities.

Such a natural history goes beyond the speculative dispute about the fundamental structure of the world as a whole, since it initially operates in a decidedly non-reductionist manner. Tomasello’s approach is thus not determined by abstract metaphysical speculation about the ontological foundations of certain human abilities, but rather by an interest in a better understanding of these abilities through a precise reconstruction of their conditions of origin. At the same time, however, a natural history of the human mind takes seriously the insight that humans’ cognitive abilities – reason, freedom, consciousness or language – have arisen in natural contexts or evolutionary processes.

An explanation of specifically human mental faculties based on Tomasello’s findings, non-reductive and yet compatible with common scientific findings, can thus be formulated as a serious alternative to common ontological naturalism. Such a natural history takes up the naturalist’s legitimate insistence on the natural origins of mental faculties – somehow, the uniquely human cognitive abilities must have evolved within a natural process. At the same time, a natural history

avoids a speculative interpretation of empirical results, i.e. it refrains from committing to any form of reductive naturalism or substance dualism. The ontological problem of the relationship between the mental and the physical does not disappear through a genealogy of the mental or cognitive abilities of humans, but it can be reformulated within an epistemically more modest paradigm:

”The very meaning of the ontological question changes once we start focusing on natural history in order to detranscendentalize the necessary intersubjective preconditions for objectivating the observable processes of both external nature and our own inner nature. Since we cannot escape the epistemic priority of the linguistically articulated horizon of the life-world, the ontological priority of language-independent reality can make itself heard in our learning processes only by imposing constraints on our practices [...]. In that case, however, the pictorial notion of ‘representing’ reality is the wrong model for the sort of knowledge that is possible for us; there are no proper ontological questions in which the suggestive power of the metaphor of the ‘mirror of nature’ gets repaid.”²⁰

The actual philosophical insight of the ‘natural history’, which is exemplarily carried out by Tomasello, thus consists in a pragmatist shift: On the one hand, the idealist concept of transferring all mental faculties into a ‘realm of the intelligible’ can hardly be defended today in view of the progress of the natural sciences. On the other hand, progress in the natural sciences must not be radicalized towards a reductive scientism that reifies the world as a whole by generalizing the perspective of an uninvolved observer of states of events. There seem to be certain areas to which there is a privileged access from the perspective of a participant in social processes, so that these areas – the mental states of a subject being one of them – defy any attempt to consider them as quantifiable and measurable states.

For methodological reasons, the ontological question of the relationship between the mental and the physical cannot therefore be answered from a point of view that looks at the mental and the physical ‘from above’ – regardless of whether this attempt to view the world from nowhere leads to an idealistic, naturalistic or panpsychistic result. Rather, Tomasello’s point of view is that of an *interpreter* of empirical findings who tries to answer the mind-body problem ‘from below’. The interpreter of scientific knowledge or empirical data is herself part of what she seeks to explain and understand. Any scientific analysis of human cognitive abilities cannot be based on the premise of looking at them in isolation, from an extramundane point of view. It rather aims at understanding them from within, by illuminating their natural genealogy. Ultimately, a natural history in Tomasello’s sense is the attempt to do justice to man’s interweaving within natur-

²⁰ Jürgen HABERMAS, The Language Game of Responsible Agency and the Problem of Free Will, in: *Philosophical Explorations* 10 (2007), 13–50, 39.

al processes without falling prey to formulating yet another metaphysical *grand unified theory* in the sense of ontological naturalism (or other monisms). The infertile confrontation of body and mind is undermined by natural history, since it maintains a certain metaphysical and conceptual neutrality. To put it somewhat polemically: perhaps it does not even make sense to believe that the philosopher's armchair is at the same time the epistemic God's point of view from which the relationship between mind and nature can be decided – it might make more sense to describe the phenomena from the perspective of a participant in both the mental and the physical realm.

Tomasello's natural history of the human mind is thus explicitly not about the depiction of ontological structures or the static representation of facts. Rather, he is concerned with illuminating evolutionary learning processes, i.e. with a well-founded interpretation (instead of an ontologization) of scientific findings. In this sense, Tomasello's strong affinity to philosophical pragmatism is evident.²¹ In the conclusion of his 'Natural History of Human Thinking' he is quite outspoken about this affinity when he objects to the widespread human habit of reification and objectification:

“And nowhere is this tendency (towards reification, M.B.) stronger than in language, where everyone has a tendency – correctable but only with much effort – to reify the conceptualizations codified in our own natural language. About all of these things, we are like the young child who says that even if long ago everyone agreed to call the striped feline in front of us ‘gazzzer’, it would not be right to do so because, well, ‘It’s a tiger’.”²²

Tomasello insists that the abstraction of concrete second-person perspectives from the perspective of the generalized Other makes something like objectivity possible. However, this perspective must not be confused with the fictitious ‘view from nowhere’, which contains the possibility of an unmediated or pre-lingual access to the structures of being itself. This pragmatic insight influences the methods of evolutionary anthropology: evolutionary anthropology is about having to locate the unique human existence in its evolutionary context so that it can be fully understood – anthropological reflections threaten to ‘run dry’ if they are not also located in natural history. Consequently, metaphysical speculations about the relationship between mind and body threaten to ‘run dry’ as well if they *ontologize* empirical findings instead of *interpreting* them. A natural history of human cognitive abilities thus does not offer yet another metaphysical theory on the re-

²¹ Michael Tomasello, in a rare philosophical self-characterization, speaks of “the neo-pragmatist and communitarian spirit of the approach in general”. (Michael TOMASELLO, Response to Commentators, in: *Journal of Social Ontology* 2 (2016), 117–123, 118).

²² TOMASELLO, *Natural History of Human Thinking*, 153.

relationship between the mental and the physical. It rather undermines the conceptual frame of the debate, so that new space for anthropological explorations into the cognitive faculties of human beings opens up without having to take a stance in the muddy debate on the (probably unanswerable) problem of the relationship between the mind and the body.

A second field of anthropological research in which evolutionary anthropology may prove to be a valuable resource is the question of the transcendental of the human mind. In both Catholic as well as Protestant approaches to theological anthropology, there is a strong branch of ‘transcendental’ approaches which focus on human self-consciousness and/or unconditional (i.e. transcendental) freedom as the condition of the possibility of any other human cognitive ability or even religiosity.²³ Drawing mostly on the tradition of German Idealism, these approaches emphasize the individual human subject in its relationship with the world of objects and the constitutive role of self-consciousness for any other human ability. However, these subject-centered anthropological approaches struggle with the concept of the second person. Intersubjective or interactionist approaches in anthropology have therefore raised doubts whether Idealist theories of human consciousness offer sufficient space for the genealogy of consciousness or free will which seems to require intersubjective encounters between different subjects rather than encounters between transcendental subjects and objects.

Tomasello’s evolutionary anthropology may be read in favor of intersubjective approaches in theological anthropology. The two major evolutionary steps from individual to joint and from joint to collective intentionality lead Tomasello to attribute to the modern human being the ability to think reflectively and to justify decisions on the basis of reasons. The external perspective on one’s own act of communication enables an actor-transcendent self-reflection of one’s own thinking, and collective decision-making processes require the ability to evaluate reasons and counter-arguments. Therefore, even if the use of human reason may appear as a lonesome activity, it is ultimately the result of an interactionist or dialogical process: “Human reasoning, even when it is done internally with the self, is therefore shot through and through with a kind of collective normativity in

23 For the Catholic context, cf. Thomas PRÖPPER, *Theologische Anthropologie*, Freiburg 2011; Hansjürgen VERWEYEN, *Gottes letztes Wort*, 3rd Edition, Freiburg 2000; Saskia Wendel, *Affektiv und inkarniert. Ansätze deutscher Mystik als subjekttheoretische Herausforderung*, Regensburg 2002; Aaron LANGENFELD/Magnus LERCH, *Theologische Anthropologie*, Paderborn 2018. For the Protestant context, cf. Ulrich BARTH, *Religion in der Moderne*, Tübingen 2003; Dieter KORSCH, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube. Dialektische Theologie als Hermeneutik der Religion*, Tübingen 2005; Falk WAGNER, *Was ist Religion? Studien zu ihrem Begriff und Thema in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Gütersloh 1986.

which the individual regulates her actions and thinking based on the group's normative conventions and standards."²⁴ Every communicator is thus placed within a conceptual and social network of cooperative argumentation, so that a mature form of human consciousness is evolutionarily dependent on the emergence of collective intentionality.²⁵

This insight could be especially important for theological anthropology, which often ignores in the reception of transcendental philosophical forms of thought both the genealogical aspect of the evolutionary emergence of consciousness and freedom as well as the systematic significance of linguistic interactions for human consciousness. The Idealist concept of a subject-object structure, within which the subject comes to itself through the opposition of an object, can be criticized based on Tomasello's evolutionary-anthropological research because it underestimates the relevance of social interactions for core human abilities. This form of criticism is not innovative as it has been formulated for decades by philosophers committed to the linguistic turn or to interactionist theories of the mind such as George Herbert Mead, Jürgen Habermas or Karl-Otto Apel who all defend a shift from the subject-object dyad to a communicative triad of the *subject, which communicates with a personal counterpart about some object in the world*.²⁶ The innovative aspect of Tomasello's research rather consists in a certain empirical validation of interactionism as he is able to illuminate the ontogenetic development of self-consciousness. Tomasello shows that it is not the case that human beings are miraculously endowed with consciousness or a capacity of reason in order to make sense of the world by facing previously unknown contexts of communication. Conversely, it is the case that contexts of communicative cooperation first and foremost allow for consciousness or the capacity of reason to develop: "Internalized, communicative process[es] become individual reason."²⁷

This insight is by no means associated with a devaluation of the subject, but rather with the call for a stronger consideration of intersubjectivity as the context within which subjectivity arises. Tomasello does not argue for a postmodern dissolution of the structures of subjectivity. He rather calls for a more thorough reception of the genealogy of core human abilities in order to further their under-

24 Ibid., 112f.

25 Thus, from a genealogical perspective, individual consciousness has not always been there as some form of prereflective transcendental shell which is filled with material. Rather, it is a potential of a human organism which may mature if it is subject to adequate interactions with its environment.

26 George Herbert MEAD, *Mind, Self, and Society*, Chicago 1934; Jürgen HABERMAS, *Theory of Communicative Action*, Boston 1987.

27 TOMASELLO, *Natural history of Human Thinking*, 119.

standing. Thus, a moderate transformation of a philosophy of subjectivity may be able to integrate the findings of interactionist or evolutionary approaches to anthropology. However, there is one bullet to bite for every transcendental approach in theological anthropology: The (evolutionary) genealogy of consciousness plays a constitutive role in its philosophical or theological analysis.²⁸ Although it will not be easy to concede this for a straightforward transcendental approach, I regard this concession as an anthropological assumption without any alternative, considering the success of evolutionary anthropology over recent years. The fate of transcendental theological anthropology will, to my mind, depend on its capacity to open up its theoretical architecture for these evolutionary insights.

To draw an interim conclusion, Tomasello's evolutionary anthropology proves to be a promising partner in crime for theological anthropology as his approach offers both an innovative reconceptualization of the mind-body problem as well as a stimulus to elaborate on the shop-soiled transcendental approaches in theological anthropology. At the same time, Tomasello's evolutionary approach faces some difficulties on its own, so that these advantages are countered by some serious disadvantages. Therefore, I will now turn to the internal limitations of evolutionary anthropology.

III. Limitations of Evolutionary Anthropology

In the following, I will consider two possible limitations of Tomasello's approach. These limitations are formulated from a philosophical and/or theological point of view, so that I will not address the growing discussion on Tomasello's work within evolutionary theory or social ontology. The two limitations I will address concern the peculiarity of strong normative commitments and the human ability to interpret one's existence within a framework of transcendence.

In moral philosophy, there is some agreement on the fact that normative commitments show a certain peculiarity. If there is a moral demand or a moral obligation, it is not only because we are afraid of being judged by others (or any generalized other) that makes us conform to these demands or obligations. Usually, a strong normative commitment is regarded as having a normative foundation in its own, as being right or wrong independent of our social standing within our peer

²⁸ Cf. TOMASELLO, *Natural History of Human Thinking*, 151: "[T]o understand the way contemporary humans think, we must understand how human thinking evolved to meet the specific evolutionary challenges that early and modern humans faced as they moved toward ever more cooperative ways of making a living."

group. Jürgen Habermas, who usually agrees with most of Tomasello's arguments, raises this objection in all clarity: "From the perspective of a version of social pragmatics that explains the use of language exclusively in terms of the cognitive requirements for efficient coordination of action, the transition from imperative demands to strong valuations and normative behavioral expectations remains a void."²⁹ Thus, moral norms who claim universal validity cannot be reduced to being a specific mode of action within contexts of cooperation, as Tomasello seems to claim.³⁰ The normative force of a moral obligation is misrepresented if it is regarded merely as an internalized product of natural evolution. Its force cannot be grasped from an outsider's or observant's perspective which merely regards "human morality as a special form of cooperation"³¹ which scaled up from early humans' proto-morality to the objective group-morality of modern humans.

Consequently, Tomasello's evolutionary anthropology seems to be unable to differentiate between social and moral norms – the former being conventional and group-relative rules, the latter being categorically binding obligations independent of group membership.³² In other words, the strong normativity of moral claims is not entailed in certain practices of communication or cooperation. Rather, the binding of force of morality has to be interpersonally constituted in social interactions between peers. Such a constitution of normativity, however, resists an explanation from any empirical perspective as it is based on reasons and objections for or against certain actions. It is not up to empirical research to decide which reasons are compelling and which are not – these decisions are up to the participants in moral discourse. So, an evolutionary approach to anthropology struggles with an explanation of moral legitimacy because moral legitimacy contains *justificatory elements* that remain methodologically sealed for empirical research which can only take *genealogical elements* into consideration.³³

29 Jürgen HABERMAS, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, Cambridge/Malden 2017, 36.

30 Cf. TOMASELLO, *Becoming Human*, 190: "The unique motives and attitudes of shared intentionality thus enable humans, but not other apes, to relate to one another in some new ways cooperatively, even morally."

31 Michael TOMASELLO, *Precis of a natural history of human morality*, in: *Philosophical Psychology* 31 (2018), 661–668, 661. Tomasello seems to be aware of the problem of conflating the legitimacy of norms which must be based on reason with the maturation of the biological prerequisites of making moral judgments when he writes: "None of which is to say that biological evolution in any way determines an individual's moral decision making. Nature makes us creatures capable of making moral decisions, but we make those decisions ourselves." (*Ibid.*, 668).

32 Cf. Neil ROUGHLEY, *From Shared Intentionality to Moral Obligation? Some Worries*, in: *Philosophical Psychology* 31 (2018), 736–754.

33 Cf. Jürgen HABERMAS, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 168f.: "Clearly, the observer perspective, to which the empiricist perspective limits us, must be combined with that of participants in

A second aspect which remains a blind spot in Tomasello's evolutionary anthropology is the human potential for religiosity. Evolutionary anthropology largely ignores one of man's central abilities, namely the ability to interpret herself and the world in an existentially meaningful way. The human mind does not just exhaust itself in solving problems of adaptation, but as (probably) the only spiritual form of life in this world it can ask the question of meaning – why do I live at all and not someone else? Why is there anything and not nothing at all?

The only place where Tomasello himself negotiates the role of religion for his approach, however, can be found in his 'Natural History of Human Morality' in the chapter 'Coda: After the Garden of Eden'. The discussion of religion there, however, is quite instrumentalistic. According to Tomasello, religion is ultimately only an amplifier for normativity and group identity, i.e. a "supraindividual regulatory device."³⁴ It becomes impossible to ask for the rationality of faith or the individual existential relevance of religious attitudes to life if "religions exist primarily for people to achieve together what they cannot achieve on their own."³⁵

From the perspective of theological anthropology, it is an open question to what extent evolutionary anthropology can make sense of the potentially religious dimension of human existence other than in contexts of exploitation. This is not simply a 'pious wish' of a theologian to take religion into account. Rather, I would argue that the specifics of religion are not adequately considered at all if they are regarded exclusively under evolutionary considerations of utility and if it is clear from the outset that they cannot correspond to reality. Religion would then become an evolutionary placebo that achieves effects without containing any active 'substance'.

Tomasello's approach therefore faces at least two serious limitations as it seems to be unable to make sense of core aspects of human life. However, these limitations are not objections to his approach – rather, they are to be seen as a caveat to not treat evolutionary anthropology as all-encompassing 'theory of everything'. Instead of absolutizing one branch of anthropology and expecting it to offer answers to every single phenomenon relevant to anthropology, there are strengths and weaknesses in every branch of anthropology; and it is precisely this fact which allows for stimulating possibilities of interdisciplinary research. The interface of evolutionary and theological anthropology, for example, seems to be

communicative and social practices in order to give socialized subjects like us cognitive access to the world. [...] [S]ocial cognition and the development of moral consciousness [...] are rooted in the complementary relation between participant and observer perspectives."

34 TOMASELLO, *Natural History of Human Morality*, 129.

35 David WILSON, *Darwin's Cathedral. Evolution, Religion and the Nature of Society*, quoted in TOMASELLO, *Natural History of Human Morality*, 132.

a promising spot where both sides may learn from each other. Therefore, the limitations of Tomasello's approach are not problematic as long as they are regarded not as a replacement but as complementary pieces to philosophical and theological anthropology.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that from the perspective of evolutionary anthropology, a highly developed form of community constitutes the uniqueness of the human being by virtue of an 'ultra-social' capacity for cooperation. The universal evolutionary process of the development of shared intentionality leads to species-universal basic skills, which are then culturally diversified and developed into culture-specific cognitive achievements. Tomasello's work may thus be regarded as a bridgehead between evolutionary and philosophical or theological anthropology. He uses the methods of evolutionary anthropology to gain a better understanding of the approaches and problems of philosophical and theological anthropology. The main merits of his evolutionary approach can be found in an innovative re-conceptualization of the mind-body problem as well as in empirical support for interactionist theories of human consciousness or human free will. However, his evolutionary approach struggles with the peculiarity of moral obligations and the ability to interpret one's existence within a religious framework.

To simplify things, it might be said that evolutionary anthropology shows certain shortcomings when it comes to morality and religion. Most interestingly, these two areas are among those which cannot be made sense of from an observer's perspective – morality, rituals or religious interpretations of one's existence can be fully grasped only 'from within', i.e. from a participant's perspective. Thus, while the empirical approach of evolutionary anthropology may offer important and innovative insights in central fields of anthropological research, it will always be in need of a hermeneutic approach to anthropology which complements the observations of evolutionary anthropology. Therefore, evolutionary and theological anthropology may be regarded as two sides of the same coin – they approach the same problems, but from different (and possibly complementary) methodological directions.

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