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Human Consciousness and the ‘Anthropological Turn’: Theological Perspectives on Evolutionary Anthropology

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Abstract: Recent discussions between evolutionary and theological anthropology have intensified, particularly through the work of Michael Tomasello. As a key figure in evolutionary anthropology, Tomasello synthesizes extensive empirical research into an accessible ‘natural history’ of core human abilities. He posits that a unique human trait distinguishing us from our closest relatives is the capacity for “collective intentionality”, a concept he adapts from the philosophy of action. In this article, I show that Tomasello’s insights carry significant implications for philosophical and theological debates. Philosophically, his evolutionary framework invites a new understanding of the mind–brain problem, promoting a non-reductive view of human consciousness which questions the basic metaphysical assumptions of the debate by taking a genealogical perspective. Theologically, his work supports a “practical metaphysics”, suggesting that although morality is autonomous, it can lead to theistic interpretations of human existence. This supports the Kantian idea that religion does not precede morality but that religious views of the world are interpretations of human moral life. At the same time, religion is not just an add-on to morality but an interpretation of a human form of life as such. Both discourses exemplify the importance of a genealogical perspective in philosophy and theology, especially reinforcing the necessity of considering the ‘natural history’ of consciousness, free will or religiosity in anthropology.

Keywords: evolutionary anthropology; theological anthropology; mind–brain debate; anthropological turn; natural history; human consciousness; collective intentionality; Michael Tomasello



Academic Editor: Sibylle Trawöger

Received: 19 December 2024

Revised: 13 February 2025

Accepted: 10 March 2025

Published: 11 March 2025

Citation: Breul, Martin. 2025. Human Consciousness and the ‘Anthropological Turn’: Theological Perspectives on Evolutionary Anthropology. *Religions* 16: 346. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16030346>

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1. Introduction: The Theological Importance of Evolutionary Anthropology

In recent years, there has been an intensified discourse between evolutionary and theological anthropology (Hoff 2021; Breul and Helmus 2023; Judith 2024). Michael Tomasello, who is one of the leading researchers in evolutionary anthropology, has been of special interest to philosophy and theology. This is not only because of the remarkable fact that he has been able to condense an enormous amount of specific research articles into a number of impressive monographs, which makes them easier to approach for book sciences such as philosophy or theology. It is also because his non-reductive natural histories of human thinking and human morality enrich theological anthropologies and help to further the interdisciplinary understanding of human beings and their place in the world. In his groundbreaking studies, Tomasello argues that the unique feature that distinguishes humans from their closest relatives is their ability to cooperate with each other and to develop—both evolutionarily as well as ontogenetically—a form of ‘collective intentionality’.

Tomasello borrows the notion of collective intentionality from the philosophy of action (cf. Bratman 1999; Searle 2009). Collective intentionality “is the power of minds to be

jointly directed at objects, matters of fact, states of affairs, goals or values. [...] Collective intentional attitudes permeate our everyday lives, for instance when two or more agents look after or raise a child, grieve the loss of a loved one, campaign for a political party, or cheer for a sports team” (Schweikard and Schmid 2021). Tomasello has adopted this concept and has conducted a lot of experiments with infants and great apes. These experiments lead to the conclusion that Great Apes are intentional agents as well; it is not individual intentionality which separates humans from their closest relatives. However, Great Apes fail as soon as their task includes combining their perspectives and pursuing a goal in a cooperative fashion. The ability of *collective* intentionality is thus the decisive step in the evolution of human thinking (Tomasello 2014) and human morality (Tomasello 2016), and it is also a crucial step in the individual ontogeny of human beings (Tomasello 2019).

These insights from evolutionary anthropology are highly relevant to both philosophical and theological anthropologies. In this paper, I will explore the relevance of Tomasello’s ‘natural history’ of human thinking for a major philosophical and a major theological debate: Philosophically, an evolutionary approach to the development of human consciousness in natural history paves the way to a new understanding of the mind–brain problem. Theologically, Tomasello’s approach provides ample support for the project of a ‘practical metaphysics’ as a way of doing theology in a Kantian spirit: religion is not the foundation of morality, as morality is autonomous—but such autonomous morality may lead to a theistic interpretation of the world since moral practice entails the postulates of God and the immortality of the soul (Kant [1781] 1788).

In order to argue for these theses, I will proceed in three steps: First of all, I will briefly reconstruct Tomasello’s approach to a natural history of human thinking based on the notion of collective intentionality (2). Then, I will outline the consequences of such a bottom-up approach for the mind–brain debate: by subverting the futile dichotomy between monism and dualism and by embracing a genealogical approach to the mind–brain problem, it is possible to develop a non-reductive view of the mind without disconnecting it from its rootedness in the brain (3). In a final step, I will turn to theology and argue that Tomasello’s account provides further evidence in favor of the anthropological turn and the concept of ‘practical metaphysics’ as a form of thought for theology (4). The Kantian view that the rationality of religious convictions is a question of practical reason instead of theoretical reason can be substantiated by Tomasello’s findings. Tomasello is able to show that, in the natural history of mankind, it was not religion that came first and then morality, but the other way around: first, there were some elements of a proto-morality, which were then interpreted in a religious way. Theologically, this train of thought is promising: a religious view of the world is a practical interpretation of life. It does not precede the everyday practice of humans but is a (rationally legitimate) interpretation of this very practice without reducing religion to a practice of morality.

Two caveats should be made at the end of this introduction: One, it is not my aim to discuss whether Tomasello’s approach is well founded from a perspective of evolutionary anthropology. Within that field, there are, of course, objections to Tomasello’s methodology as well as his findings (Lorenz 1988; de Waal 2006, 2016). The approach of this article, however, is to presuppose, for the sake of the argument, the validity of Tomasello’s position and explore its philosophical and theological relevance. Two, it is also not my aim to give an exhaustive overview on the relationship between religion and morality in all its historical complexities. Rather, this article aims to show a stunning parallel between Tomasello and Kant and to elucidate this parallel’s theological significance.

2. A Natural History of Human Thinking: How Collective Intentionality Shapes Human Consciousness

Michael Tomasello, one of the leading researchers in evolutionary anthropology, has carried out groundbreaking research both for an evolutionary explanation of the intellectual (Tomasello 2014) and moral (Tomasello 2016) abilities of humans and for the individual ontogenesis of human persons (Tomasello 2019). On the basis of comparative experiments with infants and chimpanzees, the closest relatives of humans, he set out in search of the characteristics that explain the evolutionary success of humans over all other species. In the process, he discovered some astonishing things about the way primates think. For example, he had to abandon his initially defended hypothesis (Tomasello and Call 1997) that the evolutionary secret of human success is due to their ability to consciously refer to objects and persons, i.e., intentionality. He was able to demonstrate that primates display individual intentionality as well, for example, in their understanding that others also have mental states and that the perspective of others is relevant for one's own actions (Tomasello 2022). It is therefore not the capacity for individual intentionality that distinguishes humans from their closest relatives, so that individual intentionality cannot be responsible for their specific evolutionary success.

Tomasello's follow-up hypothesis, which can be regarded as empirically well supported by now, has been that it is the ability for *collective* intentionality which characterizes the uniqueness of humans. The hypothesis of collective intentionality is aimed at "the ability of human individuals to come together interdependently to act as a single agent—either jointly between individuals or collectively among the members of a group—maintaining their individuality throughout, and coordinating the process with new forms of cooperative communication, thereby creating a fundamentally new form of sociality" (Tomasello 2019, p. 342).

Both the evolutionary view of the development of this ability within the human species and the ontogenetic view of the development of this ability in the individual suggest that this ability develops in a two-stage process. Tomasello differentiates the capacity for shared intentionality into the two categories of 'joint intentionality' and 'collective intentionality'. Their main difference lies in a change in the level of abstraction: the ability of 'joint intentionality' makes it possible to form intentionality in concrete contexts and with other concrete individuals. This goes hand in hand with the emergence of the important ability to adopt the perspective of others. Cognition remains perspectival, and cooperative interactions and imitation learning may take place.

Let us take a look at *ontogeny* first: Tomasello locates the beginning of the ontogenetic emergence of joint intentionality in the so-called 'nine-month revolution': "Rather than just sharing with others' emotional states, infants now share with them intentional states—goals, attention, knowledge—aimed at external referents. A dual-level structure of sharedness and individuality is thus constituted, creating in addition the possibility of relating to others second-personally as coequal partners" (Tomasello 2019, p. 308f).

After the development of joint intentionality, the child's level of abstraction experiences a new boost at around the age of three, as this is when "the objective/normative turn" (Tomasello 2019, p. 317) occurs, which is accompanied by the development of collective intentionality. This enables each member of a particular group to adopt a supra-individual perspective: "Group-minded thinking and acting is not just scaling up from the second-personal to multi-personal, but rather scaling up to the group's self-identity". (Tomasello 2019, p. 318) This means that around the age of three, young children gain the ability to evaluate their own thoughts and actions from an abstract, 'objective' point of view. This is also the time when children begin to have real interactions with their peers and not just asymmetrical interactions with adults. This process then ends at the age of 6 to 7 when children are considered "reasonable and responsible persons" (Tomasello 2019, p. 330) who

can be given increasingly independent tasks and who are reliable partners in interactive contexts. Of course, Tomasello is aware that 7-year-old children are not persons in the sense that they bear full responsibility for their actions: “In no society are six- and seven-year-old children considered full persons” (Tomasello 2019, p. 332). However, he claims that the cognitive abilities to become full persons are already in place by reaching the stage of collective intentionality; all that is missing is cultural knowledge and practice in giving and demanding reasons: “Six-year-olds cannot participate in cooperative problem-solving about how to deal with the coming drought or how to deal with a festering dispute [...] over money, because they do not know enough about how droughts and money work. [...] These are all the tasks of middle childhood” (Tomasello 2019, p. 332f).

This is also the reason why influential individualistic theories, such as Piaget’s theory of mental development, are viewed critically by Tomasello. He claims that they display a lack of consideration of the profoundly social nature of human ontogeny. Even if Piaget refers to the social environment and the child’s symbolic interactions with its environment, this reference is rather stereotypical and does not play any decisive role in Piaget’s explanation of the process of human ontogeny: “the fundamentals of the process are conceptualized as inherently individualistic: the child as scientist exploring her environment and learning how things work” (Tomasello 2019, p. 299). Tomasello criticizes these individualistic theories because they cannot adequately explain either human cognition or human sociality. The key to both, he argues, is not based in the linguistic capacity of humans, but in their capacity for shared intentionality, from which humans’ impressive capacity for language follows in the first place: “Critically, these deeper processes of shared intentionality—and not linguistic representation and computation—are what is required for explaining the many and various other forms of uniquely human cognition and sociality, from children’s emerging sense of fairness and obligation to their cooperative thinking with peers” (Tomasello 2019, p. 299f).

Let us now turn to the *evolutionary* perspective: In addition to his exploration of human ontogeny, Tomasello describes a parallel structure in the natural history of the human species as a whole (Tomasello 2014). He claims that the evolutionary game changer has not been the human ability to take an intentional stance; the closest relatives of human beings are able to do that as well. What makes humans unique, however, is their ability to develop a form of collective intentionality. According to Tomasello, collective intentionality includes all essential aspects of human thinking. He 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” (Tomasello 2014, p. 81).

The development of this uniquely human ability took place in a two-step process: In a first evolutionary step, around 400,000 years ago, new ecological pressures led to the evolution of ‘joint intentionality’. Such a form of intentionality enables a form of second-personal thinking, which allows for a form of social self-regulation in concrete social groups. This goes beyond the merely individual self-regulation of great apes, but there are no abstractions beyond the concrete other in this intermediate step of human natural history. The second evolutionary step took place some 150,000 years ago. Around this time, the ability to abstract from concrete contexts of cooperation emerged, enabling a new form of collective intentionality. This ability unfolds into various cognitive abilities: Firstly, members of a group now share not only a concrete second-personal background but also a common cultural background that contains a multitude of implicit assumptions and values. This enables an actor-neutral or transpersonal evaluation of the actions of group members. One concrete consequence of this developmental leap is that it becomes possible

to sanction misconduct towards third parties—a practice that has never been observed in great apes. Furthermore, this abstraction of the context of cooperation also leads to a new perspective of human thinking, which can not only take the concrete perspective of the other person but also 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 generalization from the existence of many perspectives into something like ‘any possible perspective’, which means, essentially, ‘objective’” (Tomasello 2014, p. 92).

Crucial to the development of cognitive, social and moral capacities is therefore the interaction with others that leads to the development of the capacity for shared intentionality. It is this ability that explains the evolutionary success of humans and provides the key to other impressive human abilities: “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” (Tomasello 2019, p. 7).

This natural history of human thinking is by no means intended to undercut the modern notion of autonomy. Rather, the ‘rational freedom’ of the subject should be understood even more deeply by focusing on its evolutionary and ontogenetic genealogy. However, if it is the capacity for collective intentionality that distinguishes human beings from their closest relatives, contexts of cooperation and intersubjectivity become constitutive of human rationality. From an evolutionary perspective, it is not the case that humans first develop the faculty of reason and then use it to initiate previously unknown communication processes but rather that communicatively designed cooperative contexts allow the faculty of reason to emerge in the first place.

Summarizing Tomasello’s findings, it can be stated that he provides empirical evidence for the thesis that human consciousness is always intersubjective and cooperative. It is a flawed understanding of human cognition to assume that humans first develop the faculty of reason and then use it in communication processes. Rather, communicative processes and contexts of cooperation allow the faculty of reason to emerge in the first place. Tomasello describes two 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. Humans are not singular monads who miraculously develop language and consciousness but always individuals within a community, depending on the input of others in their ontogeny to develop human cognition and consciousness. Tomasello’s emphasis on collective intentionality offers an innovative perspective on human consciousness and may even explain the specific features of *human* consciousness.

3. Philosophical Consequences: New Perspectives on Human Consciousness

So far, I have reconstructed the basic ideas behind Tomasello’s approach and concluded that collective intentionality—as an intersubjective and embodied form of cooperative thinking—shapes the specific nature of human consciousness. An obvious follow-up question to this insight would be to explore its consequences for the mind–brain problem.

Over the last years, the mind–brain debate has settled into something that might be called an unhappy stalemate. It is quite clear that there are numerous approaches which do not work to explain the relationship between the mind and brain: any form of dualism is unconvincing as it remains unclear how the separate realms of the mind and the body are

supposed to interact. Reductive monisms, however, are equally unconvincing as it remains unclear how the specific features of the mind are supposed to be reduced to merely physical states—an issue which has been labeled the ‘hard problem of consciousness’ by David Chalmers (1996). It seems unlikely that the mind–brain problem will find a convincing solution in the near future, as some even argue that this problem belongs to those problems which are, for both methodological as well as conceptual reasons, unsolvable (Passon and Benz Müller 2021).

In this argumentative stalemate, Tomasello’s natural history of cognitive abilities and human consciousness could offer a fresh and innovative alternative: from the genealogical viewpoint of evolutionary anthropology, the debate on the mind–brain problem focuses too much on rather static and decontextualized metaphysical concepts of the mind and the brain. Instead of either reducing one to the other (as monism or panpsychism does) or postulating their ontological independence (as dualism does), an approach based on evolutionary anthropology would consider it more fruitful to tell a genealogical story of the origin of specifically human abilities. Such a story would go beyond a speculative dispute on the fundamental structure of the world-as-such or on the primacy of either the mental or the physical realm. Tomasello’s approach is not determined by abstract metaphysical speculation about the ontological foundations of certain cognitive abilities or human consciousness, but rather by the interest in a better understanding of these abilities through a reconstruction of their evolutionary origins. It is an attempt to contextualize and historicize metaphysical questions and to answer them by understanding the conceptual frameworks and dependencies which influence the way a metaphysical problem is formulated.

By doing so, it might be possible to reconcile two basic intuitions: On the one hand, it seems quite clear that human consciousness—as well as further human abilities such as freedom or rationality—have developed in the natural context of the evolutionary process. Human beings do not inhabitate two different worlds or have some miraculous mental abilities that are completely detached from the natural world. On the other hand, a natural history of these abilities avoids a speculative interpretation of this insight, as it abstains from subscribing to any strong metaphysical claim on the being-as-such of mental or physical abilities. As John Searle put it, “Once you see the incoherence of dualism, you can also see that monism and materialism are just as mistaken. Dualists asked, ‘How many kinds of things and properties are there?’ and counted up to two. Monists, confronting the same question, only got as far as one. But the real mistake was to start counting at all” (Searle 1992, p. 26).

Evolutionary anthropology pursues a similar theoretical disarmament: instead of a comprehensive reduction in human capabilities to the exclusively material (or exclusively immaterial) basis of the world, it considers telling an evolutionary history of the development of specifically human capabilities as more promising. Offering such a genealogy of the emergence of the human mind may help to historicize and contextualize the mind–brain debate as a natural history of the human mind goes beyond the speculative dispute about the fundamental structure of the world as a whole. Furthermore, it operates in a decidedly non-reductionist manner, as Tomasello explicitly rejects a naturalistic reductionism (Tomasello 2002, p. 9). Tomasello’s approach is thus not determined by abstract metaphysical speculation about the ontological foundations of certain human capacities, but rather by an interest in a better understanding of these capacities 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 human mental faculties—reason, freedom, consciousness or language—arose in natural contexts or evolutionary processes. To put it simply, the task should not be to determine the nature of reality as such but to understand

human consciousness from a genealogical perspective and gain anthropological insights to the intersubjective mode of existence of conscious human beings.

To draw an interim conclusion, Tomasello's evolutionary anthropology proves to be a promising partner in crime for theological anthropology as his approach offers an innovative reconceptualization of the mind–body problem by historicizing unique capabilities of embodied human beings. In a final step, I will turn towards theological anthropology directly and explore in how far evolutionary anthropology may support the important 'anthropological turn' in modern theology.

4. Theological Consequences: Consolidating the Anthropological Turn

Theological anthropology is a comparatively young branch of theology. Before its establishment, the question of 'What is man?' had been regarded as a subquestion of a theology of creation. It took theology some time to track the philosophical development of Enlightenment, which turned towards the autonomy and rationality of individuals, marking an anthropocentric turn. This movement started with Descartes and Kant, who turned towards the subject of knowledge and pointed out that philosophers are in no position to approach being-as-such but rather have to consider their own subjectivity: it is the human individual which constitutes epistemological practices. Descartes and Kant both assume that human beings are not passive containers into which knowledge of reality-as-such is being poured in. Rather, they find that the subject itself incorporates a number of categories, concepts and presuppositions which affect every cognitive process. Therefore, the primary object of philosophical analysis is not being as such but first and foremost the subject of cognition, which attempts to make sense of the world and itself. Kant also refers to this insight as the 'Copernican turn' in philosophy (Kant [1781] 1788): whereas it was previously assumed that thinking was based on being, it is now the case that being is (also) based on thinking: "Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them a priori through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an a priori cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us. This would be just like the first thoughts of Copernicus, who [...] tried to see if he might not have greater success if he made the observer revolve and left the stars at rest" (Kant [1781] 1788, B XVI).

In theology, this insight has been taken up, with a certain delay, as both Protestant and Catholic theology developed their version of an 'anthropological turn'. This anthropological turn has both a methodological and a soteriological meaning. The methodological meaning of the anthropological turn points out that modern theology can no longer speak responsibly about God without taking into account the human conditions of hearing and recognizing God's Word. The Word of God is not something that is removed from any context and any human conceptualization but is communicated to humans in concrete contexts and in human terms. Therefore, the most important task of theology is to clarify the conditions in which humans are able to hear the Word of God. This methodological focus on the human being is of decisive theological importance, as it enables a breakthrough towards a modern theology that does not indulge in contextless and therefore unfounded speculation about the Divine.

The soteriological meaning of the anthropological turn states that theology, as a scientific reflection of the Word of God, must be existentially relevant for the concrete human individual. For example, scholastic speculations about the spatio-temporal expansion of angels may be witty and profound, but they have little connection to the everyday world

of human experience. *Existential meaningfulness instead of idle speculation*: this is what the anthropological turn of modern theology writes into the homework book of any modern theology (Rahner 1982).

The anthropological turn can thus be described as a turn towards a performative theology: religious faith is not just a theory about a detached transcendent being but rather a life practice. In this practical twist, the anthropological turn mirrors an important insight from Kantian philosophy: certain concepts which are essential for human existence are not regarded as objects of possible knowledge and thus not negotiated within theoretical reason. Rather, they are effective as pragmatic assumptions of our way of life. Their rational legitimacy is accordingly negotiated within practical reason. It makes little sense to understand the unity of the world, human freedom and the existence of God as cosmological questions to which metaphysical theories can provide answers; rather, they are based on practices of action rooted in the lifeworld and can be justified in a form of ‘practical metaphysics’ (Wendel and Breul 2020).

Kant applies this line of thought to his treatment of the rationality of religious belief as well: Kant is highly critical of any attempt to provide theoretical evidence in favor of or against the rationality of belief in God. He offers a devastating critique of the ontological, the cosmological and the teleological argument for the existence of God as they all mistakenly regard religious convictions as a form of knowledge which may be (dis-)proven (Kant [1781] 1788). At the same time, he develops a very promising argument for the rationality of religious belief from practical reason: the moral practice of humans presupposes the existence of a wider horizon of meaning as this practice would be futile and irrational if there were no God (Gerhardt 2024).

In accordance with the Kantian turn towards a ‘practical faith of reason’, a religious interpretation of the world and the self does not primarily focus on extraordinary cosmological issues, but rather on ‘ordinary’ existential questions in the everyday lifeworld of human beings. As Kant pointed out in his book *Religion within the Boundary of Pure Reason*, religious convictions are not part of metaphysical *knowledge* but rather belong to the realm of practical reason (Kant [1793] 1838). From a Kantian perspective, religious convictions are rather an *interpretation* of one’s existence than a cosmological *worldview*. Interpretations of one’s existence are usually open for rational critique, but there cannot be conclusive theoretical evidence for (a-)theism in the form of proofs (or refutations) of God’s existence. Therefore, theology and metaphysics become a practical enterprise since metaphysical or religious convictions are no possible subjects of theoretical knowledge but performative utterances that provide orientation in a complex world.

To summarize this theological turn towards practical reason and a ‘practical metaphysics’ in line with Kantian philosophy, it can be said that it is not the case that first there is religion and then there are certain moral norms inferred from this religion. Rather, Kant claims that first there is morality and then there are certain religious convictions which follow from the rationality of morality. It goes without saying that there would be a lot more to say about the impact of Kant on theology (Breul 2022; Hanke 2024; Langthaler and Striet 2024). However, it seems to be more fruitful to turn towards evolutionary anthropology for one last time in this article, as there is a rather surprising parallel between a Kantian turn towards practical reason and Tomasello’s natural history of human thinking and human morality: one of the most striking aspects of evolutionary anthropology is that it provides empirical support for the Kantian thesis that religion is based on a moral life (and not vice versa). First of all, it can be said that, from a chronological perspective, religious interpretations of one’s life appeared later in the natural history of humans than proto-moral behavior: “[E]arly humans came to cooperate and treat one another morally before the establishment of organized religions” (Tomasello 2023, p. 6). Apart from this

chronological argument—which still could be a contingent development—there are also conceptual and empirical reasons to assume that human beings started to develop a second-person morality before starting to develop religious interpretations of life. Tomasello argues that there is an “evolutionary primacy to cooperation and morality, with religion exploiting these pre-existing human proclivities and integrating them with pre-existing beliefs about supernatural beings” (Tomasello 2023, p. 12). Strikingly similarly, Kant also posits a philosophical primacy to morality, with religion fleshing out the presuppositions and implications that a consistent moral way of life requires. Both Tomasello and Kant thus share the thesis that religion does not play a decisive role when it comes to the obligational aspect of morality, but that the focus of a religious interpretation of the world is rather on “inspirational and aspirational dimensions of human cooperation and morality” (Tomasello 2023, p. 12). Put simply, religion is not a fail-safe mechanism to make sure that humans actually act in a moral way but rather an interpretative sequel to experiencing moral obligations and detecting a form of transcendence within them as they point towards a reality beyond an anonymous and amoral universe.

Therefore, a major parallel between Tomasello and Kant can be seen in their view of religion as a legitimate interpretation of moral life. Kant argues that religion is not a necessary condition for morality, but that, vice versa, religious faith can be postulated as a consequence of moral life. Tomasello seems to agree with Kant as he argues that the basic development of collective intentionality and of the mainly cooperative nature of human relationships does not depend on the belief in a transcendent being. Kant and Tomasello thus do not view religions as belief systems which make use of transcendent authorities in order to force social behavior upon human beings. Against such a negative view of religion, it can rather be stated that a religious interpretation of one’s life can be based on the intersubjective nature of human existence:

“My Durkheimian proposal is thus that the originators of first religious institutions in the western world (and perhaps beyond) actually identified some of the basic mechanisms of human cooperation in groups and instantiated them in the shared practices and beliefs characteristic of their institutions. And moreover, the focus was not so much on the ‘negative’ incentives for cooperation such as punishment and obligation (although there was some of that), but more on the ‘positive’ incentives for cooperation such as the feelings associated with collective effervescence and inspirations and aspirations to exceed group norms” (Tomasello 2023, p. 11)

The intersubjective and cooperative mode of existence of humans is hence decisive for opening up an interpretation of life which reaches out for a horizon of transcendence. Belief in a transcendent God is therefore an interpretation of the experiences of human beings, and by that, I do not mean extraordinary epiphanies of the Divine but the everyday experience of the value of cooperative relationships, which may be interpreted as a symbol of a transcendent reality that grounds human life:

“As human communities searched for a transcendent Other, an experience of that Other gradually dawned, filling out memories and eventually providing foresight with a sense of divine Providence. [. . .] In retrospect it is possible to interpret the yearnings of the very earliest humans theologically as a slow reaching out towards the transcendent, the inklings of which were in place long before our own identified species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, first walked on the Savanna hundreds of thousands of years ago” (Deane-Drummond 2019, p. 118)

To summarize, Tomasello’s genealogy and Kant’s claims to validity complement each other, as they both lean towards the hypothesis that religious convictions may be a

legitimate interpretation of certain moral obligations that developed in the natural history of humanity. The perspective of evolutionary anthropology is thus of central importance for theology and its attempt to justify the rationality of religious belief. By better understanding the origins of religious belief, one might come to better understand its plausibility and its rational acceptability. This does by no means indicate that Tomasello's approach implies or entails religious beliefs. Rather, it indicates that Tomasello's evolutionary anthropology opens up a space for further theological reflection on the genealogy and validity of religious views of the world.

5. Epilogue: A Natural History of Human Religiosity?

In this article, I have illustrated the relevance of evolutionary anthropology for philosophy and theology. One of the most important consequences of such an approach is that it may offer a non-reductive view of the evolution of religion. On the one hand, it can ensure that theology stays in touch with the empirical sciences and considers the genealogical and evolutionary aspects of how religious views of the world started to emerge in the natural history of humans. This may enrich theology as it can better understand the origins of human religiosity, thereby fostering the project of a rational justification of religious beliefs.

On the other hand, a conversation between theology and evolutionary anthropology may help to overcome one of the most influential and at the same time most flawed atheist critiques of religion in the last decades: the evolutionary critique of religion as it has been put forth by self-proclaimed 'New Atheists' such as Richard Dawkins (2006) or Daniel Dennett (2006). The simple fact that religious interpretations of the world and one's place in it have evolved in the natural history of humans does not mean that these interpretations are necessarily false, illusionary or projectionist. The new atheists misunderstand religions as they regard them as competitors to scientific theories instead of life practices which are grounded in contexts of cooperation and fairness. John Gray has put it succinctly: "The new atheists have directed their campaign against a narrow segment of religion while failing to understand even that small part. Seeing religion as a system of beliefs, they have attacked it as if it was no more than an obsolete scientific theory. [...] But the idea that religion consists of a bunch of discredited theories is itself a discredited theory—a relic of the nineteenth-century philosophy of Positivism" (Gray 2018, p. 9). The misconstruction of the structure of religion has led to obstacles for interdisciplinary research as the polemical tone of the new atheists and their methodological shortcomings were rather discouraging for theology. Fortunately, evolutionary anthropology encourages an interdisciplinary dialogue between empirical sciences and theology. It may help to overcome the polarizations of new atheists in order to actually understand how religious faith evolved and to assess its rational plausibility within our times.

To conclude: theologically, a non-reductive natural history of the development of modern humans opens up a space for integrating a natural genealogy of religious ideas into one's own reflections on the rational responsibility of a religious interpretation of life without affirming reductionism. Religion can be regarded as a human practice of interpretation that aims at a transcendent reality and that, in particular, lends the central category of intersubjectivity a religious dimension: it is the deeply communicative, intersubjective nature of human existence that suggests a religious interpretation of the world. The fundamentally social structure of human relationships makes it possible to interpret one's own existence as borne of love, not absurdity or nothingness. It is precisely in relationality, in the interpersonal quality of human relationships, that traces of a transcendent reality can be discovered within a conceptual framework of theism. Although this transcendent reality will no longer be demonstrable with the toolbox of evolutionary anthropology, evolutionary anthropology opens up space to reflect on the legitimacy of such interpretations.

Funding: This research was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), grant number Br 5921/1-1. We acknowledge financial support by Technische Universität Dortmund/TU Dortmund University within the funding program Open Access Costs.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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