

Kognitionspsychologie II: Session 10

Motivation: Morality

Maximilian Theisen, FS 2026

May 5, 2026

Semester Overview

#	Date	Topic	Instructor
1	17.02.2026	Emotion: What is an emotion?	Mata
2	03.03.2026	Emotion: What is an emotion? (continued)	Mata
3	10.03.2026	Emotion: Neural bases	Tisdall
4	17.03.2026	Emotion: Regulation	Mata
5	24.03.2026	Emotion: Well-being	Mata
6	31.03.2026	Motivation: What is motivation?	Mata
7	07.04.2026	Motivation: Extrinsic vs intrinsic motivation	Mata
8	14.04.2026	Motivation: Neural bases	Tisdall
9	28.04.2026	Motivation: Cooperation	Theisen
10	05.05.2026	Motivation: Morality	Theisen
11	12.05.2026	Applications	Mata
12	19.05.2026	Wrap-up and Q&A	Mata
13	03.06.2026	Exam (DSBG Neubau)	
14	20.07.2026	Repeat Exam (Vesalianum)	

Today's Session



From Cooperation
to Morality



Morality =
Cooperation?

Learning Objectives for This Session





- Understand how non-human Great Apes' social lives differ from ours
- Explain how two evolutionary steps shaped cooperative and moral inclinations in humans
- Understand which predictions Morality-As-Cooperation theory makes regarding moral commonalities across cultures
- Discuss central critiques of MAC theory



From Cooperation to Morality

Re: Is Motivation Always About Oneself?

Some acts seem to be motivated by selfless desires. Acts that are motivated by such desires are called altruistic.

 <p>1.4 Tsd. Spenden</p> <p>Hjälp mig i kampen mot hjärncancer.</p> <p>560'029 kr sammelt</p>	 <p>1.3 Tsd. Spenden</p> <p>Hilfe für Kevin und Morris – Unterstützung nach dem Verlust</p> <p>25'085 € sammelt</p>
 <p>15.5 Tsd. Spenden</p> <p>Support Happy Cat Sanctuary After Tragic Fire</p> <p>781'235 \$ sammelt</p>	 <p>5.7 Tsd. Spenden</p> <p>Honoring Austin Metcalf: Help His Family Heal</p> <p>285'899 \$ sammelt</p>

I Donated a Kidney to a Stranger. You Might Consider It Too.

The National Kidney Foundation says about 90,000 people in the U.S. need a kidney, and 12 people die every day while waiting for one.

MARCH 24, 2025 BY RYANN COULES



Photos courtesy: Ryann Noelani Coules



I threw myself on to an exploding grenade

'There was a pinging noise, familiar to anyone who's ever pulled the pin from a grenade. I had walked into a tripwire'



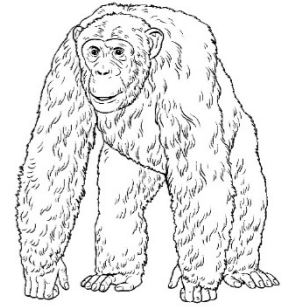
'I had perhaps four or five seconds until detonation, and I counted them down in my head.'

Photograph: Mark Chilvers for the Guardian

Excursion: Altruism among kin

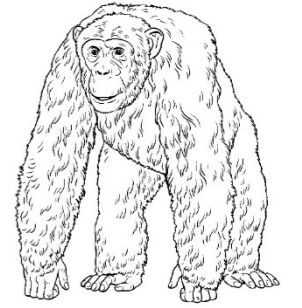
- Not individuals but their genes are the object of natural selection
- Altruism towards individuals with shared genetic information (kin) indirectly benefits the reproduction of some of the actor's genes
- Simplified: “We help related individuals because it is good for the reproduction of our genes.”
- But what about non-kin-altruism?

Cooperation in Great Ape Societies



- Social life of nonhuman great apes is characterized by rule of dominance
- Those who get what they want are those with the most physical force
- Helping and cooperation is also part of great apes' social lives, but only under specific circumstances

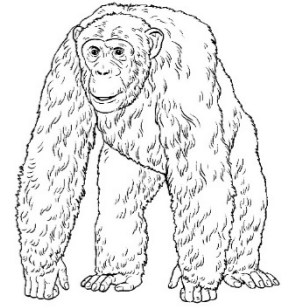
Cooperation in Great Ape Societies



Helping:

- Low-cost: Chimpanzees show spontaneous, targeted helping behavior towards humans and other chimpanzees
- High-cost: Costly helping and sharing (e.g., food) follows reciprocity or kinship

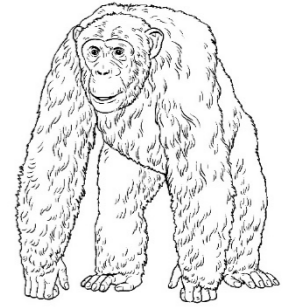
Cooperation in Great Ape Societies



Collaboration:

- Chimpanzees, in contrast to other monkey species, collaborate with nonkin for fights
- Chimpanzees forage almost always individually
- Not interested in joint goals or activities but aware when they need to collaborate for their own goals

Cooperation in Great Ape Societies



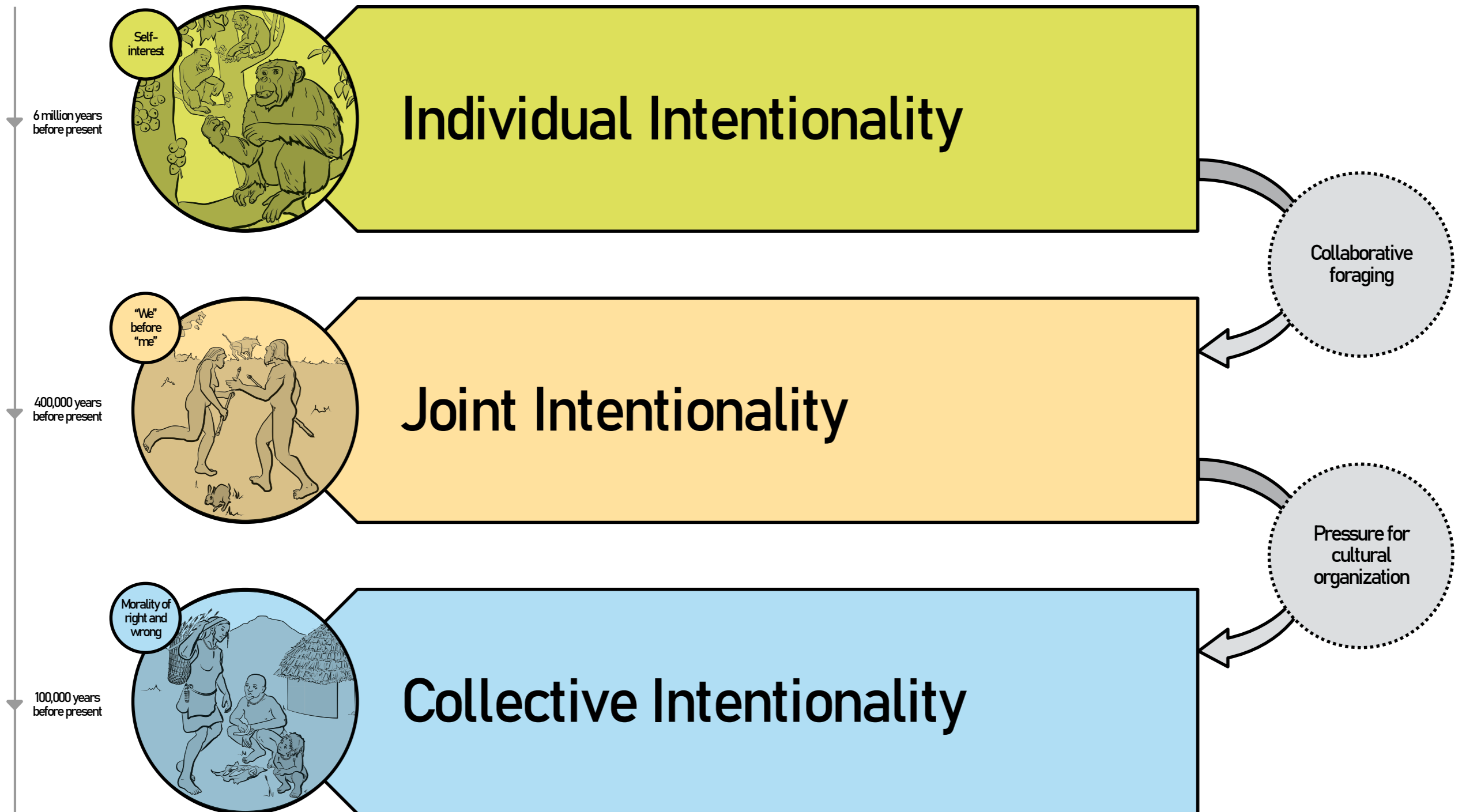
See video here:

<https://vimeo.com/55035079>

Cooperative Organization of Human Societies

Subsistence	Collaborative foraging, including 10-50% of time for helping each other
Property	Property rules are accepted and enforced by society, widespread culture of food sharing
Childcare	Collaborative childcare, where mothers do the majority of work but others are involved as well (up to ~50%)
Communication	Active teaching of children, informing others of things that might be interesting <i>to them</i>
Politics	Egalitarian foraging groups, social competence instead of physical dominance
Norms	Public social and moral rules that “everyone knows”, third-party enforcement of rules (individual and institutional)

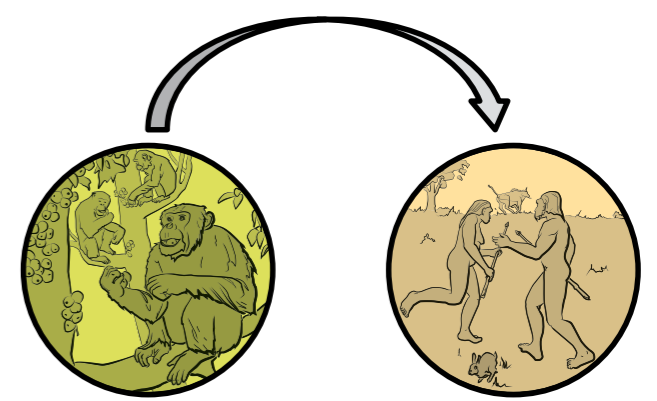
Two Evolutionary Steps: The Interdependence Hypothesis



Thomasello & Vaish (2013)

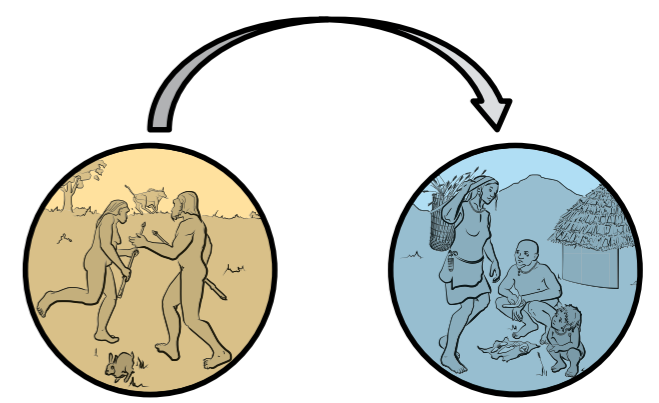
Illustrations: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-origins-of-human-morality/>

First Evolutionary Step: Collaborative Foraging



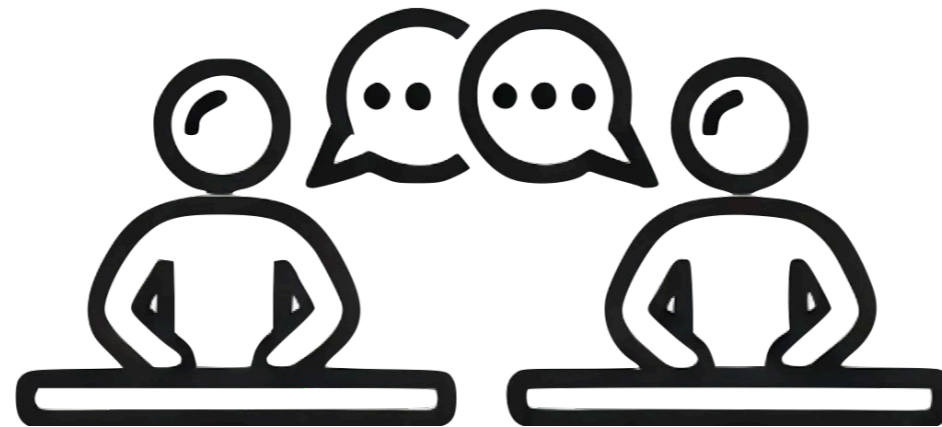
- Changes in ecology required humans to become collaborative foragers
- Individuals became interdependent with one another (joint intentionality): If the other is in trouble, it is good for me to help them
- Social pressure: Being perceived as a good collaborator becomes important
- Result: Individuals help those with whom they are interdependent, share collaborative spoils, feel answerable to others for being a good partner

Second Evolutionary Step: Pressure for Cultural Organization



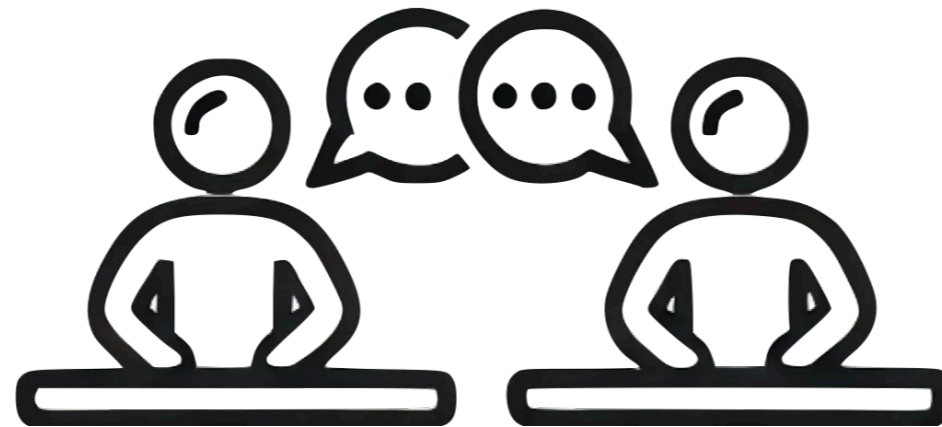
- Increasing competition between human groups
- Groups increase in size, collaborative functioning becomes even more important
- With increasing group size, more and more interactions are not based on personal interaction history of the individuals but on group membership alone
- This requires collective understanding of the norms of the group
- Actions are regulated by agent-neutral, impersonal social norms
→ Morality

Does this align with your understanding of morality?



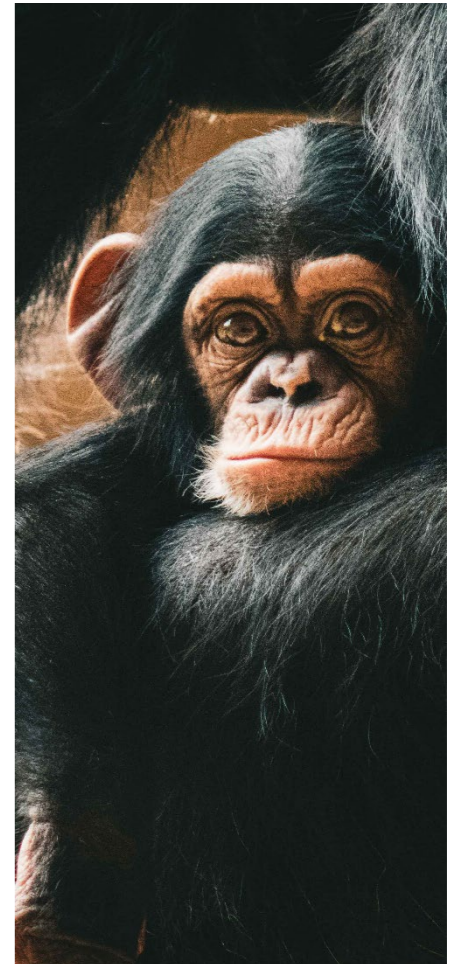
Assuming someone's desire to help a stranger is
the result of evolutionary processes:

Is this desire still
morally good?



Evolution of Cooperation and Morality: Summary

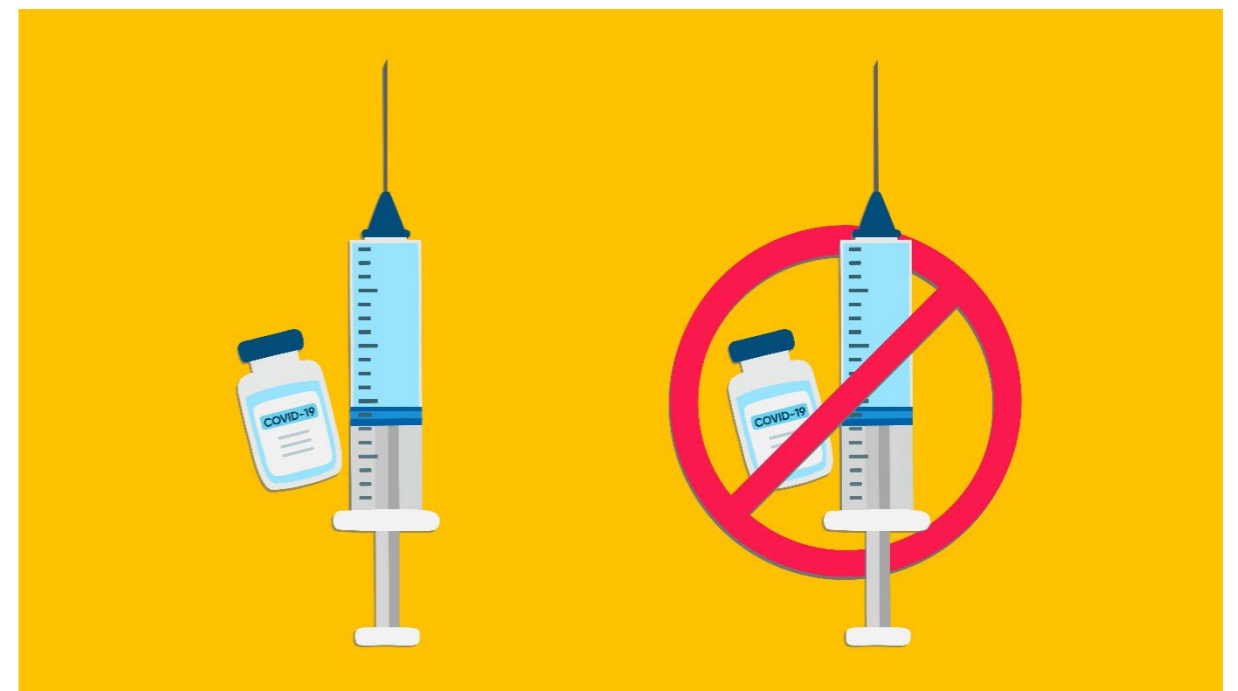
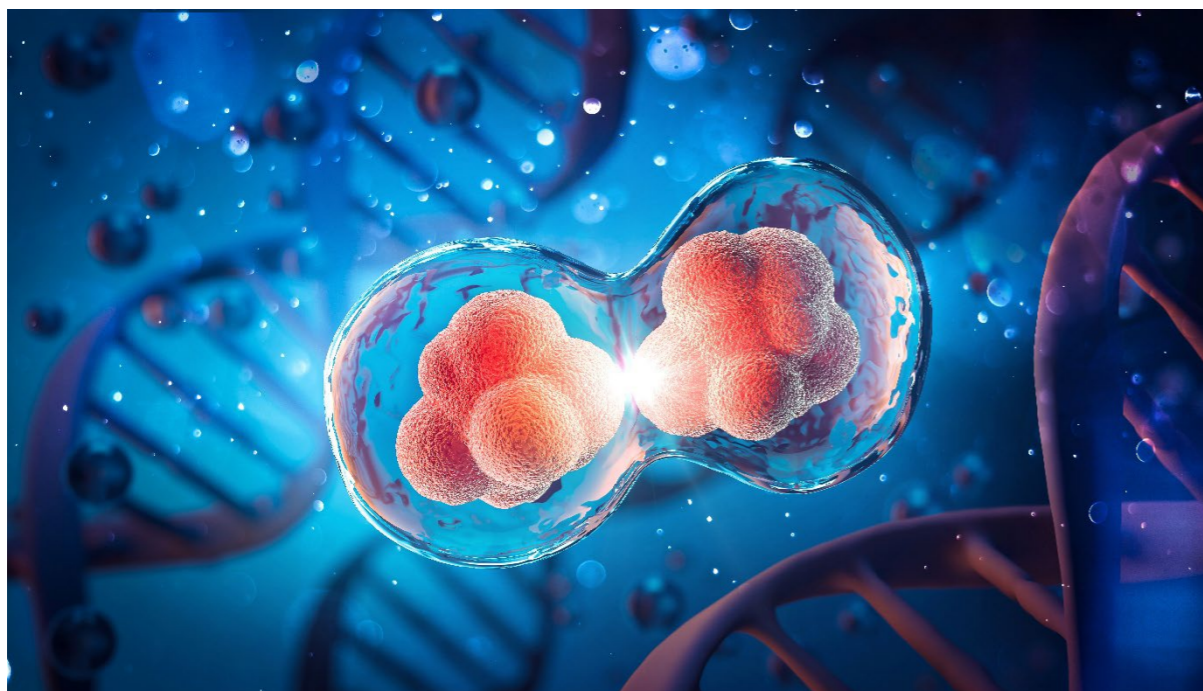
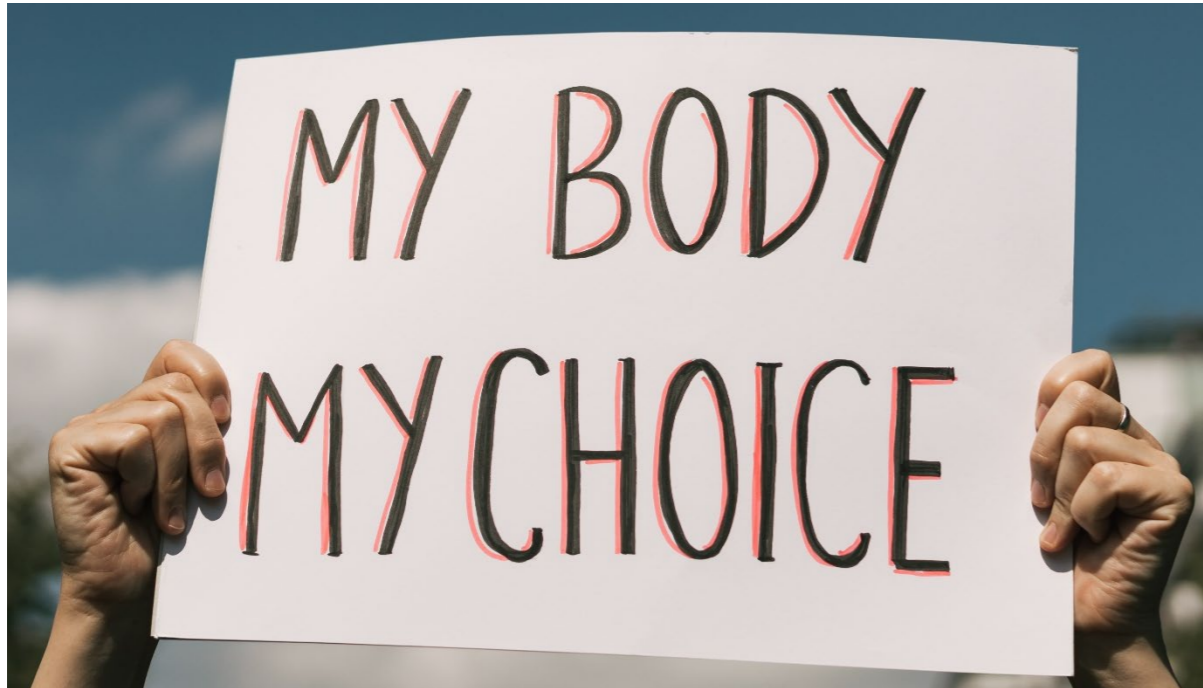
- Nonhuman great apes' social life is characterized by physical dominance and reciprocity
- Two evolutionary steps toward „ultracooperative“ human societies:
 - Need to forage collaboratively, joint intentionality between partners
 - Competition between groups, growing group size, collective intentionality



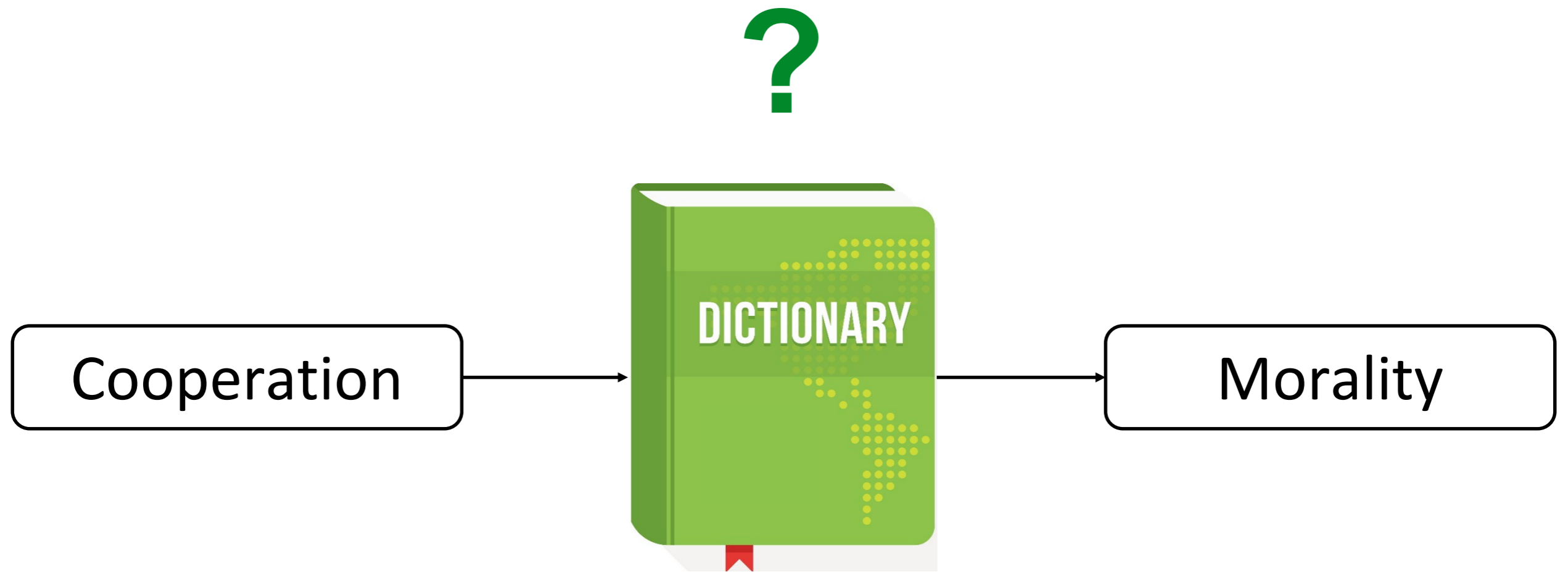


Morality = Cooperation?

Morality: Is It Always About Cooperation?



How Does Cooperation Translate to Morality?



Morality-As-Cooperation (MAC) Theory

“Morality consists of a collection of biological and cultural solutions to the problems of cooperation recurrent in human social life” (Curry et al., 2019, p. 48)

Morality-As-Cooperation (MAC) Theory

Cooperation Problem	Example	Moral Value
Allocation of resources to kin	Sharing resources with offspring	Family values
Coordination to Mutual Advantage	Traditions, forming friendships, favoring your own group	Group loyalty
Social Exchange	Trusting others, reciprocating favours, seeking revenge, expressing gratitude	Reciprocity
Hawkish behavior	Charging into battle, accepting risk, dominance, teaching others	Bravery
Dovish behavior	Obeying elders, showing deference to authority	Humility
Division of Resources	Reaching compromise, dividing resources equally, "I cut, you choose"	Fairness
Possession	Respecting what someone already holds without contest	Property Rights

Morality-As-Cooperation (MAC) Theory

“To the extent these problems of cooperation are universal features of human social life, these cooperative behaviors will be considered morally good in all moral systems, in all cultures.” (Curry et al., 2019, p. 50)

Putting MAC to the Test



Putting MAC to the Test

In 961 out of 962 observations, cooperative behaviour was seen as morally good.

Table 2. Paragraphs attesting to the moral valence of cooperation

	Positive	Negative
Helping kin	214	0
Helping group	127	0
Reciprocating	151	0
Being brave	101	0
Respecting superiors	133	0
Dividing resources	17	0
Respecting property	218	1
Total	961	1

Putting MAC to the Test

Positive evaluations of some behaviours were less often reported than those of other behaviours.

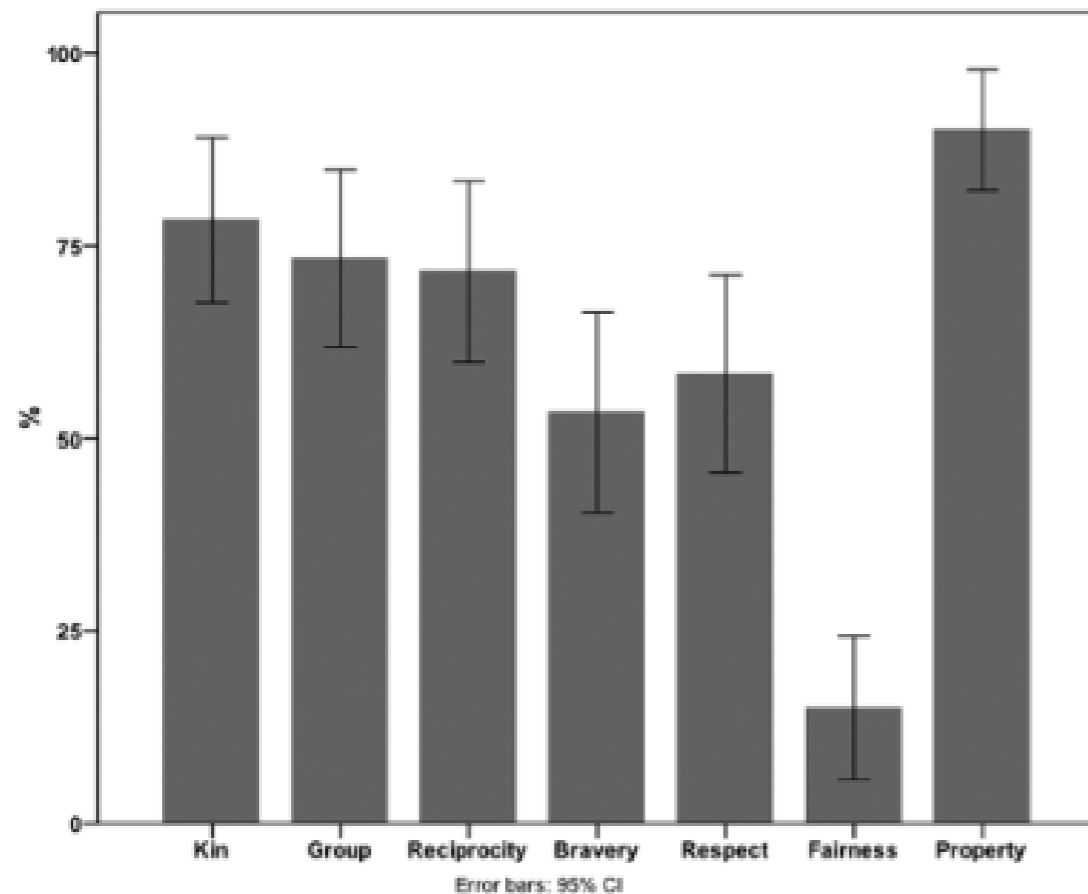


Figure 2. Percentage of societies in which positively morally valenced cooperative behavior was observed.

Criticisms

- Need to show morality is never about anything other than cooperation (but: sexuality, treatment of corpses)
- Uncooperative behaviour sometimes seen as good (trolley problem, organ sale prohibition)
- Neglects core function of morality: Ideas of what makes a good life (autonomy, aesthetic dimensions of ritual)

Summary

- Universally shared moral values that arise from universal cooperative problems
- Cooperative behaviours is universally seen as morally good
- Is it only about cooperation?

Evaluation



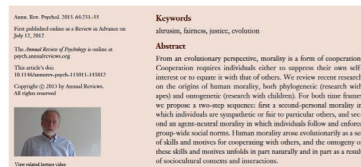
<https://evasys.unibas.ch/evasys/online.php?pswd=3E3WR>

Two (!) Mandatory Readings

Evolution of Cooperation and Morality



Tomasello, M., & Vaish, A. (2013). Origins of human cooperation and morality. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 64(1), 231–255. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-113011-143812>



Morality-as-Cooperation

Curry, O. S., Mullins, D. A., & Whitehouse, H. (2019). Is it good to cooperate? Testing the Theory of Morality-as-Cooperation in 60 societies. *Current Anthropology*, 60 (1), 47-69. <https://doi.org/10.1086/701478>

