

Children's pretence: A scientific perspective on social reality

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Abstract: The nature of reality is an old philosophical question, yet not nearly as old as the myths of different cultures around marriage and kinship. We can assume that these ancient, foundational institutions have deeply shaped our perception of reality. Here we provide an answer that integrates biology, psychology, anthropology and linguistics. Simply put, institutions are intersubjective games, and our ontological confusion around them evolved due to their reproductive function. This argument involves a precise understanding of morality as a deceptive linguistic socialisation device that is distinct from other forms of normativity. More specifically, we argue that what philosopher John Searle has called institutional 'facts', such as a piece of paper being money, should instead be regarded as subjective and nonfactual. Central to these considerations is the very definition of human society, and how its moral, tribalistic nature goes unnoticed because it is registered in language itself, limiting our self-understanding. We demonstrate this limitation by closely examining a recent book chapter on the origins of language which, influenced by Searle, uses the institution of marriage as an example of serious or objective institutional practice and discusses how children learn to participate in it. Searle's own conceptual framework also proves useful in illustrating how kinship and moral socialisation form the basis of social realities.

Keywords: prescription, marriage, kinship, definition of morality, cognitive conflation, language

1. Introduction

Being married is commonly perceived as real. When we participate in this and other institutions, however, we seem to be cognitively immersed in a society. The authors ourselves are married in a country often referred to as *yhteiskunta*, meaning ‘society’. If we assume, for the sake of argument, that we all speak the same language, it is clear that ‘society’ means different things to people from different geographical locations, where there are different criteria for marriage and citizenship, economic and legal systems. This is unlike genuinely objective concepts that are much easier to agree about, such as *water*, *sky*, *individual* or *species*. From this wider perspective, we can understand and see the world for what it is, including the world of human societies.

In this article, we propose an objective definition of morality as a basis toward such an understanding. Commonly accepted definitions remain the domain of social theory or philosophy, which tend to operate from within society. For example, morality is ‘a sense of right and wrong that is born out of group-wide systems of conflict management based on shared values’ [1] (p. 69), or ‘an informal public system applying to all rational persons, governing behaviour that affects others, and includes what are commonly known as the moral rules, ideals, and virtues and has the lessening of evil or harm as its goal’ [2] (p. 13). Or ‘norms can be defined as principles or rules that determine what behaviour is appropriate, required, permissible, or forbidden’ [3] (p. 267). These definitions are either circular, involving notions of values and prohibitions that are themselves moral, or they simply lack the conceptual precision that is required in science. This problem particularly affects the field of developmental psychology, where the focus is still on peer relations instead of the asymmetric relations of parents and children. For example, Dahl and Killen express the need for a better definition of morality, which they see as ‘prescriptive norms concerning others’ welfare, rights, fairness, and justice’ [4].

In analysing this problem, we have used an article by Emily Wyman featured in a recent book on the origins of language [5]. We find that Wyman’s views represent the current general ambivalence toward institutions. In the article, Wyman attempts to build on the ‘brute facts’ of biology, along the lines of John Searle in his classic *The Construction of Social Reality* [6], by discussing how our developmental experiences contribute to the ‘paradox of real fictions’ that characterises our social realities. This valuable discussion reveals the cognitive fog that we try to dispel by identifying morality as a socialisation device and distinguishing it from ethical notions of social harmony.

2. Institutions are subjective

We begin by highlighting the importance of a distinction between description and prescription over distinctions such as objective versus subjective, or reality versus institutional reality. Humans, unlike other animals, have the linguistic ability to represent our desired state of the world. For example, the idea that there is a country in a certain geographical area involves a state of behaviour in which people marry and have legitimate children who become citizens. This idea is *prescriptive* (from Latin *prae* meaning ‘before’ and *scribere*, ‘to write’) even if it remains a mere representation or imagining. That is, regardless of how compelling the idea might be, we have a choice to enact it or not. We can play a game whose rules we follow consciously, or become immersed in it to the degree we may call it an institution; or we can treat these rules as a formal system that describes an ideal world. Either way we are ‘writing before’ or prescribing.

On the other hand, the representation and understanding of reality, including human sociality, is an act of description. In biology, the fact that two animals mate and raise children together is not described as a marriage. Biology has different concepts for these social arrangements, which do not result from a linguistic, creative intention but from a process of natural selection. The concept of inclusive fitness, in particular, does not express a wish or intention to cooperate but the actual cooperation of genetically related animals [7].

Searle’s argument on the nature of social reality is encapsulated in the following analogy:

When hyenas move in a pack to kill an isolated lion[description], no linguistic or cultural apparatus[prescription] is necessary ... The selectional advantage of cooperative behavior is, I trust, obvious. Inclusive fitness[description] is increased by cooperating with conspecifics[prescription].’ [6] (p. 38, corrections added)

Searle here appears to be referring to natural selection. However, as noted above, inclusive fitness is not the same thing as cooperation with conspecifics (members of the same species). In biology, conspecifics are mainly seen as competitive or non-cooperative because they are genetically unrelated. Searle dismisses the role of language and confuses the natural fact that animals sometimes cooperate (also across species) with some kind of species ideal. In this way, hyenas hunting a lion becomes a ‘social fact’ together with ‘Congress passing legislation’, an institutional activity he regards as a subclass of social facts (p. 38).

There are no doubt similarities that blur the distinction between non-linguistic and linguistic sociality. A group of hyenas may cooperatively intend to bring down the lion and eat it. They might have a common mental representation of such a desired state of the world. But they have no capacity to make this representation symbolic and permanent, let alone treat it as objective. The group of hyenas will abandon their collective action once reality is such that the lion becomes too hard to catch, for instance, and this would be the end of their collective 'intentionality'. By contrast, humans reproduce the hunt, day after day, through our symbolic representation of the lion. Members of Congress intend to pass legislation regardless of what may be the case in reality, because this is required by the prescriptive existence of the United States of America. These laws, in turn, lead to a state of activity that fallaciously supports the belief that such existence is real (assuming the consequent). Nevertheless, it is because our ability to abandon these common endeavours is not effectively zero that we have paradoxical 'real fictions' to deal with [5]. We want a share of a lion that might not be there.

The same failure to perceive when and how our intentions become prescriptive confuses our understanding of what is subjective and what is objective:

With regard to institutional facts, there is no naturally occurring, objective standard in the world by which a fact such as 'this couple are married' may be evaluated. But neither is the fact that the couple are married a matter of subjective, personal opinion. [5]

Wyman here shifts from a descriptive perspective into a prescriptive or wishful one. Let us assume that those two individuals happen to have sex only with each other. If we describe this behaviour by saying that 'this couple is monogamous' (as couples of other species appear to be) we appeal to the same naturally occurring evaluation standard that 'this couple are married' fails to obtain. The couple might well be monogamous, and we will say that someone's denial of it (let's call him Sandor) is his subjective belief or personal opinion. Now, if Sandor gathers a group of people who share his belief that the couple has sex with others randomly or that it is promiscuous, his declaration that 'this couple is promiscuous' is still a subjective statement. As external, rational observers, we would consider it a shared fiction or an illusion those people have. However, Sandor's opinion begins to resemble the sense in which Wyman says that marriage is not a matter of subjective, personal opinion.

Let's now imagine that Sandor's group plays a game in which they seduce the couple, punish their restrained behaviour, discuss and celebrate their promiscuity in certain rituals. They might succeed in compelling the couple toward promiscuity. Would Wyman or Searle then affirm that the statement 'this couple is promiscuous' has become less subjective? Probably not. Indeed the game simply requires that these people's decisions and actions be consistent with its rules, but Sandor's belief remains subjective. The same is the case for the statement 'this couple is married', which requires refraining from seducing the couple, punishing them for their disloyalty and celebrating their cooperative union. Therefore, in order to avoid confusion, we must not say it is factual like the statement 'this couple is monogamous/promiscuous' is factual or appeals to an objective standard. Saying that marriage is factual obscures our understanding by adding a veneer of rationality to what are essentially prohibitions or commands to behave in one way or another.

Wyman contributes to what she calls the 'paradox of real fictions' by conflating natural standards of objectivity with cultural ones, in the same way as Searle above. She proposes that our emotional responses to fiction, such as when watching somebody who is frightened by a snake on film [5] (p. 179), say something about the objectivity of institutions: the person knows that the film is not real, yet her reaction says otherwise. Here, again, there is a distinction between these emotions and the feeling of being married. Serpent imagery is an old and widespread means to motivate people to participate in institutions, but snakes do not bite as the result of these institutional setups. Our emotions surrounding marriage may equally relate to the objective consequences that our participation or non-participation in it would entail, like we respond positively to apples and negatively to snakes in the environment. But these responses are not an argument for the institutional objectivity of marriage.

In sum, there is no 'middle ground' between subjective and objective knowledge where 'institutional facts sit' (p. 173) because institutions are prescriptive. Therefore, they are better referred to as 'shared fictions' [8] or 'prescribed imaginings' [9], which are sources that Wyman duly considers in her analysis.

3. Who says that you are married

As we have seen, not all games are playful. Morals and values can be understood as serious games that demand participation, and hence as a form of socialisation. In the same volume, Zlatev states the following:

While intersubjectivity is essentially a dyadic, subject-to-subject relation and does not presuppose a group-wide system of shared values, morality is clearly normative. [10] (p. 249)

That is, Wyman's use of a declaration such as 'this couple are married' is misleading due to its moral force. Had she chosen an amoral though still prescriptive declaration, its plain (inter)subjectivity would have been more evident. These types of statements could have included declarations such as 'this couple is promiscuous' or 'this couple is monogamous' in the games above, or even 'this piece of paper is money'. One does not have to accept the piece of paper as payment nearly as much as one is typically required to accept that people are married. This makes her understandably ambiguous:

we do not consider institutional facts to be ontologically subjective in any standard sense. This is most obvious in the instinctive knowledge that we cannot create, change, or nullify such facts, simply by changing our personal opinions about them (I cannot decide that you are 'no longer married', for instance). [5] (p. 180)

But:

If we organize to ban a particular religion or religious practice, we intend to negate the existence of whole institutions, not just the institutional facts that they generate. So, although we may rarely contemplate the fact that our institutional reality rests on collectively agreed status assignments that are normatively governed (though it seems significant that this too is possible in the human case), human social and political action indicates some grasp of the role of collective consent in maintaining it. (p. 181)

Indeed, our capacity to negate the existence of whole institutions implies that I can decide you are no longer married, and that our ‘instinctive knowledge that we cannot create, change or nullify’ such fact is only a matter of who exactly says that you are married, or how many say it. Perhaps the case of Sandor above is enough because he is very powerful. Like a religious follower, I can adapt to Sandor’s new reality together with other ‘children’, and be indifferent as to what other societies (perhaps in another galaxy) might believe about marriage. What is more, given greater incentives and power, we could take over and change marriage for those others, too, as has happened throughout history with this and other institutions.¹ This creative possibility exists regardless of its biological constraints and how unconsciously we may come up with different systems of marriage [11].

A close look at the previous example and similar writings reveals the linguistic character of such confusion. The writer seems cognitively confined to the boundaries of their own society or social aspirations referred to as ‘we’. Let us mark the distinction by capitalising these pronouns so that *We* or *Ourselves* refers to the speaker’s own society, potential society, or cultural perspective which she may be unaware of speaking from; and *we* or *ourselves* refers to those hereby addressed as researchers or external, objective observers. Saying ‘I cannot decide that you are no longer married’ therefore means that I am addressing Ourselves. Certainly, I cannot decide that another person is no longer married if I keep considering myself a member of a society where We believe in the institution of marriage. Similarly, I cannot decide that John Searle is not an ‘American citizen’ [6] (p. 31) if I keep considering myself a citizen of a country that acknowledges the existence of the United States of America.² But this changes if Our belief becomes weaker in me for whatever reason, if I leave such context and join a different Ourselves in some other culture, or if I become an external observer.

¹ ‘In its infancy the state fought an unceasing battle to restrict the absolute authority of the father who, within his own domain, had the physical power and the legal right to treat his wives and children as he pleased and even to dispose of them as he saw fit. The outcome of this struggle depended, as is the case in every combat, on the respective strength of the parties involved: in a strong state (as was the case in Babylonia during the periods of the Third Dynasty of Ur and the Hammurabi dynasty), the father's power was kept within limits; in a weak state (as was the case in Assyria, Syria and Palestine during the second millennium B.C.), the father's power was almost unlimited’ [23].

² To be more precise, my country would have to agree with calling his country ‘America’. In South America, people would ask him which country is he a citizen of exactly.

Thus, a genuinely objective perspective reveals the arbitrariness and subjectivity of institutions, regardless of what objective elements we use to support our sociocentric ‘objectivity’; and this is revealed as surely as do our observations of children who pretend play. There is, of course, no reason a piece of paper should be used as money or as a marriage certificate, or indeed no reason a couple should be married.

4. Morality as serious pretension

In *The Construction of Social Reality* [6], John Searle elaborates on the ‘constitutive rules’ that capture the ontological essence of institutions. These rules take the form of ‘object X counts as status Y in context C’. For example, a certain piece of paper counts as money in the context of a country. However, Searle distinguishes the ‘status function’ thereby ascribed to object X from ‘causal agentive functions’ because the latter build on features which, as he puts it, ‘guarantee the performance of the function’. Thus, a rock does a good job as a paperweight, whereas there is nothing in the physical piece of paper that might make it money.

With this distinction, Searle seems to make an exception of the status function, which is presumably more serious than a causal agentive function. Yet the idea that physical features ‘guarantee’ the function of an object, questionable as it is, provides greater support to the claim that X is a social fact. There may, for example, be nothing in a block to make somebody think of an apple, but they might declare it an apple because the two objects are about the same size. Searle seems to be in denial that institutional statuses build on physical features as well: geography tends to support the idea of a country; money has physical qualities, such as fungibility and scarcity, which facilitate its use as a medium of exchange and a store of value; marriage concerns individuals having some kind of sexual attributes, as does parenthood, which we shall discuss later. For these features give institutions the kind of compelling ‘objectivity’ that is here at issue. Indeed, following Wyman, a group of children who pretend that a stick is a carrot might have ‘an implicit understanding of the basic structure of constitutive rules’ [5]. That is, their declaration ascribes an *institutional* status to the stick that relates to its physical properties.

Still, such brute facts merely disguise the subjectivity of the claim that the block is an apple or the stick is a carrot. Adults do the same with the brute properties of money, countries, kin, or married people in the larger groups we call societies or cultures. None of those institutions can be ‘real’ without deriving this rational, objective status from somewhere. For example, some people

believe that monogamous marriage is real because they have ‘described’ human beings as monogamous and destined to marry ‘the right person’. In doing this, they take a further step from the children, who might give a boy and a girl the status of being married but are always able to stop pretending. We propose that this step involves self-deception, and that it provides us with an objective definition of morality. In this case, a moral concept arises out of the cognitive conflation of the natural concept of monogamy with the social concept of marriage, so that marriage appears natural. This makes morality pseudo-rational, if we understand rationality as the ability to describe what is real: the person ‘knows’ that someone ‘is married’ because they have deduced it somehow.

Morality is a linguistic socialisation device that creates an idealistic ‘social reality’ by conflating the natural concepts of descriptive statements (e.g. a monogamous animal) with the social concepts of prescriptive statements (a spouse). That is, the speaker conflates natural processes with human relations in an attempt to validate morals through appeals to reason, which gives a certain predictability to moral behaviour. This is why ancient myths feature anthropomorphic animals, children’s stories feature the Big Bad Wolf, and John Searle equates hunting hyenas to members of Congress. It is why marriage norms are typically justified through narratives that involve cosmic elements, including a snake in the Christian narrative. Moral language conflates the universality of rational considerations (snakes bite; hyenas hunt cooperatively) with a particular intersubjective space that is seen as the universe, as represented by Searle’s context C, a country, or the fictional setting of a film. The context is dropped in our minds: the country or the film are ‘real’ because it makes sense for hyenas to cooperate or for humans to be afraid of snakes in any context, though we are still in a certain context, sharing a constrained, deceptive representation of reality with certain others.

Thus, we can identify morality in the way Wyman refers to the ‘serious’ institutional practices of adults or to ‘respect’ [5]. Not only do we intuitively perceive the normative charge of those words, there is no specification between *adults* and *Adults* in those sentences (as in *we* versus *We* above): From whose perspective is a practice serious or respectful? To the average Euroamerican Adult, the rituals of hunter-gatherer cultures hardly look serious or respectful, and vice versa. Both of them feel morally compelled to participate in their respective institutions, but both adults also have the incentive to see things as they are. Both feel that they cannot cross the ‘line of stones’ [6] that demarcates their institutional reality, but both know deep down that they could cross it if they wanted. Wyman’s writing inadvertently crosses this line, moving between a natural and a cultural

perspective as if there was continuity between them, contributing to the problem it sets out to solve:

This analysis will try to deal with the fact that the way in which we[We] consider institutional facts (e.g. ‘this couple are married’) to be objective is quite different to the sense in which we consider natural facts (e.g. ‘Mount Everest is the highest mountain on earth’) to be objective. And it shows up most clearly in our sense that we can collectively intend to create, change, or nullify institutional facts, but not natural laws. It will also try to account for the fact that we[We] do not consider institutional facts to be ontologically subjective in any standard sense. [5]

Language appears to have evolved along with this confusion, which is why other authors speak of a co-evolution of language and morality in the same volume [3,10]. This is conspicuous in the linguistic notion of modality [12,13]. Modality reflects the existence of ambiguity as to whether the speaker describes or prescribes, for example, when speaking about possibilities. He might be describing that something is naturally the case for ourselves (e.g. ‘we can’t have random sex’) and others interpret that he is addressing Ourselves and prescribing Our behaviour (‘we ought to not have random sex’). This ambiguity is unnecessary, in principle, so its prevalence among different languages calls for an explanation.

A recent line of cognitive experiments reveals a constrained ability to mentally represent factual possibilities in connection with this linguistic phenomenon [14,15]. Whatever is shockingly immoral also seems physically impossible. The thinker is trapped by the pretend continuity between what is socially permissible and what is naturally permissible, even though she retains the ability to deliberate and escape this constrained representation, as moral pressures are lifted. This trap manifests not only in the way cultural norms become ‘serious’ in our everyday life, but also in our awareness of this very phenomenon:

Initiations into real adult practices may then entail a progressive de-emphasis of the play attitude, and an increasing grasp of the details and norms governing such interactions, that gradually conceals the way in which they are governed by social-conventional rules [5]

Wyman’s use of the term ‘real’ above is the same as that of ‘serious’ or ‘must be respected’

previously. It assumes the conclusion that there is reality and objectivity in institutions, and contradicts her own assertion (in the same sentence) that the situation is one of conventions in disguise. What is it that children rehearse when they engage in pretend play in Wyman's account—is it the consensual nature of institutions or their so-called objective, real or serious nature? These two options are clearly opposed, yet their conflation becomes persuasive and even passes as explanation:

As Wyman (Chapter 13) explains, collaborative pretence is the secret of institutional facts. What applies to sex and family life applies equally to economics and everything else: new entities emerge, internal to the particular game being played. Play capitalism, for example—and money, profit, mortgages, and interest seem perfectly real. [16]

Wyman does not provide an explanation so much as an observation, quoting Vygotsky, that collaborative pretence is made covert by the end of the developmental phase. No reasons are given as to why such reduced awareness would evolve. On the contrary, her observation suggests that there are strong biological incentives to repress the knowledge that those activities are consensual, as opposed to real, and that any pretension of objectivity or seriousness must result from such incentives.

These are most likely reproductive incentives. As we explain below, it is the purportedly objective entities of marriage and kinship that provide the ontological foundation for 'economics and everything else' so that the more basic biological interests are served. Certainly, the idea in the above quote that one may 'play capitalism' is an oxymoron, since any 'ism' is an adult, serious view of reality. Money, profit, mortgages, and interest only become 'perfectly real' because they are imbued with the pseudo-objective, moral quality of familial and sexual arrangements; and so they are everywhere issued and monopolised by nation-states, even if they need not be.

5. The real game of kinship

For any analysis of institutions to be ontological, it must begin with the most fundamental of institutions. Wyman's analysis fails to do this:

It is probably fair to say that most people—academics and *political* revolutionaries

aside—do not routinely contemplate the ontological basis of their institutional realities. (emphasis added)

To examine questions that are traditionally linked to religious or cosmological dogma, academics must perhaps see themselves as *moral* revolutionaries. One must deal with marriage and kinship because these institutions involve moral categories of permitted and forbidden sexual partners. Wyman touches upon this by discussing marriage, but eludes the ancient, anthropological fact of marriage as an arrangement mediated by parents and kin [11,17,18].

Generally speaking, the kinship system of a society is characterized by a certain relationship between vertical rules of descent and horizontal rules of alliance. As Allen [19] wrote:

We need only say that a recognizably human society needs some sort of marriage rule[horizontal] ... Societies seem always to have made some attempt to link new members of society with particular predecessors or categories of predecessors, and to have done so by building on the biological link between parents and children[vertical]

From a developmental perspective, it is clearly the vertical, filial rule that takes precedence. Children understand who their parents and close relatives are, and what kind of actions this requires, before they engage in pretend play with other children involving these or other social roles. For this game is presented to them as the most natural of things, ‘objectively’. For instance, when someone speaks to a child as ‘Mummy’ (e.g. ‘Mummy will change your nappies’) she conveys the institutional declaration ‘this person (herself) is your mother’ in the context of the family and society the child has been born into. Notice how these declarations are equivalent to Searle’s constitutive rules lacking any context C, in spite of kinship being a context-dependent institution. They are moral propositions, according to the definition of morality above and evident social strength.

The concepts of mother, father and other kin are thus characterised by the cognitive conflation of a particular intersubjective context with the universe. In other words, the social concept that prescribes these individuals’ parental function in a society is confused with the natural concept that describes them universally as having a biological attribute. For example, when a child asks, ‘Dad, where is your dad?’ the father might reply, ‘Dad is in heaven’ instead of ‘my dad is in

heaven'. This makes 'where is Dad?' an ambiguous address-reference of a father figure. In a society, there is an intersubjective space of individuals who are assigned the role of being kin (Dad, Father), which is conflated with the objective space of supposedly biological kin (my/your father). This linguistic conflation outlines a deceptive reality for a subset of the species. Likewise, Euroamerican people tend to discuss 'society', not *this society* or their respective society. We believe that there is only one Mother and one society (as 'We', following the notation above) while we remain relatively aware that there can be many of them.

Thus, we can understand the attribution of objectivity to the institution of marriage, in which kin terms acquire their legitimacy. The real, serious or moral character of Mother and Father appears first in crucial connection with the learning of the language, to be later recovered when the individual becomes an adult and uses more abstract, related terms such as *spouse*, *society*, *the nation* or *the economy*. The period in between can be seen as a rehearsal of the horizontal, contingent dimension of these cooperative alliances, which makes it possible to re-marry or migrate to another society, but not, for the most part, to change one's mother or father. This two-dimensional scheme is evolutionarily advantageous because it works along the vertical axis by harnessing reproductive resources, and along the horizontal axis by enabling cultural or technological development.

With these considerations in mind, we turn to Wyman's discussion of children's pretence and collective fiction [5]. As children, we do not play games where we rehearse institutional setups until they become objective in adulthood. Rather, we are born within such an objective setup in a society and learn to deconstruct it insofar as this is morally permissible. Children play normative games because the flexibility and awareness involved ultimately serves the rigid (but not unbreakable) moral scaffolding of a kinship system. This can be seen in how the games eventually become associated with power: sport, Barbie dolls, war, fashion. It is also what happens when we talk about having a certain function within a nation, or about a sports game as involving 'rights and obligations' [6] (p. 36): the sport ceases to be playful and its players become existentially identified with their roles due to the moral interpretation of the game. This explains the existential flavour of marriage, social contracts and constitutions, or the religious and mythical entities that underpin political practice. Without such a prescriptively 'objective' background, we would expect these games to be less dramatic, political systems to be as malleable and efficient as those that organise the crews of different ships, and the groups they outline to be more dynamic and sensitive

to the ecosystem. That is to say, an awareness of the ultimately playful nature of institutions would enable us to confidently and creatively transcend unnecessary constraints on our behaviour and thinking.

6. Conclusion and implications

Our different social realities are not real. They only appear to be real insofar as we are cognitively bound by morality. This goes hand in hand with the ambiguity of language around social meanings (e.g. that someone ‘cannot’ be unfaithful) versus natural meanings (that someone cannot fly). Such a limitation can be overcome through metalinguistic awareness, clear terminology, and an emphasis on the distinction between prescription and description. This would particularly affect the conceptualising efforts of linguistics, which are instrumental for the synthesis of disciplines we have suggested in this article. It also necessarily involves an awareness of how this phenomenon plays out in our personal lives and in the development of children.

The more important a norm is for a culture, the more it is presented as an unquestionable fact of the matter to children. This should immediately raise the researcher’s suspicion regarding any purported description of human sociality. Prescriptive declarations, though similar in form, are not the same thing as the principles through which we describe reality, and for which we propose the word is reserved (i.e. that there are no ethical or prescriptive ‘principles’, but ethical emotions, habits or rules). Unlike shared values, principles are not contingent on social context and we can confidently call them objective. To use Searle’s nomenclature, when we state that ‘apples are objects’ in the context of a world explained through the principle that ‘objects fall toward the ground’, or when we state that ‘Wendy is a mother’ in the context of a world where children are born by females, it is as if we dropped context C and declared apples and Wendy as having the universal status of ‘object’ and ‘mother’. It is therefore not coincidental that our fundamental descriptions of nature are called laws, because statements such as ‘objects fall to the ground’ or ‘children are born by females’ seem to have co-evolved with institutional, moral declarations. Yet in spite of their formal resemblance, the lack of social context when making rational propositions warrants a clear distinction between what is objective (the maternal instinct; human sociality) and what is merely subjective or intersubjective (being ‘Mum’; being in ‘society’).

Since we have all grown up within a kinship system, we share Wyman’s confusion regarding the objectivity of institutions and the developmental function of pretend play. However, it seems

quite maladaptive that our early pretensions were a way to rehearse a lack of awareness. In today's global world, we seem to be more aware of our social contexts than ever before. As children, we must have been engaged in a process of ethical development and practical discovery that challenged the pretend objectivity of our elders. This process enabled learning, invention, and horizontal competition or cooperation, while avoiding the extension of such playfulness to the vertical norms that govern sexuality, marriage and children with the arrival of puberty. It is easy to see how this two-dimensional scheme would have been selected for in terms of strict reproductive success, since it allows individuals to reap the benefits of a strategic, symbolic cooperation technology both at the ecological level where it pays to be conceptually flexible, and at the phylogenetic level where it does not pay.

The very successful systems of social reproduction that we observe [18], which have populated the earth with cultural and racial variation, are not so intelligent. Whichever way language got started, the power of a symbolic cooperation technology would have been readily seized by blind evolutionary forces. The existence and power of deception in nature and of self-deception in humans [20,21] must be taken into account by any comprehensive theory on the origins of language and the different realities it outlines. This applies especially to Sarah Hrdy's alloparenting theory [22]. Love and empathy are real, but they can coexist with an institutional love and empathy that ensure an offspring's loyalty to certain individuals and their group as an object of investment, and this would be more successful from a Darwinian perspective. A corollary to these considerations would be an explanation of why the result of such a cooperative breeding system was not so cooperative, beneficial or stable; why our close relationships are so ambivalent and our psychology so complex; what we try to communicate through the mysteries of art, myth and mental illness; why our babies cry as they do, and why we seem to suffer without reason.

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