The nature of kinship: From dad and mum to god and society

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Abstract: Why do we call our parents mother and father? Why do we call ourselves these general words as parents? These personal questions have not sufficiently drawn the attention of linguists and psychologists, yet any account of language and human cognition must be able to provide a good answer. Indeed, our minds have evolved and develop in a social setting that is primarily governed by norms of kinship. This article demonstrates how those norms encapsulate the relationship between language and reality, individual and society. It suggests that the use of kin terms is characterised by a linguistic conflation of address and reference that corresponds to a cognitive conflation of social and natural concepts. This analysis rests on a biological view of language and human sociality. From this grounded perspective, I integrate findings across the behavioural sciences. I argue that myth has a basis in child-directed speech, and that child-directed speech is a means of socialisation, not so much a means to help children learn to speak or relate to others. I also discuss the theoretical issues that result from this lack of metalinguistic awareness, issues that go back to the beginnings of philosophy. Because the concept of kin combines nature and nurture, yet nature is prior to nurture, understanding the nature of this concept elucidates central problems, from the origin of societies to the current questioning of gender and parenting roles.

Keywords: child-directed speech, language, socialisation, self-deception, definition of morality, natural concepts, social concepts

1. Introduction

Our relationships to close kin are filled with emotions related to the use of language. I personally would have trouble calling my parents anything other than Mum and Dad in certain contexts. Yet why is there such a need to emphasise that they are my parents? When I was a child we had a dog called Mileva. There was no question that she was a dog and our pet, so we did not call her Dog or Pet but gave her a special name.

Kinship has this kind of uncertain relationship with reality, as epitomised by the tragedy of Oedipus. This might explain the lack of scientific attention to its cognitive aspects.[1] There is, however, a growing curiosity as to why human beings should use kin terms instead of personal names [1-3]. There is also a questioning of why mothers or fathers should be female or male, or why people should be labelled according to sex, a practice that many consider disrespectful [4,5]. Such a focus on sex is puzzling because being labelled a parent indicates a definite reproductive role, not only a form of identity. We have a more difficult relationship with the kind of biological label that is less talked about. To use my own example, imagine addressing your father by his proper name when you would otherwise say 'Dad'. Now picture calling your dog, 'Dog, come here!' Neither of these uses seems very appropriate, yet this is so for wildly opposed reasons: respect is shown to the (supposedly) more respectable one through the kind of term that disrespects the less respectable one.

It is indeed widely acknowledged by sociolinguists that rules of address are very important and carry a strong emotional content. The present article offers a comprehensive explanation by making a key observation. Consider again the word *dad* in the case of a father called Jack. This

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[1] I could not find any formal research despite having communicated with important authors. A popular science website was similarly unsuccessful [2] and had to contact experts directly. I address their answers in section 2. In 'Developmental Sociolinguistics: Child Language in a Social Setting', Johanna DeStefano [48] noted 'a growing awareness of the interaction between society and language' in connection with a 'sociolinguistic awareness' or 'metalinguistic awareness' in children and adults alike. Over 40 years later, the field of developmental sociolinguistics remains 'relatively under-researched' [49]. The book Language in Cognitive Development: The Emergence of the Mediated Mind [50] refers to a dialogue 'with Father' (p. 140) supposedly meaning the father of the child who was the object of study. The same ambiguous use of kin terms is a common occurrence throughout the scientific literature.

word can be used both as a form of address ('Dad, are you there?') and a term of reference ('I saw Dad at the bar') without any formal alteration (not 'I saw a/our/the dad at the bar') in the same way as a proper noun ('I saw Jack at the bar'). By contrast, the word *child* is not normally used to address children, and in referring to them it becomes a common noun ('she had a child', not 'she had Child'). This asymmetry reflects a distinction between the intersubjective context in which we address and refer to 'Dad' and the objective context in which we talk about parents and children. However, the words *dad* and *child* allude to a natural relation between two individuals, as do *sire* and *pup* in the case of wolves. In explaining these interactions, we speak of types of individuals who have biological traits (e.g. 'dads/sires are very protective of their children/pups'). Thus, the lack of formal distinction in the case of *dad* registers a conflation of the social or cultural context in which he is 'Dad' with the natural context in which he is a dad.

This analysis suggests a special cognitive property of kin terms. Namely, 'Dad' expresses a concept, 'the father', that lies between the social concept of Jack and the natural concept of father. Linguists have identified a similar property in what they call vocative expressions. For example, 'Mr. President' means that one talks to 'the president', an individual who is talked about as a president. But kin terms go beyond social convention through their biological or quasi-biological character. Imagine a speaking pup calling 'Mum'; the particular individual that the pup addresses is the same as that it confusingly references through a *natural* category of individual. In a busy playground, this ambiguity can make it hard to tell which mother is being called, if any particular mother at all. In fact, children sometimes 'overextend' these words beyond specific individuals [6] (p. 137), in the same way as a child can 'have' more than one mother and one father in different societies. In recent years, linguistic anthropologists have favoured a view of kinship that integrates both qualities, performativity and structure, which have divided anthropologists in the past [1]. This duality between imagination and reality exists across many areas of knowledge, and can be explained by examining the genesis of kin terms in child-directed speech.

2. Baby talk

The distinctive way in which young children are spoken to is called child-directed speech (CDS) or baby talk. Researchers point to aspects of phonology, vocabulary, morphology and difference from adult-directed speech as its characteristics [6] (p. 88). Their basic assumption is that this form of speech helps children acquire social and language skills. Studies on cultures that do not use

CDS, so understood, seem to falsify the claim that it is a human universal. In these cultures, language is not directed 'toward the child as information processor' and yet the children become fluent speakers on time [7]. However, the fact that members of a distant, traditional culture who cannot understand English are still able to recognise CDS in English [8] suggests that the phenomenon is species-wide. In this light, it seems incorrect to define it as a means to help the child speak and relate to others.

CDS is more accurately understood as a means to socialise, that is, to make the child behave in an acceptable manner and so become a member of a society. In talking to children, the speaker conflates the concept of a situated, particular interlocutor (such as himself) with that of a general, natural one. The child then internalises the speaker's perspective as if it were objectively that of 'nature', much in the way bedtime stories and myths reflect the perspective of anthropomorphic animals who have kinship roles. Indeed, even the individualistic interactions of modern Euro-american families preserve the custom of talking to-about people in this pseudo-natural sense. Parents may use *you* and *me* with their children but these second-person pronouns invoke third persons. For example, Jack might ask his son: 'Do you want me[Daddy] to take care of you while Mummy is sick?' Even if we assume that Jack is asking a genuine question, he is still going to take the child for a walk as part of a certain narrative.

These familiar psychological effects can be tested by putting oneself in the position of the child. A stranger or friend who approached the scene (let's call her Sally) would validate the narrative, for example, by adding 'poor Daddy, he surely would rather have a free day, but Mummy needs a day off' (fig. 1). With this, Sally does not mean her own parents, but the child's, though the lack of distinction is telling. She refers to Jack from the child's perspective in order to demonstrate that the child ought to interact with 'Daddy' instead of Jack. In turn, this causes Jack to feel addressed and referred to (or spoken to-about) as Sally does in her role as a non-parent in that situation, or as a parent or child in another (e.g. while discussing Dad's health with her siblings). The use of biological categories suggests that the narrative should apply to all parents and children, and that the occasional use of personal names or pronouns should be a part of it. CDS thus works to promote a basic hierarchical norm, especially in the eyes of the developing child, who might be less able to question it. As Fleming & Slotta have shown, this norm exists across cultures, together with the avoidance and even taboo of personal names [3].

This way of conflating address and reference reflects a confusion of what is particular with

what is universal, or what is concrete with what is abstract. Studies report that CDS sentences favour concrete, situated referents along with the child's interest in family members, animals or food [6] (p. 82). In these sentences, subjects are also agents or doers (i.e. 'Daddy changes your nappy' not 'Daddy is handsome'). However, when using kin terms instead of personal names, elders do not refer to themselves as individual doers but as categories of doers. That is, elders do not describe events but narratives or behaviour guided by abstract principles, such as that parents want the best for their children. This kind of explanatory activity is relatively unconscious and self-deceptive. For instance, an infant mental health specialist comments that parents avoid using the personal pronouns *I* and *you* because they are 'too abstract and it's somewhat confusing to kids' and that this is to 'help their children learn the role names and also to indicate the relationship, "mommy *and me*"' [2]. Yet the opposite is the case. The pronouns *I* and *you* indicate a direct relation between self and a specific individual, unlike the learning of roles. Mixing the pronoun *me* with the common noun *mommy* does not indicate a relationship between roles either, but between self and a role. The self is primarily situated and biological, whereas the role is abstract and cultural. CDS seems rather to build a disembodied, metaphysical view of the self.

Deception is omnipresent in nature, and self-deception can be an effective, efficient means of deception [9,10]. The last 50,000 years have been a period of accelerated, culturally-led evolution that has created numerous societies and caused a population explosion [11]. During this period, human reproduction has been mediated by parents and kin in marriage practices that are possibly older than 50,000 years [12]. It is therefore likely that self-deception did not evolve from a selective pressure to deceive other adults but to deceive developing children. For instance, in the two cultures studied by Ochs & Schieffelin, elders direct their speech 'toward the child' by talking to themselves and/or others [7]. Kaluli infants are addressed and address others through the mother, who speaks as if she were the infant and the infant were a competent speaker. Whereas in the case of the Samoans, the child is mainly talked about by elders who expect him to adapt to their role-based hierarchical relations. He reaches for an object and is shamed 'who are you?' meaning 'not someone to do that'. The use of *I* and *you* is vicarious, as elders project their identities on the child. Both societies practice a form of implicit CDS because they seem to value maturity and assertiveness, the former by emphasising the act of address and the latter the act of reference.

The incest taboo is a related and well established cultural universal [13,14]. This taboo is not so much a prohibition of sexual relations with biological relatives, which is sometimes permitted

and even encouraged, but one concerning relations with culturally defined relatives. This has been a confusing paradox for anthropologists, perhaps because it suggests that the roles of parents and kin involve hidden sexual intentions, in the same way as if someone rejects bags labelled as 'drugs' but can be found consuming drugs. The same is suggested by the existence of avoidance versus joking relations and even prescribed obscenity [15,16]. Bednarik provides substantial evidence of what he calls an 'unintended self-domestication' in an archaeological, genetic and physiological context [17]. His work on cultural and cognitive aspects does not discuss incest, marriage or kinship, yet the 'numerous physiological features of human neoteny' (ibid.) point to the origin of self-domestication in attitudes toward children.

Domestication can at least be seen in the way baby talk resembles or is identical with pet talk. In a noteworthy study, Ferguson found that the early form of CDS (what may be called infant-directed speech) was directed at pets as well as infants in a wide sample of six languages [18]. These results stand in contrast with a view of CDS as a form of help or accommodation. Obviously, one does not expect a dog to learn to speak. One does expect it, however, to be an acceptable part of the home. This is not a passive expectation but a prescription involving ambivalent feelings of love and hatred. For example, in Western culture, both children and pets are shown affection and antipathy through terms of endearment such as 'honey', which would show disrespect if uttered by the child. This asymmetry is a basis for much symbolism in popular culture and pornography; remarkably, 'who's your daddy?' [19] and the address of romantic partners as 'baby'. Sadomasochistic role playing may involve CDS, as well as the practice of ageplay [20,21]. These activities suggest a play with the seriousness of reproduction that has a basis in language, highlighting the relevance of psychoanalysis [22,23].

All in all, CDS is a means of socialisation that manipulates biological concepts, such as those of father and dog, to create a confusion between what is cultural and what is natural. This view does not imply a condemnation of CDS any more than it is a condemnation of deception in animals, or a lack of recognition of the ethical dimension of our close relationships. Nevertheless, *child*-directed speech, as the term indicates, is more realistically seen as the means through which kin terms and their associated norms become a dominant part of our minds. The positive features of CDS could be studied under a term that includes anyone for whom ordinary speech is challenging (e.g. people in psychiatric care, the elderly) and excludes pets.

3. Address–reference

Talking is an intrinsically social activity that involves some kind of collective awareness. There is always an element of reference in a form of address insofar as the term which indicates whom I am talking to has a meaning that can be talked about. Correspondingly, a sign or a sentence does not simply refer to something without addressing an actual or potential audience that can interpret its meaning, from a single interlocutor to all human beings.

In order to define these concepts clearly, it is useful to differentiate between description and prescription [24]. Suppose I state the following: 'mothers pick up their crying babies'. If my intention is descriptive, it does not really matter whom I am talking to. My description only *refers* to an observable fact or pattern of behaviour that I consider natural, independent of cultural context or the desires of people. However, if I am prescribing, then it is clear that I am *addressing* mothers and expect them to cooperate by picking up their crying children. This distinction is valid even in a non-human context. Animal calls can be seen as a non-linguistic way of addressing others, who are warned about the presence of something because this will 'prescribe' or prompt a behaviour that is mutually beneficial. Alarm calls, for instance, are individually indiscriminate, though they are still 'addressed' at those who are capable of interpreting them. Chimpanzee food calls have also been found to be indiscriminate [25], though some research shows that they can be directed at specific members of the group [26].

Hence, reference and address, description and prescription, appear together but are not necessarily conflated. When hominids began to communicate indirectly through symbols, it was referring to things not immediately present, as I am doing by writing this text. In this research context, my intention is not to tell anyone what to do. It is, however, unlikely that primitive people described the world in this unattached way. A certain representation of how people and things 'are' must have implied the prescription that people and things *be* that way. A well-coordinated group would enact this symbolic representation and talk about whether others cooperate or not, a gossip whose primary aim is also prescriptive. This form of speech involves the logical propositions I call *social rules*, namely, descriptions of a desired state of the world which address the group of cooperators who will create and maintain such a state. These can be the contingent rules of explicit games (e.g. the goalkeeper catches the ball); or more ambiguous social 'facts' (policemen catch criminals); or they can describe behaviours that overlap with natural patterns or instincts (mothers pick up their crying babies). In this way, the act of address becomes subordinate to the act of

reference; that is, individuals are addressed because of how they are referenced as having a role in these games. To follow the same examples, the addressed individual interprets: 'I catch the ball because I am the goalkeeper'; 'I catch criminals because I am a policeman'; and 'I pick up my crying baby because I am a mother'.

4. Moral address-reference

> HYPPOLYTUS. Entrust your cares to my ears, mother.
> PHAEDRA. The name of 'mother' is proud and too powerful; a more humble
> name is more appropriate to our feelings. Call me 'sister', Hippolytus, or 'maid-
> servant', preferably 'maidservant': I would bear any slavery. [27] (p. 110)

The origin of human kinship, if not that of language, is probably in the usefulness of classifying individuals for purposes of collective reproduction [14,28,29]. This means to prescribe a state of activity in the manner of social rules, but in a context of lifetimes. That is, because reproduction is not a game or contingency, the categories involved would have to be natural, unlike 'goalkeeper', 'policeman' or 'maidservant'. As each generation teaches the next to fill these roles, the phylogenetic tree is effectively prescribed.

According to Allen, 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' [30]. Being addressed in this way, therefore, means much more than being identified with a role. It means feeling that I naturally *am* the role and that I follow natural laws when behaving as kin. This assignment entails a conflation of description and prescription, reference and address, or natural and social concepts. I shall refer to this phenomenon as *morality*, which I distinguish from ethics or ethical behaviour [24]. Moral norms can be scientifically understood as pseudo-natural principles that build on social rules by confusing cultural play with natural phenomena. These pseudo-principles outline an 'objective' social world or 'social reality': a constrained, deceptive mental representation of reality that restricts individual choice. They harness the explanatory power of our minds for the organisation of conduct, making individuals feel as though it is impossible to violate moral norms [31,32]. This is why debating reality (or indeed whether people are real fathers, mothers, relatives or spouses) is usually accompanied by intense emotions. Like ancient mythology, the roles assigned to different individuals are identical to natural functions which 'cannot' be broken.

Morality is thus pseudo-rational. It makes an explanation of the workings of nature indistinct from an explanation of the workings of a society, enabling prophecy and destiny. Myth would seem to combine natural and social elements precisely for this reason. Notably, Alan Barnard, who has studied hunter-gatherers in southern Africa and the extinct language /Xam, writes about the myth called 'The son of the Mantis, the baboons, and the Mantis':

> The "people" of /Xam mythology are not really people either, but semidivine, semihuman characters who are in fact portrayed as insects, mammals, and other creatures. The baboons are collective, but the mythical animals[who are given human kinship roles] *are individual even though represented by a species name.* The same is true in many other mythological systems throughout the world. [28] (emphasis and comment added)

It is not necessary to command a child to marry if they can be made participant in a myth where the behaviour of being married is naturally expected of them, or where deviance from such a behaviour 'logically' entails terrible, cosmic consequences. Command is, nevertheless, strongly implied by the fact that particular individuals are addressed and assigned roles.

This assigning of roles has received academic attention at the intersection of psychology and sociology in what is called membership categorisation analysis [33]. Harvey Sacks originally focused on the expression 'the baby cried, the mommy picked it up', noting that it lacks any formal way of telling what is nevertheless obvious to members of the same culture: namely, that the categories of *mommy* and *baby* are linked so that the expression refers to the mother of *that* baby. The way in which those categories are 'inference-rich' (p. 75) resonates with the present notion of human groups as pseudo-rationally organised through a moral use of language. Besides, it evidences the conflation of address and reference insofar as an utterance like 'the baby is crying' is an address to the same mother, which is not formally obvious either. Thus, one may also be called a woman or a man, and provided the context is moral, there would be no difference as to what is being invoked: a view of reality in which Woman and Man's actions are rationally ascertainable and natural. In such a reality, someone's cries are equivalent to the act of reference 'the baby cries, the mommy picks it up', followed by the referent attending their needs. And if the referent fails to respond, this is seen as a shocking violation of reality, in the same way as if one is called a woman or spouse but does not behave like one.

Empirical research in moral psychology confirms that morality has a constraining effect on cognition that relates to the use of language [31,32]. It suggests that maturity brings an increased ability to deliberate and contemplate possibilities. That is, when a person begins to question the reality of institutions like marriage and kinship, she gains an awareness of their subjectivity [24]. To follow the same example, a female could find a psychotherapist who helps her with motherhood, so she can find what feels natural after being assigned the moral roles of Child, Woman and Mother throughout her life [34]. As illustrated in section 2, this assignment is part of a discourse justifying how people are of a certain gender, engage in courtship, reproduce, and raise children in a society. The narrative may be Western and secular, yet in it the child addresses each parent as she addresses God in the Christian narrative (fig. 2). Indeed, the term *God* functions in the same way as *Father* (see section 1). We say 'God, why have you forsaken me' (address) and 'give praise to God' (reference). We do not say 'god, why have you forsaken me' and 'give praise to the god' as if this were a particular god. The latter forms of address and reference are, of course, forbidden for Christians, but we do not tend to acknowledge that 'give my regards to the father' is forbidden when it is Father or Dad we mean.

5. Philosophy as baby talk

> The use of general terms is not to enable a man to *reason*, but to enable him to reason *well*. They fix the steps of our progress … and are marks of direction, to which we can return; without them, we should be like travellers, journeying on an immense plain, without a track, and without any points on the sky, to determine whether we were continuing to move east or west, or north or south.

> —Thomas Brown, *Lectures on the philosophy of the human mind* [35] (p. 350)

The biblical act of creation is an act of name giving: in the beginning there was the word, and the word was God; then God gave Adam the power to name all living creatures. This might be why the rejection of God in the Enlightenment came with a theoretical focus on language. It is not clear if Adam Smith was an atheist, and he is not known for his views on language either, though they must have been important to him because he had them published as an appendix to his popular *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The monograph, titled 'Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages' [36], begins by discussing the case of 'savages', a primordial people

who negotiate the words they will use to denote the only tree and cave (and fountain) they have ever known. Upon finding entities that closely resemble the tree and the cave, the savages proceed to extend the application of those words.

At this point, however, Smith equates that presumably natural context to the cultural context in which children are *taught* to know only one father and one mother:

> And thus, those words, which were originally the proper names of individuals, would each of them insensibly become the common name of a multitude. A child that is just learning to speak, calls every person who comes to the house, its papa or its mama; and thus bestows upon the whole species those names which it had been taught to apply to two individuals (p. 438)

This strange argument reflects the classical problem of universals. For Aristotle, the universals of treeness and caveness are originally instantiated in particular trees and caves, as opposed to existing in the Platonic world of forms. The savages effectively give the tree and the cave the proper names *Tree* and *Cave* before turning them into common names. Smith finds justification in this Aristotelian idea, so he corrects the child for its Platonic tendency to begin with common names. He then continues with a passage of ambiguous terminology, which I clarify in brackets:

> I have known a clown, who did not know the proper name of the river which run by his own door. It was *the river*[It was *River*], he said, and he never heard any other name for it. His experience, it seems, had not led him to observe any other river. The general word *river*, therefore, was, it is evident, in his acceptance of it, a proper name,[!] signifying an individual object. If this person had been carried to another river, would he not readily have called it a river[have called it River]?

Smith's beginning with 'the river' hints at the assumption of his own conclusion, as does 'its papa or its mama' instead of 'Papa or Mama' in the previous quote. That is, the expression 'the river' denotes a unique instance of a general word; it is not a proper name. He attributes the mistaken use of this word as a proper name to the clown, where his own use contradicts the concept of proper name. At the end of the quote, Smith could have written that the clown would not 'readily have called it *River*', for the sake of consistency, or at most *a River*; but instead he writes 'a river' to contrive the general word. He goes on:

Could we suppose any person living on the banks of the Thames so ignorant, as not to know the general word *river*, but to be acquainted only with the word *Thames*, if he was brought to any other river, would he not readily call it *a Thames*?

Now Smith has used a proper name, Thames, though he equivocates through his avoidance of how this name actually functions. We say *the Thames* or *the river Thames* because it is already known to be an instance of a river. We do not say that we go 'to Thames', whereas we say that we go to London. Similarly, we say that we go to Mexico, not that we go to 'the mexico' or to a particular instance of 'a mexico':

> The Spaniards, when they first arrived upon the coast of Mexico … cried out, that
> it was another Spain. Hence it was called New Spain

The Spaniards did not arrive at a general word like the clown in the previous analogy, but gave the country the proper name *New Mexico*. Smith's transition from the situated concepts of Cave and Tree all the way to the abstraction of Country (a 'motherland' or a 'fatherland' for many) reveals a confusion rooted in kinship.

In my personal life most people call me Jose, including my biological daughter. However, when she was two years old, she would sometimes call other men or pictures of similar-looking men *Jose*. Children who utter their first words perhaps do the same as the clown; they do not baptise other men as New Jose or New Daddy but merely try to identify natural categories. This might reward parents who drop their proper names in favour of common ones, but not if they have to labour to get their children to understand that those nouns are simultaneously proper, a sort of proper-common noun for an individual that one talks to-about. In section 2, I discussed how these efforts are shared even by strangers, in order to make moral norms appear as natural laws. This was surely the case also in Aristotle's days:

> Now what is to us plain and obvious at first is rather confused masses, the elements
> and principles of which become known to us later by analysis … Similarly a child
> begins by calling all men "father", and all women "mother", but later on
> distinguishes each of them (Arist., Phys I.1, 184a22-b11, trans. Hardie and Gaye).

Note how Aristotle makes it sound as though children naturally discover who their parents are, where Adam Smith wrote that they are taught. Because they conflate description and prescription, these thinkers find a solution to the problem of universals and the problem of meaning, respectively, in the norm of *addressing* one's parents, that is, in the particular. Yet the fact that my daughter now distinguishes me as Jose has obviously nothing to do with Aristotle's 'elements and principles'. Aristotle has simply inverted his teacher's doctrine and used a cultural norm as a naturalistic argument. In making the same analogy, Plato would say that calling 'all men "father", and all women "mother"' is a *reference* to those universals, which appear among the lucidity (not the 'confused masses') of early cognition. Either way, if it is morally required that the names of particular individuals be words that invoke a universal, then finding the essence of universals in those names is begging the question.

Indeed, the use of common nouns to denote specific individuals is a cultural formality that is mistaken for knowledge. We speak of the 'knowledge' that people are 'really' married and that their children are legitimate [24]. Thus, modern theoretical constructions often inherit Aristotle and Plato's metaphysical assumptions. For example, in 'The psychological representation of modality', Phillips & Knobe [31] regard 'particles can't go faster than the speed of light' as a formal statement, thereby categorising it along with moral statements in their psychological experiments. Expectedly, then, these researchers find a strong correlation between the mental representation of physical and moral possibilities. Yet what is probably occurring is not that their experimental subjects display a knowledge and understanding of particle physics; they merely respond in the same normative sense as they might respond that a married person 'cannot' be unfaithful. In other words, they are not supposed to tell the experimenter that something can travel faster than light, just as they are not supposed to commit an immorality. Similarly, some linguists understand the child's development of word meaning as adherence to what they call a 'mature semantic system' [6] (p. 139). This is even if the business of classifying objects is the ongoing work of scientists. Biologists now teach us that a platypus is an egg-laying mammal and not a bird, unlike the penguin, but they could say something else in the future. Does this mean that the parents of today might be making 'category errors' (ibid.)?

Such a formal, sociocentric view of knowledge creates double-standards. For instance, if a child calls two different coats *coat*, this is an instance of 'extension', but if she calls a different person *papa*, this is an instance of 'overextension' [6] (p. 137). When examining how children

extend words, developmental linguists do not seem to distinguish between prescription and description, or between nurture and nature, however interrelated the two concepts may be. A father (nurture) is a man who changes nappies and talks about the speed of light only in some families; whereas a tree, a penguin, or even the objects we label and use as coats (nature) might not have anything to do with those social arrangements. In a family, it is important to identify individuals through proper names, and not so important to identify single trees, penguins or coats. Yet because researchers mistake nurture for nature, they interpret the normative error of calling a different individual *daddy* as an epistemic error. For example, the study 'Early Semantic Representations and Early Word-Usage' treats the words *daddy* and *Adam* as proper names [37] (p. 64). The arbitrary idea that somebody's name is Adam, then, becomes knowledge: he must be identified correctly as 'Adam'. Effectively, he is 'an adam'. In the same way, I am 'a jose', and by narrowing this concept to me only, my daughter has presumably acquired knowledge. In this light, the fact that children eventually arrive at good enough distinctions might not be that they have solved a major philosophical problem, 'word meaning' [38], but simply that they are not philosophers in the conventional sense of the word.

My proposal therefore contrasts with previous approaches in that it examines a personal and no less important aspect of meaning. Children learn the meaning of words because they do the same as biologists: they endeavour to understand and not simply formalise what is 'a jose' versus 'a man'. This implies overcoming the moral constraints on their ability to conceptualise. which can be displaced the more advanced formalities such as the notion of Man. Morality exerts that cognitive pressure by conflating two basic functions of concepts: 1) the mental representation of particular objects in the environment, such as a friendly man or his favourite coat, and 2) the explanatory representation of objects in relation to other objects, such as the concept of human being or coat. The moment a word is used to identify a special object in the environment, it cannot function as a concept in the second sense anymore. We develop a rigid concept of those we associate with, like a man called Jose or a penguin called Adam; whereas we use flexible concepts when we describe them as belonging to the human species or not. In other words, our social lives require *social concepts*, whereas apprehending reality requires *natural concepts*. Kin terms conflate these two types of concepts, denoting a special individual or group as well as an explanatory category. This causes a tendency toward formal, rigid conceptualisations in any area of knowledge, combined with a belief in prescriptive, pseudo-natural categories such as a gender

identity, an ethnic group, or Society.

The concepts of society and individual are treated in this moral sense even in a scientific context. For example, a book titled *Sociocultural Systems: Principles of Structure and Change* [39] uses 'society' as a proper noun throughout, which does not indicate an objective perspective on human societies. The same is the case in politics and philosophy as a matter of course. 'Society' provides political recognition to 'the individual' and functions like a term of kinship in English and other languages (fig. 2). Picture someone like Thomas Jefferson, for the sake of argument, when he was in Paris during the days of the French Revolution. This man refers to the different societies of the United States and France as 'society' in the same way a child calls different women 'Mother'. He advocates a single normative setting 'for the benefit of society', not for the particular society in which he happens to be. His utterances bear the same ambiguity as calling a friend a parent when one is surrounded by other parents (fig. 1). As section 2 discusses, this form of self-deceptive speech has a socialising function. I have personally known of children who, in the presence of their own mothers, have corrected strangers because they are facing the wrong person when calling 'Mum':

> Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of *society* as a whole cannot override … For just as it is rational for one man to maximize the fulfillment of his system of desires, it is right for *a society* to maximize the net balance of satisfaction taken over all of its members … Whether men are free is determined by the rights and duties established by the major institutions of *society* [40] (emphasis added)

Society appears to have the kind of ambivalent feelings that characterises pet talk. According to Rawls, society respects the individual, but if this means that he will be free, then society cannot allow it. It is also not clear who or what those entities really are. The word *κοινωνία* means 'society', 'community', 'communion' and even 'sexual intercourse' in different translations of ancient Greek. Conversely, the word *πόλις* (polis) has been translated as 'city-state', 'state', 'country' and 'society'. Consider, for instance, the following passages:

if the earlier forms of society[κοινωνία] are natural, so is the state, for it is the end of them (Aristot. Pol. 1.1252b, trans. Jowett)

And when they shall have finished producing children according to the laws, if the man have sexual intercourse[κοινωνῇ] with a strange woman, or the woman with a man, while the latter are still within the procreative age-limit, they shall be liable to the same penalty as was stated for those still producing children. (Plat. Laws 6.784e, trans. Bury)

Philosophy becomes an advanced form of baby talk, a persuasive pseudo-rational discourse that advocates a single authority and society. Echoing the Bible, 'in the beginning' there was Plato and Aristotle, who confused *their society* with nature and even with the human body:

the state is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part; for example, if the whole body be destroyed, there will be no foot or hand, except in an equivocal sense (Aristot. Pol. 1.1253a, trans. Jowett)

Based on this unifying abstraction, Plato and Aristotle drew their own view of a single creator away from the multiple deities of Greek mythology. This innovation accompanied a period of great cultural expansion. What had once been a bunch of dispersed tribes became a single empire, a model for many subsequent attempts at taking over the world. The Enlightenment, too, brought with it founding fathers and the greatest empire in history. The revolution of the Enlightenment, however, had the effect of replacing theology and philosophy with a scientific worldview. By the 20th Century, the analyticity of Plato and Aristotle had been relegated to the study of language, which was, in a way, the last hope of philosophy to arrive at the essence of things. Still, Wittgenstein famously concluded his Tractatus by writing that it was itself meaningless [41], and he would go on to write that philosophy is 'a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (p. 87).

As Hurford points out, this confusion arises because philosophers cling to the anti-biological, transcendental notion of a direct connection between language and reality [42] (ch. 1). And it is no accident that it has been a conflicting notion, involving those who believe in a definite natural connection, as Wittgenstein firstly did, against those who prefer the later Wittgenstein's belief in

cultural actors.[2] For the meaning of a kin term actually conflates both beliefs. As thinkers, we tend to engage in these metaphysical conflicts, in which we favour one or the other view of reality, because our ability to tell society from nature is morally constrained from the moment we begin to think. In other words, the meaning of meaning divides us because we confuse it with the prescriptive 'meaning' that we seek in our lives, and that we saw in our parents as developing children. Thus, Ludwig Wittgenstein was countered by Bertrand Russell, whose individualism and atheism clashed with the former's religiosity. How did they address their parents? The same question could be asked of Sigmund Freud, who explored the familial and sexual origins of these tendencies. Freud still defended a moral view of Western society/sexuality against Franz Boas, the 'cultural relativist' [44]. These personal disagreements continue today, though we are in a better position to understand them.

6. Conclusion

Human kinship involves the practice of calling relatives by names and nicknames that mean they are relatives. This puzzling activity is central to the study of our intelligent species. In this article, I have proposed an explanation through a view of morality that integrates anthropology, linguistics, psychology and biology: morality is a self-deceptive means of socialisation that creates an institutional, 'social reality' [24]. Hence, I propose that the humane, cooperative aspects of our relations to parents and kin be labelled *ethical* instead of moral. For thousands of years, human beings have been born into a social setting in which kin terms are used to establish the 'knowledge' of who our relatives are (social concepts) and what they 'rationally' must do (natural concepts). When using this moral form of speech, we are not referring to individuals in all their complexity and humanity; we are only invoking those deterministic roles, maintaining a state of activity that has a certain evolutionary inertia.

An accurate view of this practice rests on a clear, ecological distinction between prescription

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[2] The manifestations of this dichotomy are numerous. Wittgenstein's analytic philosophy itself is opposed to continental philosophy; naturalism opposes social constructionism, just as the 'biological' sciences oppose the cultural ones. These disagreements can all be reduced to a conflict around the fallacy that what is 'natural' is good, which is an effect of language. For an empiricist like Saussure, the signified was good, so he considered it natural and above the conventional signifier (s/S), whereas a rationalist like Lacan inverts this relationship (S/s). Saussure affirms the existence of the man who is 'Father', whereas Lacan affirms the 'Name of the Father' [43].

and description. On the one hand, there are statements that intend to determine reality ('mothers pick up their crying children'), and on the other hand, statements that intend to explain reality ('mothers [appear to] pick up their crying children'). This enables us to see the difference between referring to someone in society (as Mum) versus referring to them in reality (as Sally). In turn, we can see the conflation of those two intentions in speech: When an individual refers to 'Mum' (as in 'Mum picked up the child'), he has the illusion of a direct communication with Sally within the common mind of 'society' or 'God'. And when he addresses Sally as 'Mum' (wanting to be picked up), he refers to her from the same illusory perspective, playing the part of the child. In both cases, he morally prescribes Sally's behaviour by pretending that the behaviour is natural. It begins in child-directed speech, such as when Sally says 'come on, give Grandma a kiss' because she would be frowned upon for using her mother's personal name. And it extends to the complex worlds of myth, or to the religious and secular narratives that outline our different cultures.

Our only objective view of human existence is currently that of biology and its theory of evolution. The reason for our propensity to confuse ourselves and create different subjective realities must be that our genes have so far endured within them. Indeed, humans are the only primates that can coordinate their behaviour and plan for the future through signs and symbols [42]. This ability, however, is vulnerable to manipulation by those who raise the offspring. In this context of enhanced cooperation, there is a clear selective pressure for parents to ensure that the children will invest in their group, to teach their future children to do the same, and so on (see section 2). The best strategy for this purpose is not that of cooperatively arriving at symbolic meanings that are universal, rational and descriptive, such as the scientific meaning of the word 'nature'. As Barnard has argued, this form of one-to-one communication does not explain the great complexity of human language [45]. The strategy of arriving at meanings that are particular to the group is also not good enough, because those meanings are practical and negotiable (section 3). The best strategy is that of arriving at meanings that are both universal and particular to the group, thereby promoting the irrationality that one's group should prevail because its workings are 'natural' and non-negotiable (section 4). This exploitation of our own rational faculty creates the worlds of myth, from the stories of hunter-gatherers to the wishful aspects of philosophy. As section 5 demonstrates, it expresses itself in metaphysical and epistemological assumptions.

Morality is therefore a linguistic trait that biases reproductive investment toward an ingroup. This would explain why the moral concepts of Mother and Father remain such a basic, unconscious

constant throughout our life. They represent the two necessary reproductive interests of the collective in which individuals strive to maximise their reproductive success down the generations. They are elementary mythical characters. In the hunter-gatherer myth above, the concept of animal species is conflated with that of particular individuals only in the case of elders (e.g. a grandfather called 'Mantis'), not in the case of what are presumably children or foreigners ('the baboons') who are seen as unruly, dangerous and 'people who are different' [28]. The latter are either socialised or dehumanised; they become either reproductive resources or a threat to reproductive success. The same is the case with the greater scheme of the tribe. For example, the warring tribes of pre-colonial North America would each call themselves 'the people' while reserving less flattering terms for their enemies, such as 'flesh eaters' [46] (d'Errico, 2000). This was in spite of the fact that they practiced cannibalism [47]. Today the greater societal schemes of nation-states seem to be hungry for more, even though 'the people' addresses-refers to hundreds of millions.

The current decline of traditional family values, along with the questioning of sexual identity, seem to reflect a painful exhaustion of this ancient process of self-domestication. It also reflects the need for a scientific account of social phenomena that are relevant to biology. This was originally the purpose of psychoanalysis and its examination of animals who can report on the content of our minds. Self-knowledge remains a source of relief, though the psychoanalytic project failed to live up to its scientific promise. On the other hand, the sciences of behaviour are widely accepted but they tend to neglect the study of our personal relationships. With this article, I hope to have reconciled those two perspectives and opened a way forward.
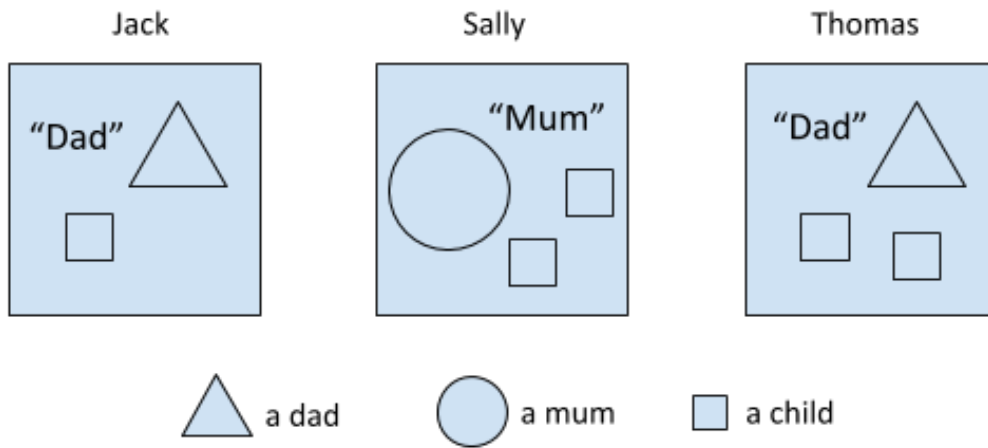
Figure 1. The big squares represent three friends in the objective space of a street, for instance. Each of them is a biological individual identified by personal name. Everyone can see the other two adults being called Mum or Dad in the intersubjective space of their families. The inside of each square represents such a normative context, in which the children, as represented by small squares, are supposed to see only one dad or mum. In addressing the children, each adult refers to the other as Mum or Dad as if they were referring to their own mother or father. This alludes to a common father or mother, which turns their objectivity into intersubjectivity (see Fig. 2).
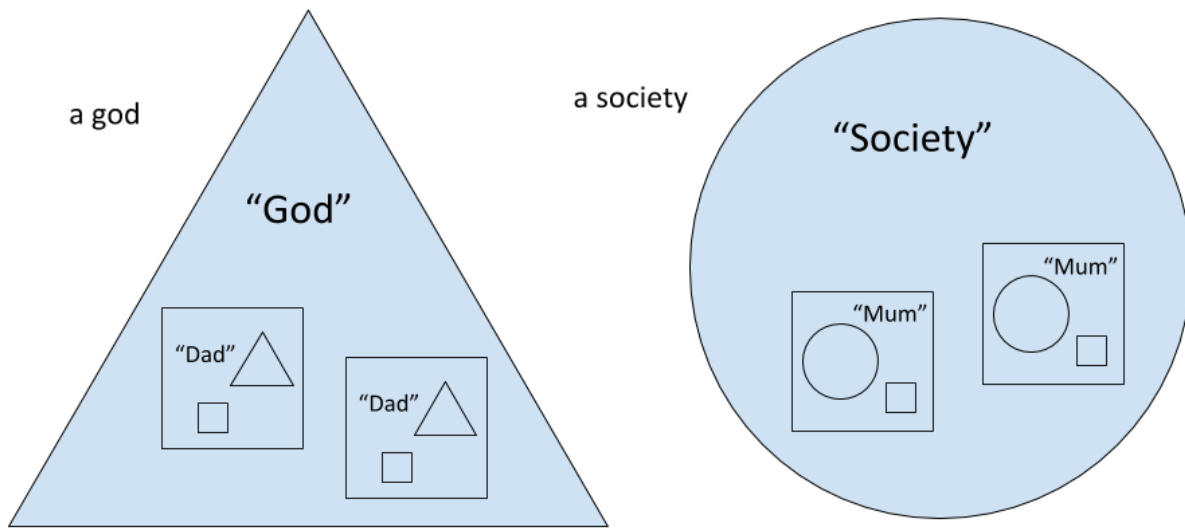
Figure 2. Individuals are socialised into seeing only one god or society. Religious or secular societies consist of individuals who share a social reality, as represented by the coloured space within the big triangle or circle. This intersubjective 'reality' contrasts with objective reality, in which individuals can see the various religions and societies in the same way as they can see that there are many parents, not only 'Dad' and 'Mum'.

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