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The objectivity of moral norms is a top-down cultural construct

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Abstract: Encultured individuals see the behavioral rules of cultural systems of moral norms as objective. In addition to prescriptive regulation of behavior, moral norms provide templates, scripts, and scenarios regulating the expression of feelings and triggered emotions arising from perceptions of norm violation. These allow regulated defensive responses that may arise as moral idea systems co-opt emotionally associated biological survival instincts.

Regarding the evolutionary advantage of objectifying of systems of moral norms, Stanford says: “The creation of a novel conceptual category of norms or standards of behavior to which I hold both others and myself responsible simultaneously thus established a mechanism for safely *extending* prosocial, altruistic, and cooperative behavior in new ways and into new contexts” (sect. 5, para. 8, emphasis in target article). But he does not say *how* the creation of this novel conceptual category comes about and admits ignorance as to how exteriorization arises in individuals. Is it an individual trait, or is it something that is culturally induced? If seen as an

individual trait, a number of problems arise. In particular, how could it have ever arisen in a group of non-externalizers, and how could a group come to all externalize the same norms? In arguing the advantage of norm exteriorization, Stanford begs the question of why different individuals exteriorize the same norms.

It is important to note that a fundamental cognitive shift has taken place in humans from evolution at the individual level to evolution at the organizational level (Lane et al. 2009; Read et al. 2009). Conceiving a category of norms or standards of behavior required crossing a cognitive threshold—*individuals must be able to consciously conceptualize themselves as members of a reified group*. With this capacity, cultural idea systems (Leaf & Read 2012) become possible as complexes of beliefs and/or organizational rules that operate in a top-down manner so that individuals gain functionality only by adherence to these rules and/or constraints.

Cultural idea systems are internalized by individuals through enculturation and are taken by culture bearers as having objective reality (Spradley & Mann 1975), thereby providing shared meaning for the events of social life. In this way, human culture creates a “virtual” world, including moral norms that are experienced as universals, applicable to anybody who is considered as “one of us” (Bar-Tal 2000; Hardin & Higgins 1996). In the Upper Paleolithic, we see the beginning of cultural idea systems in the form of kinship systems (Bergendorff 2016; Read 2012), and moral norms are incorporated as part of kin expectation and obligation (Fortes 1969). These patterns of expectations and obligations provide the structures for coordinated cooperation within a group when all members share a kinship relation. Acting in accordance with the behavior expected of kin is important because survival depends on being integrated with one’s kin.

If our ancestors’ moral norms are part of the cultural idea system acting in a top-down manner within social systems organized through kinship relations, then kinship itself provides the objectivity and coherence of norm exteriorization. In hunter-gatherer bands, where kinship is the basis of all social relations, the obligation to cooperate with others sharing a kinship relation becomes part of the identity of group members. Those who act improperly as kinsmen are sanctioned by the group.

In much work on the evolution of cooperation, punishment is seen as an important factor for maintaining cooperative groups against free-riders. Stanford claims that norm exteriorization removes the need for punishment because individuals will protect themselves from exploitation by simply shunning those recognized as norm violators. This is not sufficient to establish the stability of a system of norms, especially in small hunter-gatherer groups where it may not be possible to avoid contact with or reliance on untrustworthy partners. Punishment-based arguments, however, must deal with the second-order free-rider problem—punishment requires that group members agree to bear the cost of punishing a transgression at some undefined future time; yet, if punishing becomes necessary, some group members may renege on their commitment.

We argue that the second-order free-rider problem, and also Stanford’s question of “how moral norms acquire their characteristic status in the course of individual ontogeny” (sect. 5, para. 15), is solved through the linkage of culturally laden feelings and biological emotions within a cultural setting. Emotions are physiological responses to stimuli related to biological survival and are controlled by genetically established neural circuits. The feeling of an emotion is the mental experience accompanying the physiological sensations of the emotion (e.g., Damasio 2012; LeDoux 2012). Through association of feelings and behavior, culture provides functional vehicles for the social expression of emotional responses. Likewise, feelings triggered by culturally salient cues can evoke associated emotions (Damasio 2012; De Leersnyder et al. 2013; Kim & Sasaki 2012).

A cultural system of moral norms is not just a set of rules for behavior; it directs feelings associated with moral behavior or

misbehavior that have been interjected by group members and arise automatically when cued. Misbehavior by a group member may lead to feelings of guilt or shame, while perception of a norm violation by another may evoke feelings of anger and indignation (Dubreuil 2010). These feelings may trigger emotional responses, and because the emotions are grounded in biological survival instincts, the perceived norm violation may be responded to defensively as if it threatened biological survival (Ellemers 2012; Ellemers et al. 2002; Voorhees et al. 2018). Culturally determined defensive responses can range from shunning (as posited by Stanford and others), to an impulse to punish, eliminate, or otherwise correct a violation of what is seen as objectively “right and proper.”

In sum, cultural ideas, acquired through enculturation, are internalized by culture bearers and seen by them as objective reality. Among hunter-gatherers, behavioral norms are coded as patterns of expectations and obligations that are part of a kinship system. These provide the structure that facilitates coordination and cooperation of group activities. Rather than simply being collections of objectified behavioral rules, moral norm systems provide templates, scripts, or scenarios regulating the expression of feelings and emotions arising through the experience of violating a norm, or seeing another violate a norm. Only humans appear to have the psychological and neurological basis for both norm-following and sanctioning of violators (Dubreuil 2010; Read 2012), and we attribute this to the fact that only humans have the cognitive capacity to grasp the abstract concepts involved in cultural idea systems.

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[The BBS paper source for each reference is indicated by the author's name initials given in square brackets after the reference. The letters "a" and "r" before author's initials in square brackets stand for target article and response references, respectively]

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