

Nea Science



Neuroscienze, psicologia e riabilitazione

Atti della XII conferenza annuale dell'Associazione Italiana di Scienze Cognitive

Linguaggio, Cognizione & Società

a cura di
Marco Cruciani



***On the Psychological Infrastructure
of Normativity***

Antonella Carassa
Faculty of Communication Sciences
Università della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, Switzerland
antonella.carassa@usi.ch

Marco Colombetti
Department of Electronics, Information, and Bioengineering
Politecnico di Milano, Milano, Italy
marco.colombetti@polimi.it
and
Faculty of Communication Sciences
Università della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, Switzerland
marco.colombetti@usi.ch

One of the features that make humans different from all other animal species is their capacity to enter normative relationships with their conspecifics. Plausibly, this capacity is strictly related to the human ability to cooperate which, according to Tomasello (2014), evolved in two steps: in a first phase humans developed *joint intentionality*, which supports the small-scale collaborative activities typical of hunter-gatherer groups; then in a second phase humans became capable of *collective intentionality*, on which the large-scale normativity of social institutions is grounded. Tomasello argues that the psychological infrastructure for joint intentionality includes skills and motivations that allow social partners to collaborate in a second-personal mode by maintaining a common ground of shared knowledge and coordinating toward the achievement of common goals; in contrast, collective intentionality involves the ability to recognise, follow and enforce a system of agent-generic social norms able to regulate large-scale cooperative activities.

In Tomasello's view the joint intentionality supporting small-scale collaboration is not essentially normative. This opens up the problem of how the psychological infrastructure for large-scale normativity may have evolved from non-normative joint intentionality. Tomasello and Vaish (2013) postulate an intermediate phase of small-scale normativity, in which



“individuals ... felt answerable to others (as others were answerable to them) for being a good partner” (p. 239). However, Tomasello and Vaish do not analyse what is involved in feeling answerable, nor investigate the relation between small-scale normativity and group-level norms.

Recently we have suggested that small-scale normativity can be analysed in terms of *interpersonal responsibility* (Carassa & Colombetti, 2014, 2015). That *A* is responsible to *B* to do *X* means that *A* and *B* have special positions toward *A*'s doing or not doing *X*; in particular if *A* does not do *X*, *B* has the stand to complain, *A* is expected to provide a reasonable excuse, and so on. Normative relationships are a piece of social reality, and as such they hold if, and only if, they are recognised to hold by a suitable social collective (the *source* of the normativity). A characteristic feature of interpersonal responsibility is that its source coincides with the agents who are related by the responsibility; everyday examples of interpersonal responsibilities are those deriving from promises, agreements, and the like.

In another article (Carassa & Colombetti, 2012) we have argued that normativity presupposes a psychological infrastructure which goes beyond the ordinary toolkit of mainstream cognitive science, because being responsible to someone is not (at least, not only) a matter of holding epistemic or volitional mental states, like beliefs, desires or intentions. In our previous works, however, we did not describe a possible psychological infrastructure of responsibility, nor clarify whether a single infrastructure may support both small-scale and large-scale normativity. The aim of the current presentation is to deal with these crucial issues. More specifically we want to defend two theses: (i), that the psychological infrastructure allowing people to enter relationships of responsibility is rooted in human affectivity, and in particular in certain types of emotions; and (ii), that different aspects of responsibility, and therefore different types of emotions, are involved in small-scale and large-scale normativity.

The thesis that normativity is rooted in emotions has been extensively discussed in such fields as moral psychology (e.g., by Haidt, 2003) and moral philosophy (see Nichols, 2004, and Prinz, 2007, for two fairly radical positions on the matter). Our contribution is not aimed at presenting evidence for such a thesis, but rather at investigating what an emotion-based theory may contribute to an understanding of normativity.

As far as small-scale normativity is concerned, one can speculate that interpersonal responsibility started to evolve in the context of joint activities driven by shared goals and carried out in situations in which every participant could directly monitor the contribution of all partners. Plausibly, humans evolved specific emotions to deal effectively with this type of activities: certain other-condemning emotions, like anger, and self-conscious emotions, like shame and guilt (Haidt, 2003) are clearly related to the management of failures and defections, either a partner's or one's own. These emotions are social, in the sense that their function is to regulate the interaction with other agents, and intersubjective, in the sense that to fulfil their functions they need to be perceived by one's partners; thus we can assume that they evolved together with the intersubjective capacities that make it possible to share them with the relevant others (Morganti, Carassa, & Riva, 2008).

We submit that the ability to entertain such social emotions constitutes the psychological infrastructure of a sense of being responsible or answerable

to one's partners in the context of joint activities. We also suggest that this infrastructure has been co-opted (i.e., specialised for a new function, Fessler & Gervais, 2010) to support forms of interpersonal cooperation that go beyond *hic-et-nunc* collaboration, thus making room for contributions that are either distanced (I do this here, you do that over there) or delayed (I do this now, you will do that later). This form of second-person answerability for locally and temporally displaced activities is what interpersonal responsibility amounts to.

One can wonder how interpersonal normativity may have evolved into the type of normativity that constitutes large-scale cultural institutions. As a start, let us remark that also social norms, although they are agent-generic (in the sense that they apply to all agents who instantiate certain properties), impose responsibilities to agents: for example, we hold a person responsible to take care of their parents not because they made an agreement to this effect, but just because they instantiate a child-parent relationship. The main difference between interpersonal responsibilities and the responsibilities deriving from social norms is that the source of the latter is not in the same agents who are related by the responsibility, but is somewhat external. This means that social norms involve two distinct types of answerability: to one's partners in a relationship of responsibility, and to the source of such relationship. Coherently with our hypothesis that responsibility is rooted in human affectivity, we argue that humans have developed specific social emotions also concerning the recognition of the source of social normativity: emotions of this kind have been discussed for example by Haidt (2003), as pertaining to the moral dimensions of loyalty and respect, and by Fessler and Haley (2003).

However, the sheer recognition of the source of normativity is insufficient to support group-level norms, in particular because some effective sanctioning mechanism is required to deter free riding. What is needed in addition is the capacity to take a third-person stance that allows one to act as a representative of the source of normativity (an "intuitive prosecutor," in the terminology of Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). We believe that also this capacity is rooted in human affectivity, more specifically in those "vicarious emotions" that allow agents to have emotional reactions to violations of normative relationships holding between others.

References

- Carassa, A., & Colombetti, M. (2012). On normative cognition, and why it matters for cognitive pragmatics. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 9, 271-280.
- Carassa, A., & Colombetti, M. (2014). Interpersonal responsibilities and communicative intentions. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 13, 145-159.
- Carassa, A., & Colombetti, M. (2015). Interpersonal communication as social action. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 45, 407-423.
- Fessler, D. M. T., & Gervais, M. (2010). From whence the captains of our lives: Ultimate and phylogenetic perspectives on emotions in humans and other primates. In P. M. Kappeler, & J. Silk (Eds.), *Mind the gap: Tracing the origins of human universals* (pp. 216-280). Berlin: Springer.

- Fessler, D. M. T., & Haley, K. J. (2003). The strategy of affect: Emotions in human cooperation. In P. Hammerstein (Ed.), *Genetic and cultural evolution of cooperation* (pp. 7-36). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Haidt, J. (2003). The moral emotions. In R. J. Davidson, K. R. Scherer, & H. H. Goldsmith (Eds.), *Handbook of affective sciences* (pp. 852-870). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Haidt, J., & Kesebir, S. (2010). Morality. In S. T. Fiske, D. T. Gilbert, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of Social Psychology* (5th ed., Vol. 2, pp. 797-832). New York, NY: Wiley.
- Morganti, F., Carassa, A., & Riva, G. (2008). *Enacting intersubjectivity: A cognitive and social perspective on the study of interactions*. Amsterdam: IOS Press.
- Nichols, S. (2004). *Sentimental rules: On the natural foundations of moral judgement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Prinz, J. J. (2007). *The emotional construction of morals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tomasello, M. (2014). *A natural history of human thinking*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Tomasello, M., & Vaish, A. (2013). Origins of human cooperation and morality. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 64, 231-255.