

Rules as the ecological *niche* of the species *Homo sapiens*

How do we, humans, differ from other animals? Well, a lot of essential differences have been pointed out: we have language, reason, culture, free will etc. Which of these differences are basic, which mark the evolutionary point of departure of our species from our animal cousins?

In this talk I want to approach this question from an unusual angle; I want to concentrate on the question what it is that we humans can *do*, while other animals cannot, and why it is that we can do this. I do not mean specific abilities we have because of our specific physical build, like producing an extraordinarily differentiated system of sounds, or subtle manipulation of things with our hands. I mean things we do that require a certain framework other animals cannot enter: we can borrow money from a bank; we can checkmate somebody (while playing chess); we can graduate from a university; we can marry, divorce etc. All of these are not things that other animals cannot do because of lack of abilities; they are things that make no sense aside of frameworks made out of rules. (It makes no sense to want to checkmate somebody outside of the framework of the rules of chess.)

Every animal requires, to survive, a certain kind of *niche*; and many animals act on their niche to enhance its suitability for them. The same is done by us, humans, but aside of the fact that we can rebuild our surroundings physically, we have developed the ability of establishing systems of rules that act as "walls" of new, "virtual" spaces that open up the possibilities of the brand new actions we have indicated above. Just like by establishing the rules of chess we as if open up a space which we can enter and engage in activities not available outside of the space, we establish a lot of other similar "virtual spaces" (sometimes also called *institutions*, like banks, schools etc.) that allow us engage in many new kinds of novel activities. As a result, a great deal of our human lives take place in these "virtual" worlds, rather than in the physical one. (It is not that we have managed to overcome the limitations of nature, but our form of sociality make these limitations affect an individual only in a greatly refined and redistributed form.) *They* have become our ecological *niche*, and we have become a species that have mastered the art of "*niche* construction" in the form that has no precedent in the animal realm.

One of the most important "virtual spaces" that we have opened up in this way is what can be called the *space of meaningfulness*: the "space" opened up by the rules of our language, allowing us to produce meaningful utterances. This space, we can say, is the mother of all other spaces: other spaces often build on the meanings that are forged in its mould. Therefore, I believe that the investigation of the rules underlying the semantics of our language can throw a crucial light on our, human nature. (The conviction that the paradigmatic rules of this kind are *inferential* rules has given birth to the enterprise of *inferentialism*: an effort to explain meanings as inferential roles.)

The specific feature of our "normative niche" is that it is built and maintained by the coordination of our "normative attitudes", of our taking or treating various things (especially various people's doing) for "correct" and "incorrect". Our niche thus has the peculiar quality of a truly *virtual* space: viewed from outside, it is mere "make-believe"; however we, its inhabitants, experience it as quite a solid edifice. And rules are the wonderful material that allows us to build such unprecedented edifices – fleeting from outside, while solid and accommodating from inside. Hence my conjecture is that the deepest feature that make us truly human is our ability to establish, maintain and follow rules.