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DOES ONTOGENESIS OF SOCIAL ONTOLOGY START WITH PRETENCE?

abstract

Rakoczy and Tomasello follow Searle in claiming that rule games need status function *assignment and constitutive rules. But, in the case of pretend play, it is not easy to put together these notions with the natural world knowledge necessary to engage in it. If we consider the pretended scenario as a possible world, metaphysically possible, then, how can we abandon the* natural *necessity implicit in it? The rules of pretend-inference can have a robustly objective status. On this view pretence stands to pretending as truth stands to belief.*

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GAETANO ALBERGO *Università degli Studi di Catania*

Gelman and Byrnes told us, in Chomsky's terms, that "[w]e can determine how languages and conceptual systems are constrained by examining the forms and meanings that children construct, and which errors they fail to make" (Gelman and Byrnes 1991, 3). Thus Billman suggested that we should compare and test psychological models of structure and processing of concepts by examining the function from "learning instances plus the target items to categorize" to "the set of possible category judgments" (Billman 1992, 415). Then the actual extension of the category is taken to be determined by how the learner is inclined to classify new examples. But I believe that experiments need to be designed and interpreted with it in mind that the cognitive systems are designed by evolution and tuned by experience to find real-world substances, not random logically possible ones. I think *pretence* is a special case of conceptual tracking. Pretending is changing the nature of perceptual inputs at will. I suggest the exercise of this kind of agency can enable subject to experience the "refractoriness" of reality, experience the constraints that the reality sets on what they can experience.

According to Hannes Rakoczy and Michael Tomasello the ontogeny of social ontology starts with pretend play. This is the voluntary transformation of the here and now, the you and me, and the this or that, along with any potential action that these components of a situation might have. Thus, *pretence* presents a cradle for children's development into institutional life, but, in order not to be confused by a parent's pretend acts, the child must interpret *pretence* events as what they stand for. According to Rakoczy and Tomasello (R&T) this is so because on embryonic form these phenomena exhibit the logical structure of the conventional creation of institutional facts. Following Searle, they recognize that, in contrast to brute facts "out there", *institutional facts* hold only by virtue of a social, conventional practice and have the logical form "*x* counts as *y* in a contest C". Every stipulations of the *pretence* scenario involve a *status function* assignment. So children do not get confused about reality because of the symbolic nature of status function. Quoting Searle "The sense in which symbolization in [a] broad linguistic sense is essential to all institutional facts is that the move from *x* to *y* in the formula '*x* counts as *y* in C' is already a symbolic move" (Searle 1999, 155).

GAETANO ALBERGO *Università degli Studi di Catania*

I agree with R&T that *pretence*, if it is an institutional fact or not, involve normative aspects, that is, what is appropriate, what is a mistake, or highly inappropriate, in a given context. For example, Rakoczy has shown that children from around 2 years old not only are proficient at acting according to jointly set-up fictional stipulations in the context of shared pretend play, but when a third party confused pretence identities and thus made mistakes, children leveled protest and critique (see Rakoczy 2008). But we don't have a conclusive evidence that early *pretence* involves the symbolic function. Some evidence stems from old studies showing correlations between early acquisition of words—symbols for referents— and use of pretence gestures (e.g., Bates, Benigni, Bretherton, Camaioni, and Volterra 1979). On the contrary, in a recent research, Angeline Lillard claims that young children's understanding of *pretence* is heavily guided by their ability to read gestures out of context, perhaps only in the face of supportive social signals indicating *pretence* rather than by employing a symbolic function (Lillard 2001). I don't think that symbolic function is always a necessary condition for an institutional fact. In fact, we can give an independent account of normativity and not-contradiction in *pretence*, without the symbolic function.

If pretending is a case of "thinking of *x* as *y*", *y* is the way *x* is described, but, if we follow Roger Scruton's account of imagination, broadly conceived, then *pretence* involves thinking of these descriptions as appropriate in some way to the primary object (see Scruton 1974). Pretending may be compared with uttering a sentence, as distinct from asserting it. We know that not everything that is said is also asserted. I may practice my pronunciation and simply utter a sentence, so I represent a state of affairs, but I don't thereby assert that the state of affairs is real. I merely represent a possibility without asserting it, and we know, as empirical evidence tells us, that children don't believe what they pretend. Nor do I hesitantly assert what the sentence says. Pretending cannot be analyzed in terms of belief. The content of my belief can be expressed by a sentence, in this case sentences are being used to say something. In a secondary case, as in elocution, sentences are being treated more as patterns of sound than as verbal symbols. If pretending is a case of "thinking of *x* as *y*", then to think of *x* as *y* at least involves the entertaining of the proposition "*x* is *y*". So, if someone pretends that a banana is a telephone, then he has a disposition to say "I think of the banana as a telephone". But, it is not sufficient for the truth of his pronouncement that he should have a disposition to entertain this proposition if he always immediately rejects it as false. Actually, I may think of *x* as *y* while knowing

GAETANO ALBERGO *Università degli Studi di Catania*

that it is untrue. On the other hand, with symbols we are limited to the dimension of falsity. By definition it's always false that *x* is *y* if the first is a symbol for the second. And, clearly, marking the pretend representation as false does not even begin to capture the semantics of early *pretence.* In a "mark as false" account a child infers that "mummy pretends that (this banana is a telephone)*false'.* Then she gives him the banana and says "the telephone is ringing". The child represents this as "mummy pretends that (the telephone is ringing)*false*". But, which telephone? This problem does not arise if we merely entertain the proposition "*x* is *y*". The failure of reference in the speech-act is a consequence of my entertaining unasserted the existential proposition whose truth is a necessary condition for the truth of "this banana is a telephone". Of course, we know that the pretence scenario is not true, but, on the other hand, there are precise true-conditions to decide if pretending *P* is a case of *pretence.* In my opinion, to say that *P* is *pretence* is to make a normative rather than a descriptive claim, and children are sensitive to what is pretence. In this way I reject the contrary view that a child can understand what is *pretence* only by understanding that someone is pretending something. *Pretence,* I think, is a rational activity, then, what is to judge an unasserted description to be appropriate to a certain object? Pretending is a way of going beyond the "given", the primary object, and producing descriptions which one is unprepared to assert. But this is not sufficient. It is necessary that the description be entertained because of his appropriateness.

It is true that *pretence* does involve treating objects as if they were something else, and R&T quote Searle "In the limiting case, we can use the object itself to represent the *y* status function" (Searle 1999, 155), but this cognitive activity is more sophisticated. For example, following Alan Leslie (1987) we can recognize three basic forms of *pretence*, with their semantic properties:

1. Object substitution (referential opacity)
2. Attribution of pretend properties (nonentailment of truth-falsehood)
3. Imaginary object *pretence* (nonentailment of existence)

It has been argued that pretending 2-year-olds understand four features of *pretense*: pretend stipulations, causal powers, the suspension of objective truth, and an unfolding causal chain. The current situation might contain a toy horse or an empty cup. Then, for example, memory systems are

GAETANO ALBERGO *Università degli Studi di Catania*

addressed, returning information on entities that are perceptually similar (e.g., on horses) or on the functional properties of the object (e.g., on containing). This leads to *pretence* based on perceptual similarity or on functional connection.

Markman and Abelev (2006) suggest that pretence is not unique in permitting 2 and 3-year-olds to recognize multiple object identities. In their study children were as good at recognizing unusual functional use as they were pretence, while still failing the appearance-reality task where deceptive stimuli were used across tasks. Their interpretation is that children understand multiple object identities better when an object's intrinsic identity is contrasted with its relational role, that is an extrinsic *object properties.* So, children are able to distinguish extrinsic object properties from intrinsic ones (function vs. category-membership) better than they can distinguish superficial object properties from deep ones (appearance vs. category-membership).

If we follow this account, then, conceptual factors, such as the intrinsic or extrinsic nature of the alternative identity, help shape children's performance on multiple object identity tasks.

Now we can try to answer the question Scruton posed about appropriateness of descriptions.

We have two options:

> (i) Keil-Leslie: Anchoring is straightforward for immediate pretense; it proceeds by means of a best formal match between expressions in the pretend and current perceptual representations
> (ii) Searle: The status and its accompanying function go beyond the sheer brute physical functions that can be assigned to physical objects

So, we stay between Scylla of highly structured scenario and Charybdis of an umbrella-term that covers many different phenomena. We need to define our domain of search a bit more precisely.

In these situations we are working on the identity of *x* and *y*, and, my claim is, if we consider the new scenario as a possible world, metaphysically possible, then, how can we abandon the *natural* necessity implicit both

in the stipulation and in successive possible implications[1]? Children's understanding of the causal consequences of a pretend action is a routine by-product of a simple processing rule: to understand the consequences of a pretend action, assume that the entities or substances whose existence is stipulated are subject to the same causal principles as their real-world equivalents (see Paul Harris 2000; Alison Gopnik 2009). Normativity is constitutive of the scenario, but it is strongly appreciated in its possible consequences. This shows that children need to draw on familiar, real world causal principles. This evidence is not compatible with the way Searle uses the notion of *observer-dependent fact*. According to Searle the symbolic nature of a similar fact is not a product of physical virtues. Moreover, if we follow R&T in claiming that *pretence* is probably the ontogenetically primary factor for institutional life, then, should we adopt such a conclusion as: *pretence* is "a matter of status functions imposed according to constitutive rules"? (Searle 2005, 9) But, which constitutive rules? Even R&T recognize that in this case "the "*y*", is not, as in the case of rule games, only understandable through the game" (Rakoczy and Tomasello 2007, 19).

We can try to find a third position between our two:

If we follow Paul Harris (2000) we have two hypothesis about the relation between reality and pretence[2]:

> a. *In the case of pretend play, children do not set up a contrast between an imaginary event and an actual event*
> b. *Pretend events are not set up as departures from actual events*

We have a good reason to agree with him about the first hypothesis and a plausible hypothesis to reject the second.

Contrast first. Why there is not real contrast? A generic notion of symbol doesn't help, but I think we can recognize that in our examples of pretence there is something that can be called iconic. According to Peirce a sign is an icon when it "may represent its objects mainly by its similarity" (Peirce 1931-1958, 2.276).

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1   I follow Kit Fine in arguing that thinking about identity is a necessary condition to talk about metaphysical modalities, and this cannot reject physical notions. Rather than to give up the idea that there are any natural necessities, thinking about identity,
I believe, should lead us to adopt a more discriminating view as to which natural necessities are metaphysical contingent.
2   In her review, Tamar Gendler defines Harris' work "an extraordinarily comprehensive and informative book surveying a tremendous range of empirical psychological work on imagination in children" (2002, 414). Gopnik (2009, ch. 1) is even more generous with Harris' work.

GAETANO ALBERGO *Università degli Studi di Catania*

The iconic device may possess certain elementary iconic markers and sometimes a minimal resemblance is due to the fact that the iconic sign, even though different in shape from its object, performs the same function. We can think just a stick which qualifies as a horse because one can proudly ride it. The only aspect that the stick has in common with a real horse is that it can be straddled. Hence the child has rendered emergent one of the functions permitted by the horse. Now, contrary to what is sometimes said, communication need not come into this process at all[3]. He may not have wanted to show his horse to anyone. It just served as a focus for his fantasies as he galloped along.

But our stick can become the icon of a horse, a sceptre, or a sword. In all these objects recurs the same element, that is the feature of linearity (vertical or horizontal). But we haven't a case of imitation. Insofar as the vertical quality is a feature of both a stick and a sword it is the same verticality. Then, a linear dimension has been used as an expressive feature in order to substitute for the linear dimension that equally characterizes a horse as such. Or, in other words, a part of the referent is used as a sign-vehicle. We can quote Kant. In the first *Kritik* space, like time, is a pure intuition, the elementary form that we confer upon experiential data so as to be able to perceive them and place them within the categories. Therefore, verticality and horizontality are the intuitive mode within which we frame our perceptions, not intellectual abstractions. The spatial dimensions are not an intellectual construction, but the structural conditions for a possible object, and as conditions they may be reproduced, equal to themselves, in varied circumstances. Whereas geometrical figures are already objects built under the framework of such conditions, and they cannot be reproduced as equal to themselves, but only as abstractions similar to previous constructions. This doesn't stop the stick from standing for the horse, but this happens because the linearity of the stick is not a construct but a condition of every other possible construction, and thus an intuitive artifice able to determine a space. We can concede that a toy horse or a stick is a sign, but we need to better distinguish the *imitans* from the *imitatum*, that which stands for something from that for which something else stands. So, according to this analysis, iconism makes no appearance, and, as they say in semiotics, we have only intrinsically coded acts. So, to try to better understand the nature of *pretence* we are allowed to put aside symbolism.

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3   Here I agree with Ernest Gombrich (1951). It seems that Searle's insistence on the inescapable role of language goes beyond what is justified by the facts. Early *pretence* is just an example of this problem.

GAETANO ALBERGO *Università degli Studi di Catania*

We can consider the second argument: a possible hypothesis about possible departures from reality.

Episodic memory involves re-experiencing situations. Kant argued that for the experience of objects (inner or outer) to be possible at all space and time must precede and structure all experiences of outer and inner states. Our experience must be grounded in space and time as pure "forms on intuition". If experience has a spatial content and if episodic memory is re-experiencing then episodic traces must have spatial content. The claim is that for there to be episodic memory in any creature, what makes it an *experience* is something non-conceptual. According to Robert Hanna "The thesis of *Non-Conceptualism* about mental content says that representational content is neither solely nor wholly determined by our conceptual capacities, and that at least some contents are both wholly and solely determined by non-conceptual capacities and can be shared by human and non-human animals alike" (Hanna 2008, 42). Kant developed in the *Transcendental Aesthetic* the idea that space and time are a priori subjective forms of sensibility. However, sensibility was supposed to include not only sense perception but also the "inner sense" imagination, pleasure, pain, desire. Infact, we should think of the representation of space and the representation of time as the necessary a priori subjective forms of egocentrically centered human and non-human animal embodiment. Following these premises we claim that memorial re-experiencing is a form of inner sense, akin to the imagination. In the case of *pretence* I think that the non-conceptual image might be identified with what we have seen as a minimum image that is still sufficient to release a specific reaction.

Imagining intends absent objects; perceiving intends present objects. Same objects, different intentional relation. So, is it possible to see something and, in the same time, to image something else that negates it? Here with "to image" I simply mean an episode of imagery, a mental image. Or, starting from a more *basic* question, is it possible to see and to image the same thing? For example, while we are looking at our mother we can try to visualize her face, and we need the same content in the very same way. But this exercise is not easy at all. It is known that there is overlap in the regions of the brain that are activated in seeing and visualizing. According to Kosslyn the same cerebral mechanism in our neuroanatomy must be involved, the Visual Buffer. In *Zettel*, Wittgenstein says "while I am looking at an object I cannot imagine it" (§621). This means that I cannot imagine the very object I am looking at. I can surely be looking at my mother from

GAETANO ALBERGO *Università degli Studi di Catania*

the back, not even realize I am looking at my mother, and still imagine her from the front. *De re* seeing does not prevent *de dicto* imagining. So our minimum image is projected into the real situation and it helps to imagine alternative metaphysically possible situations, that is real departures. I suggest that the child who pretends productively is tracking the world. He is responding to the world in something like the way one responds to the world with one's beliefs. Rules of pretend-inference have a robustly objective status, as demonstrated by Greg Currie (1998). On this view *pretence* stands to pretending as truth stands to beliefs.

GAETANO ALBERGO *Università degli Studi di Catania*

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