HUMAN NORMATIVE WORLD

EL MUNDO NORMATIVO HUMANO

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Abstract: How can we explain how we, as people, differ from the individuals of other species? None of the common responses such as by 'being rational', 'having language', 'submitting to moral rules', 'establishing institutions' are sufficiently explanatory as they are all based on concepts that are themselves in dire need of explanation. In this paper I try to characterize the difference in terms of the kind of world we inhabit and that we have created because we have achieved such an unprecedented flexibility of behavior that there emerged the need for its "normalization". This, we argue, is not only congenial with the ideas about normativity as put forward by of Kant (not to mention later thinkers like Wittgenstein or Sellars), but it lets us to strip down the difference to such simple elements ("normative attitudes") that they can be approached in a naturalistic vein.

Key words: Correctness, flexibility, freedom, normativity, rule.

Resumen: ¿Cómo se puede explicar que como personas que somos, seamos tan diferentes de los miembros de otras especies? Ninguna de las respuestas habituales, como 'ser racional', 'tener un lenguaje', 'estar sometidos a reglas morales', 'el establecer instituciones' son suficientemente explicativas, pues cada una de ellas se basa en conceptos que -en sí mismos- necesitan explicación. En este trabajo trato de caracterizar esta diferencia en términos del tipo de mundo que habitamos y que hemos creado, porque hemos logrado una flexibilidad de comportamiento sin precedente, de lo cual emergió la necesidad de su 'normalización'. Argumentamos que esto no solo concuerda con las ideas acerca de la normatividad propuestas por Kant (para no mencionar autores posteriores como Wittgenstein o Sellars), sino que nos permite reducir esa diferencia a elementos tan básicos (´actitudes normativas') que pueden ser abordados de forma naturalista.

Palabras clave: Corrección, flexibilidad, libertad, normatividad, regla.

> We—and only we—must live in a world of our own creating that is orders of magnitude more complex and replete with opportunities (the degrees of freedom) than the lifeworld of any other living thing, and, with the help of evolution, both genetic and cultural, we have designed a system of higher-level cooperation that opens up modes of negotiation and mutually enforcible constraints, the civilization that makes life so worth living.
>
> Daniel Dennett

0. Flexibility vs. predictability

How do we, individuals of the species *Homo sapiens*, differ from the individuals of other species? Needless to say, there are plenty of candidate answers: by being rational, having language, submitting to moral rules, establishing institutions etc. However, such answers are based on complex and intricate (if not directly enigmatic) concepts like rationality, language, morals and institutions. Is it possible to characterize the "anthropological difference" in more down-to-earth terms?

Glock (2012) argues that aside of language and our specific kind of sociality we are characterized by "a special kind of plasticity: the capacity to adapt to highly diverse circumstances and environments through tools (technology) and rational deliberation (planning)". In purely ethological - and very down-to-earth - terms we can perhaps say that we excel in the flexibility of our behavior. The repertoire of the behavioral patterns we able to display are obviously much richer than those of all other species. As Dennett (2018) puts it, our world has far more "degrees of freedom" than that of other organisms.

Flexibility of behavior, of course, is something that makes a lot of sense from the viewpoint of evolution. If a creature is wired up so that it can react only in one way to a given stimulus, then if the reaction is inappropriate, the creature is doomed; whereas if it can try another reaction, it may fare better[1]. (If the rigid reactions are fine-tuned by evolution, then they are unlikely to be inappropriate - but this will not hold if there is a change in the environment with respect to which they have been fine-tuned.) Thus, flexibility of behavior might be seen as one of evolution's tricks for increasing an organism's fitness, a trick that has turned out to work very well for us humans.

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[1] See Dennett (1996), Chapter 4.

Flexibility, however, has its own problems. Though the environment may change (and then the possibility of altering one's way of coping with it may be welcome), it does not change all the time (and often it does not change significantly for a long time). In such situations, it would be disastrous if we were to try out all our available behavior patterns every time anew; this would, of course, frustrate our ability to deal with the world in a reasonable on-line manner. The primary solution to this problem is our ability of acquiring habits, of acquiescing in some "tried and true" ways of behavior.

However, this would still leave us with the necessity for every individual to invent and establish their habits anew, perhaps by trial and error, which would still not be optimal as most changes in the environment do not proceed swiftly enough to substantiate this. The solution is obvious: we learn some "standard" ways of dealing with nature from our elders, our teachers and our peers[2]. And this mechanism is immensely more elaborated for us humans than for any other species: young individuals of some other species do learn some things by imitating their elders, but this shrinks in comparison with our complex system of education and enculturation.

But what is more important from the viewpoint of the current paper is that we are also *social* creatures, and our success depends also on how we cope with each other - and here again flexibility might be a hindrance. Cooperation and prosperous coexistence depend, to a large extent, on predictability, and the more flexibility of behavior you have, the less predictable you tend to be. Thus, it seems that if coping with the world leads us, by way of evolution, to an increasing variability of behavior, then coping with each other should lead us to some kind of - at least virtual - *neutralization* of the variability. And the idea to be put forward in this paper is that we have developed an elegant response to this *prima facie* schizophrenic situation – among all the courses of action which we *can* take we have singled out a limited number of those which are those which *should* be taken. We have managed to convey our unpredictably flexible behavior into some "standardized" and publicly recognized channels[3].

The result is that for many of the things we do, we have *correct* and *incorrect* ways of doing them. There are cases in which correct means what we have dubbed "standard" above and what derives from natural facts: for example, the correct ways of

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[2] And recently some authors, such as Boyd & Richerson (2005) or Henrich (2015), have forcefully argued that many of our abilities which used to be considered as our genetic endowment are in fact passed on from generation to generation via this "cultural" route.

[3] Mercier & Sperber (2017) argue that this is also the situation where our argumentative practices took origin – originally, they argue, these practices were tools of neutralization of potentially disturbing non-standard behavior.

hunting a hare may be just those which are likely to bring us success. But there are also cases of correctness which look quite arbitrary: for example, various rituals. In the case of rituals, it may not be important what actual behavior is being proclaimed correct, it is only important that it is a behavior on which we all converge[4].

Of course, the boundary between correctnesses that are "forced by the environment" and those that are "arbitrary" (purely "conventional") does not coincide with those that concern nature and those that concern the society. Surely not all the correctness in the social realm is just arbitrary - certainly "Thou shalt kill" is not as good as "Though shalt not kill". This gives rise to what becomes known as *moral* rules and which can be found, give or take, across different societies. However, despite this, it is the social realm that provides a lot of space where correctness can be stipulated purely "conventionally".

Now the crucial question appears to be: *How did correctness manage to get into the world?* But before we dig into this, we will make a digression into the history of thinking about normativity.

1.   Kant, rules and freedom

From what we have stated so far it may seem that our freedom is simply a matter of the fact that our behavioral flexibility, the spectrum of possibilities of how to act which opens in front of us at nearly every moment, is vast and incomparable to what we find elsewhere in the animal kingdom. However, of course, things are not that simple.

Kant famously claimed that we humans, aside of belonging to the denizens of the "realm of the concept of nature" also inhabit the "realm of the concept of freedom"[5]. He also claimed that freedom is *autonomy*. i.e., the ability to freely choose the rules according to which to live. It follows that living by rules - by some rules - is a *presupposition* of achieving freedom. This may seem paradoxical, for rules appear to be what restrict us, what preclude us from doing certain things. So, rules apparently compromise our freedom; and to be free we must apparently eliminate as many rules as possible. Rules and freedom thus seem to pull in opposite directions.

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[4] Claidière & Whiten (2012) speak about "informational conformity" in the first case and about "normative conformity" in the second one.

[5] Kant introduces these terms explicitly only in his third Critique (Kant, 1790), though the underlying distinction is clearly important for the whole of his practical philosophy. See, e.g., Risser (2009) for a discussion.

However, Kant's point was that this is a distorting view. Imagine a person following no rules whatsoever. Would it be a prototype of a *free* actor? No, because it would not be an *actor* in the first place. To *act* - in contrast to simply displaying behavior - is to make a move in a rule-governed space, in which every move has reasons and consequences, for which the actor is responsible. Hence it presupposes a framework of rules. So, rules are no enemies of freedom[6] - it is only a certain kind of "hostile" imposition of rules that compromises freedom.

To clarify the interconnection of these considerations with those discussed in the previous section, let us note that correctness and rules are two sides of the same coin, at least in the sense of the term *rule* to be pursued here. What we understand by a rule is not an explicit prescription, but rather something that is a yardstick of correctness, though it can remain implicit. (And indeed, we often speak about "unwritten rules", without feeling that the expression is a contradiction in terms[7].) Thus, we can say that there is a rule if and only if there is a way of doing something correctly and doing it incorrectly - and even if the rule is not explicitly articulated, it could be.

But there is still an air of paradox here. Every animal lives in a world delimited by certain physical boundaries. These interfere with the spectrum of behavioral possibilities that would otherwise be open for the animal thanks to the variability of the behavioral patterns it is endowed with. (An animal cannot go wherever it might want because of natural hindrances; it cannot eat whatever it might want; it cannot move faster than its constitution allows, etc.) Humans have managed to expand their variability of behavior in an unprecedented way; however, they subsequently began introducing rules in order to narrow it back down. As we saw, this makes sense from the viewpoint of cooperation and predictability; however, how can the introduction of rules and the restrictions they institute help us to *greater freedom*?

The answer is that the freedom to which it helps us is not greater in the sense of being simply broader, but rather in the sense of being "higher-level". In fact, the kind of negative freedom which amounts to an absence of restrictions is not freedom in the Kantian sense at all. His freedom, autonomy, is something we can achieve only thanks to our ability to abide with rules, to be normative creatures. There are myriads of new things which we can do in the new world, and only in the new world. Think about the vast number of our actions that depend on various kinds of normative, institutional frameworks we have established: studying at a university, getting married, playing

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[6] Cf. Brandom (1979).

[7] See Peregrin (2014), Chapter 6. Adopting the useful terminological distinction introduced by Svoboda (2018), we can say that rules are quite often not L-rules (linguistic articulations) but S-rules (social configurations).

football, buying goods, etc. etc. For better or worse, we humans partly evacuated the natural world in favor of the condominium of our normative spaces.

2. Wittgenstein, Sellars and Brandom

There are especially two philosophers in the twentieth century who pioneered the notion that rules, and norms are not just one of the dispensable expedients of our human way of life, but rather its ever-present dimension. Although the first, Wittgenstein, does not say this explicitly, a large part of his *Philosophical Investigation*s is devoted to the elucidation of the concept of rules and of the way we follow rules; and there is little doubt that this is because rules are essentially connected with the main topic of his book, *language games*.

Wittgenstein obviously thought that in the typical case, our language games are governed by rules. (True, our language games, according to him, are so disparate that it is next to impossible to make generalizations embracing *all* of them, suggesting that government by rules should not be a *sine qua non* of such a game, but the close tie is obvious.) And, moreover, as "*speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (Wittgenstein, 1953), §23, this extends beyond *language* games to the kinds of social games that constitute the form of our life.

The second philosopher in the twentieth century to recognize and anatomize the importance of rules within the human world was Wilfrid Sellars. He emphasized that what makes us different from other animals is precisely that the role played, in the case of other species, by *habits*, is assumed, in our case, by rules (Sellars, 1949). Just like Kant insisted that we are inhabitants of not only "the realm of the concept of nature", but also the "realm of the concept of freedom", so Sellars pictured the situation as being that aside of seeing the world as a "scientific image", the causal network of things and facts as revealed to us by science, we also see it (and are bound to see it) as a "manifest image", a normative edifice inhabited by *persons*, who not only *display behavior*, but *act*, are *responsible* for their acts, and are capable of producing *meanings* (Sellars, 1962).

Sellars' approach has then been taken to its consequences especially by Robert Brandom (1994), who offered a grand picture of life within a human society as navigating through normative spaces by acquiring various *commitments* and *entitlements*, which constitute our status within the society. Each of us, Brandom maintains, "keeps score" of her peers, registering the changes of their commitments or entitlements, while undertaking commitments and conferring entitlements herself.

It is the elaborate structure of these "normative statuses", and their incessant kinematics, that constitutes our social life.

However, now it would seem that explicating the "anthropological difference" we have circumvented the enigmatic concepts of language, reason, or morals only to embrace the no less enigmatic concept of normativity. However, the difference, I am convinced, is that in case of normativity we can tell a plausible story about how normativity might have originated, thus decomposing it into some simple elements, which can be accounted for in naturalistic vein.

3. How did correctness get into the world?

How have we managed to *introduce* correctness (and hence *rules*, for rules, at least as we use the term here, are one side of the coin the other side of which is correctness) into our world? Quite simply, of course: things come to be correct when we come to *take them* as correct; so, we introduced it by starting to take things as correct. But how does one do it, take something for correct?

Imagine you want to make somebody do a particular thing or do a thing in a particular way. How would you set about this? A straightforward option, of course, would be to use brute force. If you want somebody to take one path rather than a second, you may simply preclude the latter by making it physically impossible for them to take it, or by forcing them into the first. A more flexible option would be to use some system of rewards and punishments. Of course, if we want to divert somebody from something they *want* to do and make them do what they *do not want* to do, the reward and/or punishment must be such that it trumps their inclination – if they want to take a particular path, but know that if they do it, they will be beaten by sticks, they may be likely to reconsider.

Now the more intricate the social organization of our communities comes to be, the subtler also the rewards and punishments may become. Perhaps it is not necessary to beat somebody with sticks, it is enough that they know that doing wrong things lowers their social status and thus makes them less likely to achieve what they want in the society. Gradually the impact of the society may become so subtle as to be almost imperceptible, it may turn into mere "social friction", which only those who have been brought up to become sensitive to it can perceive. True, there is still something like reward and punishment, but it is so dissolved into the whole social life that it is not directly felt as such.

At some point along the spectrum from beating with sticks to mere social friction, the impact of the society becomes what we call *normative*. It is no longer a physical dictatorship, but rather the ever-present sense that things should be correctly done in one way rather than in another. But it continues to be grounded by practical attitudes, by the tendencies of individual members of the society to make others (and sooner or later also themselves) do certain things (the "correct" ones) and not do other things (the "incorrect" ones).

Thus, *correctness* is brought about by our taking something as correct, and by synchronizing these takings across members of the society. Hence, it is induced by our *normative attitudes*[8]: by encouraging others to do certain things in certain ways and discouraging them from doing these things in other ways or from doing certain other things. What is also important is that the things to which we react in this way are individuated by means of what kinds of actions they are, not in terms of who the actor is, nor of who is being affected.

Note that in so far as we rely on brute force only, in so far as we prevent someone from doing something by making it impossible for them to do it, there is nothing *normative* in play – we just act as part of nature. Normativity enters as soon as the diverting becomes such that it is possible to ignore it, that the target comes to know that though they *can* do it, they *should not* do it. This establishes the complicated and unique behavioral syndrome that grounds normativity – assuming the kinds of attitudes that opens up the gap between *cannot* and *should not*.

We can imagine the network of normatively established channels for the direction of our actions as constituting a scaffolding that vastly standardizes what we do and how we do it. In this way, it has a lot to do with what Zawidzki (2013) calls *mindshaping*[9]. We need to know what to expect from our peers, we need to be able to "read their minds" (i.e. to "see" what they are after and what they are about to do), and this problem is greatly simplified if the ways we tend to do things are severely limited - if among the vast number of possibilities of what we can do in any given moment there is only a limited number of those that are to be really expected, for these are the way "things are (correctly) done".

In this way, norms, as the behavioral syndromes that drive us to do what we do in certain specific ways, offer the solution to the problem that the world appears to pull us in different directions - we need to be behaviorally as flexible as possible to cope with the natural world, and at the same time we need to be as predictable as possible

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[8] See Brandom (1994), Chapter 1; see also Peregrin (2014), Chapter 4.

[9] See Peregrin (2020).

to cope with the social world. We have acquired a flexible spectrum of behavior, which, for the purposes of social interaction, is rectified into a limited number of "correct" ways.

4. Living within normative worlds

Consider playing chess. What does this amount to, how do I start playing chess? I must accept the rules of the game (as governing the specific chessboard and the pieces that are in front of me). By doing this, the pieces become pawns, bishops, knights etc., and what I do with them has to be within the boundaries of a certain metaphorical space, a space in which chess games develop. However, the delimitation of this space does not merely restrict me because within the space it constitutes, acquire the potential to produce brand new kinds of actions. It is only within the framework of the rules of chess that I am able to check an opponent's king, that I have the freedom to plot how to checkmate my opponent, and that I can organize defenses against her attacks.

Now what we humans have established are multifarious normative spaces in which we can perform similarly unprecedented kinds of actions, save for the fact that they are not mere moves in a game, but often socially much more "serious" actions. The most important space is the space of our language, the "space of meaningfulness"[10]. Just as in the space of chess, pieces of wood become chess pieces that can form an "army" with the potential to fight another "army", so in the space of language certain kinds of sounds become specific kinds of reports, orders or questions, vehicles for playing our "language games", which transform us into the kind of "discursive creatures" that we are.

But by no means is it only the rules of language that constitute a normative space which we inhabit. We have a plethora of other, smaller or bigger, either less or more important, either less or more widespread, normative spaces. We live great parts of our lives in this system of interconnected normative spaces; this is our specific human kind of *niche* – a *normative niche*.

It is the normative niche that promotes us from being merely *organisms*, which only display various kinds of *behavior* to being *actors*, who carry out actions, for which they (should) have *reasons* and for which they become *responsible*. Indeed, what it takes to become an actor is not to be pushed around by natural forces (and "passions

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[10] See Peregrin (2012).

of the soul"), but to possess the ability to make deliberate moves within a "space of reasons" – a space constituted by rules.

Do the normative worlds only *supplement* the natural one for us, or do they also transform the original natural world into a normative shape? I am not sure, but some philosophers argue that the latter is the case, that we can no longer abandon the condominium of normative worlds and behave as mere natural creatures, for the normativity has contaminated the whole of our world. Thus Kern & Moll (2017) argue that even "when a human walks or talks, her walking or talking is guided by an understanding of what it means to walk or talk, including an understanding of how it is done correctly" and they continue: "Wittgenstein expresses this by saying that human activities have the character of 'following a rule'." It is possible to add that this is not only what Wittgenstein, but also what Kant had in mind.

5. Building a "shared future"

The fact that normativity rests on the attitudes of individual people also allows us to use it for the purposes of what I call "building a shared future". (This, I think, is an unprecedented achievement of our species.) The point is that my attitude alone is not really significant, till it is joined and reinforced by resonating attitudes of many others. Thus, my attitude may count as a *proposal*, which might be accepted or rejected (ignored) by the rest of the society.

Hence, normative attitudes can be seen as a tool of our human "niche construction"[11], building our future world. It is clear that we, like other animals, try to make our environment as hospitable to us as possible. We try to eliminate or diminish dangers and hindrances and we try to support and cultivate such aspects of the environment that are helpful. However, not all features of the environment are equally yielding to our interventions. We can move a stone or a tree trunk and it stays where it is. We can mow grass, but it will not stay mown; we have to mow it again after some time. And the most complicated issue is to influence the part of the environment that is constituted by our humans peers: here we must wield continuous pressure, in the form of normative attitudes, to keep it in the shape we think it should be.

Suppose a bunch of prehistoric humans travelling along a track are impeded by a huge tree trunk blocking their way. If they do not possess developed means of communication, it might be reasonable for a member of the tribe to go and start lifting the trunk, even if he alone is obviously unable to move it. This action may be

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[11] Applying this concept to human evolution has produced some interesting theories (Kendal, 2011; Laland & O'Brien, 2011; Odling-Smee et al., 2003).

interpreted as an invitation or an appeal and other members of the tribe may soon join the pioneer and help him remove the obstruction. Of course, if the tribe does possess a developed language, it would be better to make use of an explicit appeal: "Let us move this trunk out of our way!"

This particular situation concerns a transient problem and only minimally involves any shared future. A shared future amounts to building virtual walls to delimit our future (normative) dwellings. Imagine a university: it needs some tangible buildings; but the buildings alone are insufficient to constitute the university, it is much more a matter of the virtual spaces which are built out of rules: of all the things a student or a teacher at a university should and should not do.

Just as in the case of the hindering tree trunk, we can invite others to participate in building a virtual, normative "wall" by simply starting to assume the corresponding normative attitudes; others may then concur (or not). The difference from the previous case is that now the action is not transient, but persistent, and aims to administer an ongoing normative pressure. The situation, of course, accelerates dramatically if a rich language is up and running in the community. (Remember, however, that language itself is already a matter of a normative space – therefore it cannot help us open the normative spaces from the beginning.) If this is the case, then I can not only assume the normative attitudes moving others to do *X* and preventing them from doing *Y*. I can *say* that *X should be done* (or that *it is correct*), while *Y should not be done* (or *it is incorrect*). In addition to perhaps glowering at someone who does not, say, recycle their waste, I can also say things such as "One should recycle" or "It is correct to recycle".

Such pronouncements can be ambiguous, for in one sense they can be read as stating facts concerning the set-up of the society in question: in this case its members tend to assume normative attitudes towards recycling, in particular they approve of recycling. However, if a speaker says such things as "One should recycle" or "It is correct to recycle", it is also possible, and usual, to interpret the speaker as not (only) stating such facts, but assuming the corresponding attitude. Thus, one is interpreted as not only stating a fact in a disengaged way, but as approving of recycling.

Such pronouncements, which I call "normatives"[12], then, are in a sense, successors to the "implicit" normative attitudes, making them explicit. At the same time, these acts are construed as close enough to declarative utterances to be truth evaluable (though their status as successors to normative attitudes might suggest that they should be assimilated rather to a kind of imperative, prescribing people what to do and what not to do). The reason, I think, is that these speech acts are apt tools for building a common future.

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[12] See Peregrin (2014), Chapter 6.

The thing is that the normative worlds in which we humans mostly dwell presuppose a robust resonance of our normative attitudes (perhaps so robust that we can speak, together with Sellars (1962), about "we-intentions", or about "collective intentions"[13]). Such a resonance can be achieved by long-term calibration (which is what happens with the pre-linguistic normative attitudes), or in a much swifter way using the "normatives". The normative as if describes a desired state, for which the utterer votes, and other members of the society may concur – or, as the case may be, refuse to concur. If they do concur, the "wishful thinking" behind the "normative" is turned into reality[14].

All in all, the normative dimension we have added to our world has made it possible (and in fact inevitable) for us to live very specific kinds of lives. The self-reflection which we have imputed to our practices by way of supplying the ever-present evaluability of what we do, so that we do everything as if under the eye of a normative beholder, makes the practices and our lives "self-conscious" in a sense not too dissimilar to Hegel's[15] (though, as we saw, we can account for this also in some very different, perhaps naturalistic terms). In any case, our life is the life of understanding the reflective assessment of our actions.

6. Conclusion

Our human world is specific in that it has a normative dimension: even in many situations where we may not be aware of this, we respect certain rules that delimit it and many things we do (if not everything) are *actions* that may be carried out only within a normative framework. In this sense, our human world, in comparison to the worlds of other animals is special, for in case of no other species do we have reason to think that its members have developed the kind of reflective practices that institute the complex kind of normativity that allows for opening up these normative spaces. Thus, though there is certainly no evolutionary crevasse between us and other animals, there is a significant distinction between our own and their own "form of life": we have developed the tendency to assess each other's behavior that has led us to certain complex feedback-driven behavioral patterns (which we sometimes call rule following), and this, in turn, has given our world a distinctive and ever-present "normative dimension".

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[13] See Koreň et al. (2020).

[14] See Peregrin (2016).

[15] Especially if we read Hegel in the "sociological" terms of some of his interpreters, such as Pinkard (1996) or Brandom (2019).

The answers that the "anthropological difference" is a matter of language or reason, or morals may not be wrong, but they alone are not truly explanatory. I think normativity, on the one hand, is what underlies all of them and which, on the other hand, can be decomposed into its simple components the *raison d'être* of which within evolution can be at least conjectured.

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