

9. The creature comforts of management – on morality and empathic response in economic exchange

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1. INTRODUCTION

Can there be such a thing as a moral foundation of management, and what would it in such a case look like? And what, to begin with, would be a moral foundation in the case of management? This issue, which might seem like a most abstract one, only of interest to people with a distinct philosophical bent, might however be exceedingly practical and tell us a lot about the way in which the complex field of ‘management’ as a set of human practices is enacted and made meaningful, but it also forces us to consider what it is we mean by such a field. The notion of a foundation implies the existence of a certainty, while the notion of morality implies the existence of a judgment – which would mean that we could say a lot of very defined things about a thing that has a moral foundation.

Are we even prepared to accept something like this for this strange business of ours, one we are conditioned to think of as emerging *ex nihilo nihil*? Looking at how business ethics has been discussed, there is often little heed paid to the historical and anthropological constitution thereof (see however, Argandona 2007; Gordon and Thietart 2007), to the point where much of what is written in the field implicitly seems to assume that ethics comes to the economy a posteriori, as an addendum to an assumed Hobbesian state. As a consequence, relatively little attention has been paid to the way in which long-term cultural figurations in the field of social feelings affect contemporary management (cf. Newton 2001), and how moral notions may in fact be understood as a constant traveler to and with enterprise. In the same vein, there exists an implicit assumption that business ethics is intimately tied to the historical contingency that created the legal construct of the modern corporation in the latter part of the 19th century

(although there were similar forms existing in Britain (and other countries) before this, I here take the American understanding of the corporation as a major sea-change in the field of management), which has led to a relative lack of discussion regarding the ethics of the economy, a concept that is much wider-ranging than that of business ethics, and also to a dearth of anthropological viewpoints in the debate thereof.

In this chapter I will argue that in order to develop the thinking of morality and management we need to revisit the very roots of human economies, and maybe even go beyond this historical limit. By bringing in notions from economic anthropology and even primatology I want to show that notions such as empathic response and honor – concepts that have tended to be either ignored completely or discounted as archaic or too trivial – in fact can be used to query the very notion of a business ethics, and also suggest an actual moral foundation of management. Here, I want to problematize the notion that we can point to any clear historical moment from which moment on we can talk of management, and thus challenge the epistemological assumptions I see existing in much of contemporary business studies. In so doing, I want to argue that the power/knowledge regime of management studies suffers from an ethical problem, namely the necessity to limit the discourse to things that can be managed within the framework that constitutes its identity project. By bringing in themes that break with both the modernist and the postmodernist tradition in organization studies, I want to raise the issue of epistemological comfort as a necessary part of ethics – but also as a very dangerous thing in research. As a consequence, we need to ask ourselves whether the limitations we are imposing on our field of study needs to be studied as a form of ethics, and whether the comfortable tag of ‘business ethics’ might in fact make us both less ethically aware and less capable of discussing the wider ethics of exchange.

This is to a great deal influenced by the work of both anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins, but also by the work by primatologists such as Frans de Waal, and the robust attack on ‘veneer theory’ (de Waal 2006). The latter is not necessarily a theory as such, but rather an implicit assumption in much of what is written on the issue of morality and ethics, where one treats these dimensions as a thin coat of civilization applied on the brutish and animal ‘true nature’ of man (and in extension other, related animals). De Waal challenges this, claiming that we can find behaviors in the large primates that fit well with notions of morality, and that further casts doubt on the idea that ethics would be a mark of progress, in the modernist sense. For business ethics this posits an interesting dilemma, for isn’t the way we normally describe the field also a case of ‘veneering’ an assumedly brutish natural state of business? To extend the metaphor,

the field of business ethics might thus be a case of a ‘two coats’-fallacy, the veneering of a field assumed to be populated by people veneered by civilization . . . This is the dilemma my chapter will address.

2. THE WORDS WE USE

In order to analyse the notion of management, I want to start by pointing to some problems of vernacular. Simply put, words such as ‘management’ and ‘business studies’ are fundamentally contingent, not only historically but also within specific language regimes. For instance, this chapter is written in English, even though this is my second or third language, and this phenomenon (i.e. the predominance of English) is rarely questioned. In Swedish, my main language, the word management might be translated into *‘företagsledning’*, or possibly just *‘ledning’*. Business studies is normally translated into *‘företagsekonomi’*, but none of these terms represent perfect translations. In Chinese, the world’s de facto major language, the terms are in all likelihood different yet again. Consequently, we are always already, even in management studies, trapped by language and our assumptions about our contingent words representing specific things in the world.

But as Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953/2001) so aptly pointed out in his philosophy of language, the important aspect of a word or words is not necessarily its definition but its use, and its use can be queried through the company it keeps. More to the point, he argued that an understanding of language use must take into consideration something he called ‘family resemblances’, i.e. the way in which words and concepts have overlapping characteristics and familiarities (cf. Rehn 2008a). As not all of these characteristics need to apply to every concept in the ‘family’, it becomes possible for us to understand, for example, both football and archery as sports, even though they share few or no characteristics. In the context of studying the moral foundations of management, we might start by considering what family ‘management’ belongs to. We might imagine something like:

Management – business – exchange – economy – enterprise – organization
– leadership – and so on.

Such a list might also make us think about the different ways we might portray the field-intersection of management and ethics, so that we might make a second list:

Management ethics – business ethics – exchange ethics – economy ethics
– enterprise ethics – organization ethics – leadership ethics – and so on.

Some of the concepts on this list are familiar (Numbers 1, 2, 6 and 7, for instance), whereas one (enterprise ethics) seems fairly redundant. The interesting thing for me here is the two logical but rarely used concepts of an exchange ethics and an economic ethics. The latter has seen some usage, normally in connection with the academic discipline of economics, or as a more general term of ethics in the economic space (see, for example, Koslowski 2000). The former, however, is very rarely used. Even though some might see this kind of linguistic analysis as a form of sophistry, I contend that it might in fact show us an important avenue of inquiry into how the notion of business ethics can be understood in the context of human history and culture.

Of special interest here is the relation between exchange and management. Oddly enough, the concept of exchange, which widely used in the discourse of management studies, remains under-theorized. Exchange is one of those things we simply assume to exist. In fact, the concept of exchange might seem almost trite to try and analyse, so ingrained does it seem to be in all our dealings. Specifically, it might seem too basic a concept in studies that deal with management and organization, as these phenomena are assumed to exist in a market society (Slater and Tonkiss 2001) and therefore permeated by market exchange. Still, concepts such as interaction, agency, culture and interpretation are also similarly general, but nevertheless vehemently discussed and analysed within the literature. So why has the concept of exchange received so little interest?

Were we to look towards economic anthropology, we would find that exchange is in fact a central concept, perhaps the most important one of all in understanding economic behavior (see Davis 1992), and also a key form of enacting the social. As an example, in a footnote in his seminal *Stone Age Economics* Marshall Sahlins (1972, pp. 185–186) states that for his purpose in writing the book he was not interested in how a particular individual uses what little she has to achieve a goal chosen among alternatives and that he would instead conceive of economy as ‘a component of culture rather than a kind of human action’. In the following footnote (*ibid.*, p. 187) he went on to define economy as ‘the process of (materially) provisioning society’, and remarked that this definition is helpful since it does not necessarily refer to any individual provisioning. Instead, many exchanges may be strictly worthless as ways of bringing anything material to an individual, but they can still be very efficient ways of provisioning society: ‘they [exchanges] maintain social relations, the structure of society, even if they do not to the least advantage the stock of consumables’.

In other words, one of the foundations of economy, and thus management, is ongoing exchange. This might seem self-evident, but it addresses a central issue in trying to address the moral foundations of management. As Sahlins’ points out, exchanges are interesting not because they necessarily

create profits, but because they provision the society/community/culture they exist in through creating patterns and figurations of social relations, i.e. they create the lattice of social acts and understandings we call culture. Inversely, exchange isn't necessarily a function for creating profit and/or improving the status of any one actor, but might in fact be described in its original guise as something akin to a grooming function, the scratching of a particularly social itch. This would be well in line with how economic anthropology (see, for example, Godelier 1972; Wilk 1996) has discussed exchange behaviors in early societies – not as a distinct function, but rather as an institutionalized behavior. For instance, exchange patterns in gift economies – such as the potlatch and the *kula* ring (see Mauss 1924/1950; Malinowski 1922, 1927; cf. Rehn 2001) – might be understood as emerging organically from micro-level behaviors and becoming functional only after the fact. This is for instance the argument in Claes Gustafsson's (1994) regrettably untranslated *Produktion av allvar* [*The Production of Seriousness*], where the usual teleological explanations for economic institutions are mercilessly criticized as having no analytical basis. Rather, Gustafsson argues, we should adopt an anthropological understanding of the economic world, and accept that the institutionalized patterns we can now observe may well have emerged quite spontaneously, and that the reason for them created *post hoc*. This is of course completely in line with the argumentation in Sahlin's (1972) brilliant essay *The Original Affluent Society* (published as the first essay in *Stone Age Economics*), in which he shows that the birth of structured economic behavior in all likelihood did not originate out of a need to combat dearth and famine, but rather out of the sheer amount of free time hunter-gatherers (see also Gowdy 1998) have at their disposal. Succinctly put, economy (and in extension management) can anthropologically be understood less as a necessary function, and more as a symptom of idleness in early communities, as the continued scratching of a social itch brought on not by pressing need but by a desire to pass the time.

3. THE MORALITY OF EXCHANGE

Hunters and gatherers have by force of circumstance an objectively low standard of living. But taken as their *objective*, and given their adequate means of production, all the people's material wants usually can be easily satisfied. The evolution of economy has known, then, two contradictory movements: enriching but at the same time impoverishing, appropriating in relation to nature but expropriating in relation to man. (Sahlins 1972, pp. 36–37)

Such a view suggests two things. One, exchanges contain a fundamental element of grooming behaviors, of creating interpersonal comfort by

engaging in social intercourse mediated through mechanisms we have later come to call economic. Two, in assessing the makeup of economic orders, we need to be wary of teleological explanations, insofar as they do not necessarily function as adequate descriptions of the assumed foundation of the order itself. Put somewhat differently, if we assume exchange is at the heart of economy, and that economy is a necessary precondition of talking about management, we cannot through this immediately assume that there is any specific functional form which we can go back to in order to debate ethics and morality. The notion of a moral foundation may in fact be misleading, in that it assumes that there is a specific rationality that this morality is keeping in check. What Sahlins and Gustafsson so brilliantly showed was that there might never have been a definitional moment of calculative rationality that kick-started economic thinking, no reckoning of transaction-costs or stakeholder analysis, but rather something much more like a game, a set of exchanges played out in order to instill into the community a sense of a shared ritual. In other words, what if economy started out as a form of comforting?

In fact, if we look to the existing anthropological data regarding exchange, and compare the patterns between intra- and inter-community exchange, a very clear pattern emerges. In most societies where exchange has been analysed, exploitation of a partner that exists within the group that engages in the most intensive exchange – i.e. the partners within a community – is frowned upon, even punished. However, cheating somebody who comes from very far away is seen as less problematic, and in some cases even laudable. In traditional economic analysis (as well as in most cases of business ethics) this would be explained by reference to cost–benefit analyses. Since a trader from far away will not come by often, and might never come by again, it is ‘economic’ to cheat him, since the gains outweigh the risks. The same would then be inverted within the community. This is, however, a very odd way of looking at it. If one wants to look at the pecuniary or material value-benefits, intra-community exchanges have little to none. Rather, these exchanges often represent institutions that in time and work expended cost more than they bring in – situations an economic agent who coordinates behaviors through cost–benefit analyses would not engage in. Instead, our assumed rational agent would (if we believe those arguing for an economics-based understanding of man) be more likely to cheat a person the greater a chance this represents a case where cost-efficient exchange can be engaged in. In cases with low to no profits, and thus low to no economic losses to be had through exclusion – be moral. In cases with high profits, and thus high losses to be had – cheat away. This, seemingly, would be how an economist would explain early trading behaviors.

The error in this argument is identical to the fallacy that besets much of the thinking on business ethics, namely that exchange (as the basic form of economic behavior) must be understood as driven by the strive for benefit for either of the parties. Important to note here is that in Sahlins' now often forgotten treatment of early economies, his argument was that not only could a person enter into exchange relations without expecting a profit, the other party might as well. This is exceptionally important, for it establishes that when querying the logic of exchange we need not try to find a specific form of analysis of outcome, but can instead study the exchange *as it is*.

This, which we could call a phenomenological analysis of exchange (cf. Bibard 2007), would thus look at what takes place when, for example, early man started exchanging material goods within a tight-knit community dominated by kinship ties. Looking to how, for example, gifting behaviors, for instance the exchange of ceremonial tokens or icons, is conducted shows us how early exchange built not so much on the creation of wealth or material value (in fact, the process is in many cases highly wasteful (cf. Bataille 1967/1991)) but the establishment and upkeep of identities and social relations – as we can see in the case of the *kula*.

4. THE RETURN OF THE *KULA*

Based on extensive fieldwork among the people of the Trobriand Islands in Melanesia, Bronislaw Malinowski published a series of books and articles on the different aspects of their culture. Of these, two books are particularly well known, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) and *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (1927). It is in the earlier of the two in which the particular institution of the *kula* is expounded upon, and the description of this circulation of valuables in the Trobriand Islands still holds a central place in the history of economic anthropology.

The analysis begins with an observation that stands at odds with the then generally held belief that 'primitive' societies lacked economies, a fallacy that still exists, albeit in a somewhat modulated and subconscious form, in modern thought concerning economic organizing. Although such societies may exhibit some barter, even some trade, they were not seen as developed enough to have mastered the art of economic exchange. As they lacked financial institutions, their economic behavior was assumed to be of a non-developed kind, which (assumedly) in time could grow into a real system of exchanges, i.e. a market economy. But what Malinowski observed on, for example, the island of Kiriwina, was that there was a continuous and omnipresent exchange of goods, and that these exchanges were extensive both in their geographical dispersal and with regards to

the amount of time and resources the islanders put into them. Within the islands there existed advanced and deeply embedded forms of interaction, where exchange and kinship relations were intertwined so as to make them indivisible, but it was the far more dramatic exchanges between the islands that became the focus of Malinowski's early study. He noticed that there existed a traditional system of exchanges that covered the islands as a whole, one where valuables circulated in a '*kula* ring' spanning several hundred miles. In this, two specific articles circulate in opposite directions, creating both a trade route and a distinct cultural pattern, one that encompasses all the members of the societies that take part. The first object, which circulated clockwise (assuming you could observe the islands from above, a vantage point from where they form a kind of circular pattern), was the *soulava*. These were shell necklaces, considered to be male and worn by women, which were constructed by stringing together disks of shells with red mother-of-pearl. The opposite object, the *mwali*, were armbands constructed through breaking off and polishing rings from large shells. *Mwali* were seen as female, worn by men and circulated counter-clockwise. Together they are referred to as the *vaygu'a* and the exchange of these within the *kula* ring constituted an economy unto itself where an intricate structure of rules and conventions ordered their movement.

In the *kula*, the possession of one of the *vaygu'a*-objects is a matter of great pride and satisfaction. The present custodian of an object will often gather people around him and tell the tale of the object, complete with lists of previous custodians. Still, these objects must continuously be kept in motion and given away to the next member in the *kula* ring. As the objects travel in opposite directions, a participant will have a partner or partners to whom all *mwali* are subsequently given and from whom *soulava* will be received. Likewise he will have an opposite partner or partners, to whom *soulava* goes and *mwali* is received. These relations are often enduring and life-long, although new participants can enter from time to time. In some areas, the *kula* is reserved for tribal chiefs, but this exclusivity isn't total. And although it is true that *mwali* are continuously exchanged for *soulava*, this exchange is not conducted in a way that would enable us to liken it with trade.

Superficially viewed, the *vaygu'a*-objects are mere trinkets of extremely limited economic value. But the *kula* system in which these circulate can be seen as the most important institution on the islands, and to a great extent a person's social standing is determined to his position in this system. The travels entailed in these exchanges marked a significant exertion and usage of tribal resources, and to a great degree this exertion was only compounded upon, with participants working hard to create, for example, special ceremonial boats with which to travel. The travels that

were undertaken in order to give the objects away could furthermore be very perilous, but were undertaken with diligence and a pronounced enthusiasm. And what is more, all this activity was in order to get and give objects that participants very well could have manufactured themselves, at a fraction of the cost in time and resources (the shells are not particularly rare, and the objects are not hard to create). Despite the ‘uneconomic’ nature of this, the institution is seen by both Malinowski and Mauss (and later scholars) as both central and functional to the inter- and intra-tribal economies. Mauss, who devotes much of the beginning of his *The Gift* (1924/1950) to a description of the *kula*, sees in this a pure example of the ‘total social phenomenon’ of the gift as it exists in archaic societies. But what Malinowski tries to do, something that gives his analysis a particularly political bent, is to show that far from being a childish and irrational custom of childish and irrational natives, the *kula* is in fact an inherently functional institution, even an efficient one. The perspective of classical economics is for him ethnocentric and arrogant as it trivializes all such economic behavior that doesn’t fit into the market system of exchange. He writes in the conclusion of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*:

At one or two places in the previous chapters, a somewhat detailed digression was made in order to criticise. . . the conception of a rational being who wants nothing but to satisfy his simplest needs and does it according to the economic principle of least effort. . . Now I hope that. . . the meaning of the Kula will consist in being instrumental to dispell such crude, rationalistic conceptions of primitive mankind, and to induce both the speculator and the observer to deepen the analysis of economic facts. (Malinowski 1922, p. 516)

When a participant in the *kula* has possession of one of the objects, he will for a time hold on to it and his status will be higher due to this. As tales about the objects are in continuous motion, and he has received the object from one of his trading-partners, his possession of the object in question will be well known to those that interact with him. After a while these will, within the boundaries for propriety both with regards to the time it has been in his possession and to the rules of *kula* exchange, engage with him in order to keep the gift circulating. They may give smaller gifts to make him bound by reciprocity, or otherwise attempt to influence him. As there may be several partners to whom he can give the *vaygu’a*-object, he will choose between these and after a while prepare his boats and voyage to a trade-partner. Here, he will give the object to him, as is befitting the ritual. This is done in a fashion that intentionally downplays the value of what is given:

The act of giving itself assumes very solemn forms: the thing received is disclaimed and mistrusted; it is only taken up for a moment, after it has been

cast at one's feet. The giver affects an exaggerated modesty: having solemnly brought on his present, to the sound of a seashell, he excuses himself for giving only the last of what remains to him, and throws down the object to be given at the feet of his rival and partner. (Mauss 1924/1990, pp. 22–23)

To conduct oneself honorably, you cannot show any greediness or trading behavior in the *kula*. Although there is continuous talk about what one wishes to gain [*sic*] or what someone else has received in the *kula*, to do this in an open manner would be inappropriate. As the objects are never traded directly, which is further exemplified in the custom of not even giving them hand-to-hand but by throwing them to the ground instead, there is none of the direct and explicit computability we are accustomed to present in trade. Trading, which exists in parallel but which is strictly distinct, is called *gimwali* and is markedly 'economic'. Here, you haggle over prices and try to negotiate maximizing outcomes. To engage in this is fully normal, and not associated with any moral stigma; it is merely a normal trading situation. But if the boundaries between these two institutions are breeched, condemnation will ensue. If a *kula* is conducted in a sloppy way, too quickly or without proper keeping with etiquette – or if a participant tries too overtly to negotiate better terms for himself in the exchange – it is said that it is conducted 'as if it were *gimwali*' (Malinowski 1922, p. 97), something that is unfitting honorable men. One of the most important aspects of the *kula* is that it must portray and represent the generosity, freedom and unselfishness of the participants, as well as their power in being able to forgo valuables. This power can be viewed in many ways, but what such a ritual shows is that the participants can communicate their independence of material restraints, i.e. their affluence. And at the same time show us that exchange need not be founded on efficiencies in the traditional, 'economic' sense, but instead on processes of building friendships, displaying friendships, proving oneself to be a man of honor, and so on – all processes of social feelings. All of this is old news to the field of economic anthropology, but it contains a puzzle when talking about morality in the field of business.

What social feelings – by which I mean the set of emotional and sense-making processes that constitute embodied knowledge of interaction behaviors in the social animal – represent here is something quite different from the assumed calculative rationality of *Homo æconomicus*, and my contention is that this set of feelings can be referred to as the actual moral foundation of management. This as the capacity for empathic response and emergent social grooming functions (Gustafsson 1994) for me stands as both by necessity more primal than the equally cultural capacity for calculative rationality – as the need for the latter should only emerge in

more complex settings whereas the former will be necessary in all social interactions – and having greater explanatory force than models reducing human interaction to algorithms and cost–benefit analyses.

5. MANAGEMENT AS MONKEY BUSINESS

In the context of this chapter this points to social feelings being something more complex than merely veneer applied to a state of *homo Homini lupus*, and instead something much more fundamental, a natural state from which the economic grows rather than vice versa. It also points to exchange as something which finds its base in an indelible and quite possibly biologically given preference to keep up social contacts. The latter point demands an explanation. Within the social sciences, the change in thinking that has been described by and through terms such as ‘the linguistic turn’, ‘social construction’, ‘post-structuralism’, ‘cultural studies’ and a plethora of others, has made calls to biology and genetics anathema. For many, particularly in the field of critical management studies or critical business ethics, there is no greater sin than invoking explanations from biology, as this is often mistakenly assumed to be a call to social Darwinism. This, however, is a tragic mistake.

One common origin-myth of organizing refers to the necessity of cooperation for sheer survival, in effect arguing that Neolithic man (or whichever early ancestor one wants to use as origin-point) started the first organization for necessary, rational and calculable reasons – something akin to a Neanderthal *Homo aeconomicus*. Some, like Paul Seabright, even refer to economic life as having a biological basis, and talk about the ‘natural history of economic life’ (the subtitle of Seabright 2004).

Task-sharing takes place to a limited degree in all species that reproduce sexually . . . but human beings’ capacity – unique in nature, as we have seen – to share tasks regularly and elaborately with others to whom they are unrelated has enabled them to exploit the presence of large numbers in a way unavailable to higher mammals. (Seabright 2004, p. 36)

Here unique capacities lead, in full accordance with the precepts of strategic management, seamlessly to exploitation of an advantage. Simple as that. However, very little in these socio-biological explanations show why simple task-sharing (such as the all-time favorite example, sexual reproduction) would lead to advanced organizations. And although the Darwinian solve-all of ‘survival’ is regularly brandished, this actually solves very little. The existence of an advantage may seem like enough of a reason to utilize it, but obviously this is not a logical necessity.

Let us ponder this in the context of our earlier discussion for a moment. According to Sahlins (cf. Gowdy 1998), Neolithic man led a fairly nice and uncomplicated life. Four hours of daily work (or less) sustained his/her needs, and the rest was spent chatting, playing, having sex and napping. Now, obviously, some would see this as a utopian existence. Still, it is conceivable that some of these antediluvian layabouts got bored, and made up alternative amusement – like organizing! As Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson (1996) show in their study of chimpanzees, organizing among these normally takes place not due to any specific stimulus, but as a reaction to boredom. All of a sudden, a chimpanzee may start beating on the ground with some branches, screeching and jumping around. After a while, others will join in, until a critical mass is reached. This can then lead to a war-party, which will attack neighboring flocks of apes, killing and raping with some abandon. In such a manner, even our animal cousins can create at the very least a temporary organization, but not out of any rational reason or distinct necessity. Chimpanzees may enjoy these little forays into organized mayhem, but they do not form these bands out of any pressing need – unless breaking up the monotony of a peaceful and unproblematic existence is seen as a need. Obviously, this kind of diversion takes on many forms. Chimpanzees play, engage in frivolous sexual activity, fling dung at each other for fun, and so on. None of these have clear-cut evolutionary advantages, and as socio-biologists invent ever-more fanciful explanations regarding such behavior, the great apes seem to find new ways to simply amuse themselves. Even hunting, which many reference as an origin-point of sorts for organized behavior, seems to be less than rational when observed among the chimpanzees:

My work at Gombe has shown that the energetic balance involved in hunting rarely tips in favor of a nutritional motive. Most members of the hunting party receive very little meat for their effort, and the number of chimp-hours expended on the hunt plus the long begging and sharing session that follows it can be enormously costly relative to the quantity of meat that is usually available. The most typical catch is a one-kilogram baby monkey, divided among up to twenty hunters. So chimpanzees engage in an energy-expensive behavior, and most fail to recoup their caloric investment. (Stanford 1999, pp. 97–98)

The difference between my position (drawn from the work of primatologists such as de Waal and Stanford) and that of socio-biologists in the social sciences (see for example, Nicholson 1997, Seabright 2004) should be obvious. I contend that we can trace complex social behaviors back through the biological veil of our separation from the other great apes, but not in order to claim that our social feelings are strictly biological or genetic, but rather that culture and social feelings exist on a much more

fundamental level than socio-biologists are normally prepared to admit. Where this debate has often hinged on finding 'rational genetic' explanations for human behavior, even a passing interest in primatology shows that the kind of rationality that one seeks is not necessarily present in 'nature' either. Chimpanzees hunt for fun, capture small monkeys and use them as dolls (Stanford 1999), engage in war parties and so on, behaviors that are closer to the argument for the development of human economies as presented by Sahlins and Gustafsson than anything remotely like the actions of a purely efficient self-interested optimizer.

Returning to our Neolithic ancestors, we can now ask whether the adoption of increasingly intricate task-sharing so praised by Seabright (2004) is a result of a necessity a priori, or in fact born out of the luxury of abundant leisure time? If we accept the works of Sahlins (1972) and Gowdy (1998) as at least possible conjectures, then the development of organizations would not have been started due to a need for such, unless we account for their importance as social activities. The hunting behaviors of chimpanzees and the organizing activities of early man might in fact best be seen as precisely the kind of grooming activity postulated earlier, activities engaged in because animals with social feelings (i.e. capacity for empathic response) have something akin to a biological propensity (cf. Popper 1990) to engage in social activities. We should of course not see this need as a need in a limited sense, but rather as the likely realization of a biological possibility, much as the development of language in *Homo sapiens*, which in part was dependent on the complex genetic contingency of how our mouth cavities, tongue and vocal cords happen to match and make complex sounds possible. Nor should we see it as a given, except after the fact. But with this fact, with these activities, and seeing to the problems in presenting calculative rationality as an explanation, it becomes evermore clear that we need to revisit the notion of a moral foundation.

6. AGAINST ANTHROPOCENTRISM: EMPATHIC RESPONSE AND THE MORAL FOUNDATIONS OF MANAGEMENT

Regardless if we look to the economic life of early man or the organizing behavior of our close ancestors, we will find a much more complex set of behaviors than is normally assumed. In the former case, economic and organizational development appears as something much more complicated than just a response to the stimulus of dearth and famine. In the latter, we cannot discount the existence of complex organized behavior engaged in for reasons going beyond simple survival. In both cases we

need to go beyond the simple surface, the veneer referred to by Frans de Waal (2006; cf. Cheney and Seyfarth, 2007).

In fact, things may be exactly the other way around. Instead of language and culture appearing with a Big Bang in our species and then transforming the way we relate to each other, Greenspan and Shanker (2004) propose that it is from early emotional connections and ‘proto conversations’ between mother and child (cf. Trevarthen 1993) that language and culture sprang. Instead of empathy being an endpoint, it may have been the starting point. (de Waal 2006, p. 23)

The critical part of de Waal’s argument is that he wants to move the debate regarding morality and ethics away from the assumption that these are behaviors that have endowed upon the human animal, and upon the human animal alone, as a kind of veneer given by the advance of civilization. By studying ongoing social behaviors among monkey and apes, he has been able to show in them complex and ongoing interactions that seem to fit very well with social emotions such as generosity, gratitude, fairness and even community concern. All these build on the capacity for empathic response, i.e. the capacity of ‘putting oneself in the place of another’, realizing that one is interacting with a being that is also an individual, and being able to translate between one’s own emotional states and those of the other. For instance, de Waal (2006, p. 29) references a study by Masserman et al., which showed that rhesus monkeys would not interact with a food delivery system when they realized that doing so sent a painful shock to another monkey. Rather than continuing to hurt another, the monkeys would simply refuse food, even starve. In other words, on a basic level of ethics, monkeys were shown to be quite capable of making a long-term ethical decision that went against its own self-interest, simply in order not to hurt another being. This kind of empathy is at the base of social feelings, and de Waal carefully lays out the wide variety of moral behaviors that apes and monkeys are in fact capable of.

By doing so, de Waal delivers a stinging criticism against those who would see ethics and morality as something that is merely applied on top of an assumedly brutish nature, and claims that morality is as much part of our ‘natural makeup’ as the capacity for complex calculations is. We are moral *to begin with*, and have been so for a very, very long time, much longer than we have engaged in anything like more complex economic behaviors. Insights from primatology could thus be used to critique those forms of ethical argumentation that would postulate self-interest as a natural state – the popularity of dressing up reductionism as ‘methodological individualism’ would be a good candidate – by showing that this is not only sociologically problematic and philosophically weak, it builds on a mistake regarding nature as well. In a move that will surely be seen

as downright perverse by some, the natural sciences might actually be a friend of critical management studies (by any other name).

Similarly, the arguments that can be drawn from economic anthropology attack the notion that economy started out of a 'natural state' where dearth and the war of all upon all reigned. Rather than seeing the cultural aspect of the economy as a veneer applied to a necessity of profit and a relentless fight against lack, we can from people like Sahlins infer a quite different history, one where dearth, lack and radical competition are in fact *effects* of the cultural move towards collecting things, setting up permanent homesteads, establishing trade. The natural foundation we normally if implicitly assume simply isn't there. This is why it is necessary to inquire more deeply into the moral foundations of management – they may be quite different from the ones we are used to.

Both insights, that primates may be more fundamentally moral than we give them credit for and that the early stages of economy might have been a case of serious play bring us back to social feelings as a shared foundation. There exists a moral foundation for management simply because there exists a moral foundation for our very being as social animals, and this can be traced back far beyond the usual borders of how business ethics is thought about. By challenging the usual assumptions about self-interest (or not) in novel ways, the field could be extended, and old argumentations broken up. But there also exists a moral foundation to the birth of economy, namely that in the development of exchange behaviors, by necessity, there existed a dimension of social feelings, and in order to have a fully developed theory of economy we need to revisit this anthropological core. This dual query regarding the standing of social feelings in the possibility to establish an original economy to actually manage might seem to touch upon a rather abstract, even irrelevant issue, but I contend that in order to have a theoretical foundation one needs to free the discussion of overly anthropocentric ideas. This would include at least entertaining the notion that we are at heart creatures of comfort, and that the grooming we still engage in is in fact something basic and necessary rather than a marginal and contingent phenomenon.

7. MANAGEMENT AS COMFORT, MANAGEMENT STUDIES AS COMFORTABLE

In other words, to me management is impossible without social feelings, and the category of comfort is critical if we want to fully understand the origin and the trajectory of economy as a human endeavor. From early on, we comfort each other and engage in activities that represent grooming

behaviors – chatting, agreeing, puttering about. And this is in fact what we have been doing throughout the ages. Grooming is a social activity that builds on social feelings, and existence of this even in animals such as chimpanzees gives us the possibility of re-imagining the trajectories and connections of social development. If we accept the challenge from economic anthropology that exchange need not be a case of profit-seeking but might instead have originated out of empathic relationships and their continuation, we get a situation where comfort and economy in fact are irrevocably intertwined, giving us a very clear moral foundation of management.

However, the term ‘comfort’ also contains another side, one that might be analytically much more problematic. As I have argued elsewhere (Rehn 2008b), management studies is to a great extent defined through the ways it has chosen to remain affixed to a set of unchallenged assumption, i.e. defined by a kind of epistemological comfort. By sticking to the same ideas and the same assumptions, the field itself has become something akin to a gang of baboons picking each other’s nits – lovely but far removed from an active intellectual debate. The field of business ethics can likewise be criticized for being too nice for its own good, with the same references and the same calls to theorists repeated *ad infinitum* out of an unconscious desire to keep the debate comfortable. So where comfort might be exceptionally important to establish and keep up an economy, the same comfort might very well stifle an intellectual debate.

Therefore, this text has quite consciously been written in order to be uncomfortable. I make no claims to have fully shown how economic anthropology and primatology can be used to query business ethics, I have merely tried to show that there are questions about the foundations of our field that are rarely asked, because we are not comfortable with seeing apes as moral agents or questioning the origins of economy. However, *exactly* because this is uncomfortable, these are questions and issues that should be raised. If we are to discount things because they do not fit in elegantly with our prevailing ideas about things, we are not researchers but ideologues. And if we are to understand morals, we cannot let our moralizations about the world guide us. In other words, if we truly want to inquire into the moral foundations of management, we can never let ourselves be creatures of comfort.

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