

Nature as Convention: A Future Moral Relationship With Humans?

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the relationship between nature and ethics, particularly by considering nature as a convention, the result of a social agreement, which is based on the criterion of social utility. In order to analyse this relationship, my assumption takes into consideration three pathways: evolutionary ethics, with reference to Paul Rée; error theory, with reference to John Mackie; and the concept of commodification, with reference to Ralph W. Emerson. I try to connect these perspectives in order to re-define the concepts of judgment and objectivity, showing that both can be viewed as standard or criteria of evaluation according to specific context and needs. My final aim is to show that Emerson's concept of commodification corroborates the interpretation of nature in relation with the concept of social utility.

Keywords: ethics, environment, nature, utility, evolutionism.

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ISSN 2533-0675

JPC © 2018

DOI: 10.17605/OSF.IO/BZWTR

journalpc.org

1. Moral existence of nature

My initial assumption in this short essay is that nature does not exist. Particularly, in moral terms. It is certainly an assumption that sounds rude and somehow hasty. Nonetheless, it would be shallow to consider it as merely catchy. I mean that nature does not exist but in specific relationships. I will try to say something about them, beginning with three pathways: 1) evolutionary ethics; 2) error theory; 3) the concept of commodification. For the first element, I will refer to Paul Rée; for the second, I will take John Mackie into consideration; for the third, I will conclude with Ralph Waldo Emerson.

It is possible to get to evolutionary ethics by several ways and one of the most significant is certainly pragmatism, particularly in John Dewey's view. I will not say much on Dewey here, but it is not possible to ignore that the whole of Dewey's philosophy pays tribute to evolutionism, that pragmatism itself is evolutionism, and that all Dewey's early works (two last decades of the nineteenth century) is an explicit inquiry around Darwinism. I like to report this passage by Dewey: "Education and morals will begin to find themselves on the same road of advance that say chemical industry and medicine have found for themselves when they too learn fully the lesson of wholehearted and unremitting attention to means and conditions [...]. In the name of the ideal we fall back to upon mere luck and chance and magic or exhortation and preaching; [...] Until the dogma of fixed unchangeable types and species [...] had been shaken in its hold upon the science of life, it was impossible that the new ideas and method should be made at home in social and moral life" (Dewey 1920, pp. 121-3).

Beyond the technically evolutionary issue concerning the fixed types, Dewey underlines the importance of material conditions. It seems that to mention material conditions, contexts, situations, means and the likes in ethics be a sort of contamination. According to several standpoints, it is quite difficult to pretend to ignore the weight that material conditions have on the final formulation of social, economic, political, and moral orders that communities set. The fact that certain peoples give more importance to specific values, or have a language that contains a sole word to refer several kinds of love – as the word ‘fago’ for the Ifaluk (Nussbaum 2004, p. 197) –, or express emotions in opposite manners (think of mourning expressed by heartrending cries by Balinese peoples, or soberly in the western countries) often has to do with material conditions: environmental, territorial, and climatic conditions (predators, enemies, resources, natural elements or disasters) in which peoples and communities settle and develop. In Fernando Pessoa’s words, this means that “life is whatever we conceive it to be. For the farmer who considers his field to be everything, the field is an empire. For a Caesar whose empire is still not enough, the empire is a field. The poor man possesses an empire, the great man a field. All that we truly possess are our own sensations; it is in them, rather than in what they sense, that we must base our life’s reality” (Pessoa 2002, p. 102).

This topic would call for a significantly longer analysis (Nussbaum’s work is some 800 pages), but my aim now is to say that it is possible to get to evolutionary ethics – besides Dewey – by Paul Rée. He cannot only be remembered for the ménage à trois with Nietzsche and the young Russian woman, Lou Salomé. Rée is impressed by the reading of Darwin’s work and intends to apply his theory to ethics, by bringing it back to the ground of facticity. As he states, “since Lamarck and Darwin have writ-

ten, moral phenomena can be traced back to natural causes just as much as physical phenomena: moral man stands no closer to the intelligible world than physical man” (Rée 1877, p. 87).

2. Moral criterion of social utility

This is my first point: evolutionary ethics and a criterion of social utility. To quickly hop to the core theme, humans, for instance, tend to appreciate truth and, by consequence, to define it as a value; this happens because humans have always preferred a true description about a source of food or the presence of a danger, for the sake of survival.

Rée’s criterion of utility, which also inspired Nietzsche, is quite simple: no innate moral sensations exist that can determine the human evaluation of the good; “the concepts of good and evil simply are conventions of humans whose foundation is a unique evaluation criterion, utility. Utility is [...] the sound basis which all the human moral constructions have originally been settled on. [...] All that humans have originally experienced as useful and convenient, not only according to themselves, but above all according to the community which they belonged to, was praised and defined good; on the contrary, all that was detrimental, was blamed and defined as evil” (Vignali 2005, p. 17).

As Rée writes, “egoistic actions that occur at the expense of others were originally condemned on account of their harmfulness; non-egoistic actions were originally praised on account of their utility. Later, the former were condemned in their own right, and the latter praised in their

own right” (Rée 1877, p. 99). Accordingly, Nietzsche states: “First of all, one calls individual actions good or bad quite irrespective of their motives but solely on account of their useful or harmful consequences. Soon, however, one forgets the origin of these designations and believes that the quality of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ is inherent in the actions themselves, irrespective of their consequences” (Nietzsche 2004, p. 39).

It is self-evident that “utility that is the basis for every moral form is not simply the utility of the single human being, but the utility of the community which the individual belongs to, that is social utility” (Vignali 2005, p. 18). Such a standpoint, which would call for a deeper examination of what ‘social utility’ means and what the limits for the self-determination of a community are, offers the chance to shift the analysis of the good to the consequences of a particular political and moral order: as Dewey reminded, we should not wonder whether idealism is better than empiricism, or whether someone’s principles are truer than someone else’s ones; on the contrary, we should wonder whether a specific moral code opens the mind, stimulates the senses and perception, fosters critical thinking, allows for personal development and so on.

The separation of utility and good has not been the result of a casual operation, but the response to an idea that we find in both Rée and Nietzsche, that is “humans are not any more conscious of the origin of their moral evaluations because it fell down to obscurity over time” (Vignali 2005, p. 18).

Rée refers to oblivion because our moral judgments, which are grounded in utility, tend to become *per se* judgments over time and by habit. In his terms, “it follows from what has just been said that the good (non-egoistic) has been praised on account of its utility, because it brings

us closer to a state of greater happiness. Nowadays, however, we do not praise the good because of its useful consequences, but it instead appears to us praiseworthy in its own right, independently of all consequences. Although it may originally have been praised on account of its utility, afterward people became accustomed to praising it and forgot that this praise was originally based on usefulness to the community” (Rée 1877, p. 98).

It is not my intention to explore the radical critique to metaphysics – it would suffice to mention Rée’s claim in §184 of his *Philosophie*, that “God and the thing-in-itself are reveries” (Rée 1903, pp. 348-349). It is clear that the issue of moral judgment implies a recovery of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, as we find it in Locke, Hume, and Kant. I will not mention Descartes’ Sixth Meditation, nor Locke’s and Hume’s essays on the intellect, but I will refer to Richard Hare’s work, which is one of the main references in John Mackie’s theory, that I listed as my second point at the beginning. In his *Ontology in Ethics*, Hare states that the main issue in moral realism goes beyond the necessity to establish whether moral qualities exist in *rerum natura* or be part of the fabric of the world. Despite Hare states that the central topic be to try to determine the meaning of the word ‘exist’, there is an urgent issue that concerns the primary and secondary qualities; particularly, he attempts to explain that to treat the secondary qualities, e.g. the colour red (redness), as primary qualities, and the moral qualities, e.g. the wrong (wrongness), as sensitive qualities, is totally unacceptable: redness is a quality that depends upon perception and observation, though an objective claim is possible, unless of colour-blindness; while wrongness – as all moral qualities – is grounded in specific attitudes and not in perception

and observation: and these attitudes are approval and disapproval, agreement and disagreement, which all are conventions.

So, what are moral qualities? Are they qualities of primary or secondary type, or none of them? As Hare states, “the ascription of redness, for example, is governed by conventions which do not allow two people, faced with the same object in the same light in normal circumstances, to say, one of them that it is red and the other that it is not. One of them must be in breach of the conventions. He is in breach of them even if his mistake is due to colour- blindness. But the ascription of wrongness is governed by conventions which do allow you and me, confronted by the same act in normal and identical circumstances, to go on saying, one of us that it is wrong and the other that it is not wrong, if that is what we respectively think. We can reason about it in the hope that one will convince the other; but neither of us is constrained by our observation of the facts of the case and the correct use of words” (Hare 1985, p. 47).

3. Moral criteria of social agreement and disagreement

The centrality of convention refers to the concept of agreement and disagreement. As Hurley reminds (1985, p. 60), this is an important point in Wittgenstein’s argument, which calls for an evaluation of the logic antecedent with respect to the rule: Wittgenstein’s argument too, since it implies a definition of agreement, which in turn calls for an evaluation of the logical antecedent with respect to the rule: “If you measure a table with a yardstick, are you also measuring the yardstick? If you are measuring the yardstick, then you cannot be measuring

the table at the same time” (Wittgenstein 1978, III, p. 74). As it is well known, in Wittgenstein’s view, practices are the ground of every possible attribution of sense: “The words ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are used when giving instruction in proceeding according to a rule. The word ‘right’ makes the pupil go on, the word ‘wrong’ holds him back. Now could one explain these rules to a pupil by saying instead: ‘this agrees with the rule – that not’? Well yes, if he has a concept of agreement. But what if this has yet to be formed? (The point is how he reacts to the word ‘agree’). One does not learn to obey a rule by first learning the use of the word ‘agreement.’ Rather, one learns the meaning of ‘agreement’ by learning to follow a rule” (Wittgenstein 1978, VII, p. 39).

And this leads me to my second point: Mackie’s error theory. Briefly, Mackie’s analysis is grounded in two different arguments: 1) the argument from relativity and 2) the argument from queerness. The first argument is developed according to the wide variability of beliefs and moral codes among different societies and cultural groups. Moral diversity and disagreement would demonstrate the difficulty to hold objectivity in the traditional sense. The second argument is based on the distinction between primary and secondary qualities – though not explicitly and somehow partially. According to Mackie, the assumption of the existence of objective values would require a relationship with special entities or qualities “of a very strange sort” (Mackie 1990, p. 38).

Now, these two arguments align Mackie’s view with Hare’s and Wittgenstein’s claims, and underline the importance of agreement: “Disagreement about moral codes seems to reflect people’s adherence to and participation in different ways of life... It is that people approve of monogamy because they participate in a monogamous way of life rather than

that they participate in a monogamous way of life because they approve of monogamy” (Mackie 1977, p. 36). In other terms, it is because people practise a specific lifestyle that they create and approve the related principle and not the contrary. This is what is called ‘inversion of the causal connection’. The existence of this inversion would be confirmed by the fact that generally there are not moral codes for practices that we do not experience: for instance, so far, nobody has formulated a commandment that prohibits penguins coveting a man’s wife.

The key goal of this thesis is to avoid incurring in the main error connected to objectivity, that is to transform it in a value, while it should be considered as a standard of evaluation: “The classing of wool, the grading of apples, the awarding of prizes at sheepdog trials, flower shows, skating and diving championships, and even the marking of examination papers are carried out in relation to standards of quality or merit which are peculiar to each particular subject-matter or type of contest, which may be explicitly laid down but which, even if they are nowhere explicitly stated, are fairly well understood and agreed by those who are recognized as judges or experts in each particular field. Given any sufficiently determinate standards, it will be an objective issue, a matter of truth and falsehood, how well any particular specimen measures up to those standards. Comparative judgements in particular will be capable of truth and falsehood: it will be a factual question whether this sheepdog has performed better than that one. The subjectivist about values, then, is not denying that there can be objective evaluations relative to standards, and these are as possible in the aesthetic and moral fields as in any of those just mentioned” (Mackie 1990, p. 26).

So, objectivity is guaranteed, but it is shifted from the ground of values to the field of standards of evaluation. And such standards are criteria of adequacy, whose objectivity only counts within the specific system of evaluation and related criteria. The other point connected to the error theory is linked to the so-called ‘pathetic fallacy’, an argument that usually is made derive from John Ruskin, which would imply Hume’s topic about the strong propensity of the mind to spread itself on external objects: “If a fungus, say, fills us with disgust, we may be inclined to ascribe to the fungus itself a non-natural quality of foulness” (Mackie 1990, p. 42). This fallacy can be extended to the whole of nature.

4. Nature as a phenomenon

And here we are at my final point: the critique to the anthropomorphic vision of nature (just based on the ‘pathetic fallacy’). In his last work, completed two months before dying, *The Miracle of Theism* – a vast apology of atheism – Mackie criticises a specific view of nature that is connected to some arguments for Design. Particularly, Mackie holds that the first representation of an argument of this kind is present in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, where Hume introduces it – through Cleanthes – in order to criticise it. Cleanthes describes a view of nature as ‘machine-making machine’, a structure that is constituted by an infinite number of smaller machines, whose parts are all gauged mutually, with an accuracy that evokes a great intelligence. In one of the most beautiful philosophical pages, Hume – as Philo – expresses serious critiques against this view: rather than a machine, nature is a living organism, continuously changing, in perennial movement towards equi-

librium. Not any specific design is necessary – and the presence of many defects in nature seems to corroborate the thesis of unceasing adaptation, a kind of primordial evolutionism, rather than the idea of an imperfect and inexperienced god: matter moves to endless adjustments according to the surrounding environment. And universe does not present in its totality a necessary order, but it can be seen as a blind power, which matter has obtained all its energy from. Hume went a few steps away from describing evolutionism and the Big Bang theory.

Here is my final point, which drives me to Ralph Waldo Emerson: the idea of change that marks nature is supported by Emerson, who considered nature not as an essence, but as a phenomenon, which appears in the various forms of beauty. In the chapter of the work *Nature* dedicated to language, Emerson states that even our words are just abstractions coming from a direct reference to nature: the word ‘consider’ derives from Latin ‘con siderare’ (to observe the stars); ‘supercilious’ is from Latin ‘super cilia’ (eyebrows); ‘spirit’ comes from breath, wind. Nature is not the whole of the vegetal and animal kingdoms or the totality of the organic and inorganic worlds, nor is it a naïvely fabled view (‘pathetic fallacy’): in this sense, Emerson’s theory discloses more recent concepts of biosphere, that is the whole of the living world, including human beings, extending it to the limits of universe. Nature is simply all that surrounds us, be they trees, animals, other humans, rocks, seas, stars – the stars that would cause a much greater wonder if they appeared one night only in one thousand years, says Emerson.

It is important to avoid believing that Emerson depicts a wonderful painting of nature, which reveals its secrets to whom is ready to contemplate it: Emerson does not consider contemplation the sole pos-

sible interaction with nature; otherwise, we could end up by acting as the businessman, who possessed all the stars, while we should be like the Little Prince, who possessed a flower and three volcanoes and cared for them every day.

This is the connection among my three points: nature as convention, based on a criterion of social utility, means care for its fruition. Emerson expresses it by the concept of ‘commodification’, that is the use of a good for the sake of profit and amelioration. Nowadays, examples of commodification of nature are represented by theme parks, national or regional institutions for the environmental safeguard, hotels and resorts in particular environmental areas, ski or dive schools, foot or animal trekking activities and so on. For commodity Emerson means all those benefits that our senses owe to nature, though immediate and temporary. Nature, with its ‘ministry towards humans’, is not only a material resource to be exploited, but it is also the process and result, since we should intend it as a sort of ‘business partner’ in a cooperative action with humans, by working with them and for their sake: “The wind sows the seed; the sun evaporates the sea; the wind blows the vapor to the field; the ice, on the other side of the planet, condenses rain on this; the rain feeds the plant; the plant feeds the animal; and thus the endless circulations of the divine charity nourish man” (Emerson 1971, p. 11).

And so, back to *Rée*, a certain soil or climate is good insofar they are useful for the harmony between humans and nature. By adopting this criterion, to affirm that a star or a cloud is good makes no sense, because it is not possible to evaluate them on account of social utility; similarly, to affirm that a soil or a climate is good makes sense provided that they are related to a specific context: a soil is good on account of what we have to

cultivate on it, a food is good provided that it is not allergenic for whom eating it.

To conclude, according to a pragmatic-evolutionary approach, in relation to humans, nature only exists in conventional terms, according to criteria of social utility, which produce standards of evaluations – that guarantee some objectivity – whose final result is measured by the possibility of commodification.

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