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The Natural Foundations of Human Ethics

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1. Being moral, or being natural?

Ethics has not been much concerned in the human relationship with nature, until the debasement of the biosphere by the effects of modern civilization provoked the surge of *environmental ethics*. Concurrently, *ethology* showed that animal morals were not so alien to ours as we used to believe. This led to reconsidering on two planes the question of the relation between morals and nature. Henceforth, we cannot dissociate moral questions from their foundation in the natural order.

Now, though the terms of the problem are new, the problem itself is a very ancient one. Indeed, it has been going a long time since people started to ask whether nature is good or bad; in other words, since people questioned about the relation between nature and morals. This problem is posed in the *Gorgias*, a Platonic dialogue in which we see Callicles opposing to Socrates the idea that, in the human polity as well as in nature, it falls to the stronger to rule over the weaker. Law, which for its part establishes the right by discriminating the just from the unjust, is no more than the defence of the weaker, and has no other foundation than the numeric majority of the weaker. On the contrary, natural justice asks for the stronger to dominate.

This sort of view has travelled down the ages. We find it again in Nazism, with the idea that one has the right to be cruel, since nature is cruel. This amounts either to a pure cynicism (nature is bad, and that's just too bad for the weaker), or, for instance in Nietzsche's case, to striving to overcome the narrow frame of established morals in order to found it anew in the wider order of nature. In a word, that would be to *recosmize* the social order. This question was already looming in the discussion between Socrates and Callicles. It is contained in the very word *kosmos*, which primarily means "order", and strongly connotes positive qualities. This same term might as well mean "the universe"

as designate the highest magistrate, a woman's finery, or the sky. In short, the Good, the Beautiful, the Truth. Now, modernity has dissociated that set. Astrophysics bears no relationship with cosmetics, nor does magistracy with cosmology. Human values have turned away from the universe: they are *decosmized*. But then, how can we justify justice?

Let us first pose that the respective otherness of the cultural and the natural, in itself, does not prevent from founding morals in nature; on the contrary, it is a necessary condition for morals to be founded. *Mutatis mutandis*, this has been shown by Gödel's theorems, which say that a system of propositions can be consistent only if it refers outside of itself. In other words, morals cannot be founded for moral reasons. It needs a base outside of morals.

This base is precisely nature. Not that nature should be a *model* for morals; but because it is *that toward which* morals finds its consistency. In this relationship, neither term can be reduced to the other; they are respectively in a position analogous to that of the subject and the predicate in logics. Here the subject (that which the matter is about) is nature, and the predicate (that which interprets nature) is morals.

Indeed, human societies have never ceased to interpret nature in moral terms. We just have seen a few examples, which would tend to show nature in a morally negative light; but the opposite view also exists, and in fact predominates. The myths of Eden or of the Golden Age in Europe, that of the Great Identity (*Datong* 大同) in China both idealize an original state in which nature and morals were in harmony. If Christianity in general has considered nature as bad, heretics like Pelagius or saints like Francis of Assisi have illustrated opposite conceptions. Taoism for its part sees the cause of all evil in human artifice (*zuowei* 作為), and advocates unartifice (*wuwei* 無為), which gives vent to the natural (*ziran* 自然).

Heidegger shows a similar idea when opposing *Erzeugnis* (intentional production) to *Ereignis* (event, "let-come-to-presence"). In both cases (Taoism or Heidegger), we are in the wake of the myth of the Golden Age or of *Datong*, that is, the longing for an age when work had not yet severed the humans from nature. Work, indeed, is that which transforms nature, and by so doing turns us away from it. Now, the fact is that, in China as well as in Europe, morals—be it Christian or Confucian—has valorised work rather than "let-come-to-presence". Our world is indeed based on artifice; and, unless we reject it, like did the Fathers of the Desert in early Christendom or Chinese hermits under

the Six Dynasties, the domain where morals should reign is nothing else than the world.

This exigency is for us all the more pressing as our world, to day, is overtly conflicting with the Earth which bears it, and as in this conflict—the devastation of biodiversity, global warming etc.—, it is not the Earth which is jeopardized. The Earth has seen worse; but what is jeopardized is our world, with its morals; and this is why, more than ever, we have to found our morals in nature anew.

2. Natural history and human history

The conceptual difficulty which we find in according morals with nature largely comes from modern dualism, for which nature is an object: the object of the “natural sciences”, which one categorically distinguishes from the “moral and political sciences”, the latter concerning the human subject. Now, in dualism, the object is supposed to be neutral, unrelated with our values, be these moral or not. This is why, for being scientific, one must describe, not prescribe; because nature is a matter of *is*, not of *should*. This entails an aporia, which is a major embarrassment for environmental ethics: how can we found, in the moral neutrality of ecosystems, the axiology of an ethics? In other words, if the human is subsumed under the ecological, why should we, differing from all other living species, impose ourselves duties toward the biosphere? And if we do, are not we, by this very fact, founded in posing ourselves on our own? Which is precisely that which ecology objects to.

The most consistent answers to such problems amount to common sense: it is our own interest to modify our behaviour, since it jeopardizes our own existence as well as the rest of the biosphere. Yet this has nothing to do with ethics as such; the matter is only to be more reasonable. True, there are some trends of thought which go beyond such evidences. In the view of Arne Naess’ *deep ecology*, nature is a great Self which encompasses our own, expresses itself through us, and which we must respect. Yet, this mystical view does not in the least solve the above aporia; which is that nature as such, i.e. as the neutral object of ecology, cannot found morals. Deep ecology is in fact a very shallow ontology. Now, there cannot exist an ethics without an ontology, which in this matter supposes to overcome modern dualism.

This is why the environmental crisis has furthered the surge of various currents which, confusing the subject and the object, reject modern rationalism, for instance by divinizing the Earth in the wake of the Gaia hypothesis, by reinventing druidism, by fetishizing organic

products, etc. Such effusions do not go beyond symptoms; their drift in the irrational, on the contrary, show that we have not overcome the aporias of dualism. For sure, they testify that we need to change course, but they do not make us move one inch closer to solving the problem which was already posed by Callicles.

This problem is indeed unsolvable as long as one does not see that “nature” is not a data which, in itself, would be good or bad, a model or a foil, or just neutral, but something which forever remains “to be born” (*natura*, future participle of the verb *nascor*, be born) *together with* our own existence, and *within* our very existence. Hence it is fraught with human values; which it to say, as well, that our values are fraught with nature. This idea can already be found, virtually, in Plato’s *Timaeus*, the conclusion of which affirms that the *kosmos* (the world) born from the Demiurge’s hands is “very big, very good, very beautiful and very perfect” (*megistos kai aristos kallistos te kai teleôtatos*).

But let us put aside metaphysics. The scientific study of animal worlds has led Uexküll—one of the fathers of ethology—to establish a decisive distinction between *Umgebung* (the objective data of the environment) and *Umwelt* (the ambient world of a given species). At about the same time, in the thirties, Watsuji established a homologous, and equally revolutionary distinction between *kankyō* 環境 (the objective environment) and *fūdo* 風土 (a human milieu). One can retain from this homology that, at the ontological level of the living in general (which is ecological) as well as at that of the human in particular (which is not only ecological, but also techno-symbolical), reality does not confront point-blank subjects to objects; it is instituted historically by the relationship between a certain being (individuals, societies, species...) and its milieu, while at the same time instituting both the individual being and its milieu as such. It makes them *exist* according to one another. Being and milieu are thus fit to one another, and this is why Plato could write that the *kosmos* is *aristos*—the best possible one. He could have written the same about the *Umwelt* of any living species.

In short, in natural as well as in human history, both being—that which Plato, in the *Timaeus*, calls *genesis* (birth)—and its milieu are “to be born” from one another. They exist in this mutual *natura*, i.e. in a mutual begetting. And it is this birth, not the aporias of modern dualism, that morals *proceed* from, instead of being opposed or reduced to that objective data which “nature”, for the modern, is supposed to be.

3. Nature and ethics

This entails a first moral principle, certainly the most fundamental of all: condemning individual egoism, inasmuch as it is contrary to the very dynamics (the *natura*) of our existence and of our milieu. Now, modern individualism favours such an egoism, since it amounts to locking out (forcluding) this *natura* as an object alien to our being. This forclusion is therefore morally condemnable, regarding both the environment and our fellow creatures. Indeed, morals is nothing else than this ontological relationship with what is not ourselves but, as our milieu, participates in our own being, to begin with other people.

Accordingly, we can now recosmize morals, by founding it anew in nature and thus giving it a firmer base than if it were just revolving on itself. Once more, “founding” does not mean “reducing to”. Reducing morals to nature, or ethics to ecology, is that which Callicles was advocating; but founding morals in nature is to acknowledge the structural, yet forever “to be born” relationship of each of us with our milieu, that is with other people and with other living beings, as well as with the things which surround us.

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