Naturalisation without naturalism: a prospect for metaethics

SERGIO CREMASCHI

Department of Humanities

University of Eastern Piedmont (Alessandria, Novara, Vercelli)

ABSTRACT

I discuss first the various meanings of naturalism in philosophy and then in ethics: that of American Naturalism, that of Dewey's pragmatism, the sense of negation of Moore's negation of naturalism, the neo-Aristotelian, and that of external realists. I will argue a fundamental heterogeneity of these meanings and add that the reasons for the apparent unity of a naturalist front in recent philosophical debates depend more on factors studied by the sociology of knowledge than philosophical reasons. I suggest one plausible naturalism, Aristotle's and Dewey's claim that moral good is not specifically moral. Finally, I add that scientific exploration programs into the biological bases of behaviour and coordination of behaviour within groups are promising but hardly 'naturalistic' and compatible with ethical intuitionism or Kantian ethics.

1. Realism, anti-realism, constructivism

Metaethics in the Anglo-Saxon world of the 1990s seems to be dominated by a triad: realism, anti-realism, constructivism. Naturalism tends to present itself as the most proper form of realism, the "external" one. Anti-realism is an umbrella label for theories that affirm that values do not exist in themselves, from expressivism to Mackie's theory of error, positions that would amount to ethical nihilism if they did not introduce qualifications to differentiate themselves from such nihilism in normative ethics. Constructivism tends to present itself as the third way, defending the objectivity

and universality of normative ethics without granting anything to ontological assumptions about a 'real' existence of values[1]. In this framework resulting from self-definitions of contemporary schools and currents, there are oddities and anomalies. To recall a significant one: Mackie, the supporter of a supremely antirealistic ethical ontology, is a "naturalist" in an essential sense of the term since he advocates the non-existence in the world of entities that go beyond those studied by the empirical sciences. Perhaps prudence is advisable about all triads because dichotomies may be appropriate or inappropriate, depending on the purpose for which we formulate them. In contrast, triads have the vice of suggesting the idea that it is possible to enclose everything without missing anything.

The claims argued here are: first, the term 'naturalism' is an ambiguous term, which has had rather heterogeneous meanings in different eras and different national contexts; second, naturalisation and naturalism are heterogeneous categories, the first the name of a relatively clearly defined programme, the second the name of two almost opposing philosophical positions and an 'ideology' in which one of the promoters of the (entirely legitimate) programme of naturalisation believes.

In a general sense, naturalism in ethics is an approach that "seeks to give a basis to judgments and moral conduct by describing and explaining them through methods, concepts and results of the natural and social sciences"[2]. Let us distinguish the more determined meanings that the term has assumed in the last two decades. "Naturalism" has become a name alternative to "external realism" to indicate a school headed by David Brink, Peter Railton, Robert Boyd. This school advances a set of theses in ontology, moral psychology and epistemology that have gained credibility by outlining an alternative to other general theoretical proposals. It is a proposal more vigorous than utilitarianism but equally committed to a progressive, secular and pro-science direction. Besides, such commitment does not seem, prima facie, to carry the price paid by various forms of Aristotelianism and Kantian ethics, that is, a return to the past.

Secondly, we have continued to designate as "naturalism" what has often been called neo-naturalism since the end of the 1950s, that is, anti-naturalism, or the denial of George Edward Moore's thesis on naturalistic fallacy, by Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Peter Geach and their other followers, from Alasdair MacIntyre to Iris Murdoch. This position, it should be noted, is found virtually on every point at the antipodes of the first and second naturalism.

Thirdly, "naturalism" is the name under which has circulated what has been a research program in biology, thoroughly respectable and indeed very promising, that of the "naturalisation" of morals.

---

[1] See S. Cremaschi, *L'etica del Novecento. Dopo Nietzsche* (Rome: Carocci, 2005), chapter 12.

[2] T. Magri, "Naturalism in ethics", in E. Agazzi - N. Vassallo (eds), *Introduction to contemporary philosophical naturalism* (Milan: Angeli, 1998), pp. 150-168, p. 150.

However, unfortunately, this program went with literature signed by some of the researchers involved that propose amatorial philosophical speculations instead of experimental hypotheses.

2. Naturalism in philosophy and ethics before Moore

The term naturalism has been used in philosophy at large to indicate: (a) the primacy of common sense over philosophical theses (Kant); (b) the thesis of the existence of an order of nature immanent to it excluding causes or principles of order transcending nature itself (i.e. immanentism, not necessarily coinciding with atheism since it includes deism and pantheism); (c) the thesis of the exclusive validity of concepts and methods of modern natural sciences[3]. In addition, several ethical meanings were associated in various ways with the general philosophical meaning (b), rarely with the meaning (a), to a certain extent but in a very vague way with the meaning (c), but which have dropped the thesis of order and retained only that of the exclusion of what goes beyond the world of things subject to sensitive experience.

Metaphysical naturalism", a current that appeared at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in America, of which George Santayana and Morris R. Cohen were the leading exponents, argued for the need to start with the undeniable validity of the worldview presupposed by the conceptual system that lies at the basis of modern natural sciences. According to this current,

The universe as a whole does not have a moral dimension except in that it contains human beings and therefore bodies that have and pursue values [...] The human institutions and practices, values and aims of individuals and groups are all natural, not unlike the celestial motions and the evolution of species. The only natural method, not some special moral intuition, gives the key to dissolving moral disputes, and moral theories can be treated no differently from scientific theories in determining their strength through controllable consequences. Even if it is morally neutral, naturalism is in favour of institutions that allow the use of the natural method in moral and political decision-making[4].

The enemy of "naturalism" so understood was "supernaturalism", in which the "metaphysical naturalists" included idealism, Kantian philosophy, and above all transcendentalism, an American movement founded by Ralph Waldo Emerson of an idealistic and romantic nature, a supporter of the

---

[3] N. Abbagnano, *Dizionario di filosofia* (Turin: UTET, 1971²), entry: "Naturalismo", p. 609.

[4] A. Danto, entry: "Naturalism", in P. Edwards (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 10 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1965), vol. 5, pp. 448-450, p. 449.

primacy of individual consciousness and of a sort of universal religion, which was the interlocutor with which American metaphysical naturalism found itself dealing. The choice of the label "naturalism" was possibly inspired by a desire to mark their opposition to transcendentalism[5].

In ethics, the metaphysical naturalists supported the project of scientific ethics, the same project of the European positivists, based on the idea that, since values are nothing but facts put in place by human beings, moral facts are susceptible to treatment identical to that of physical, chemical, biological facts. The result is a science of society that not only explains facts but also produces justified prescriptions.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a particular case was the "naturalism" of Ralph Burton Perry. Although starting with a methodological inspiration similar to that of the nineteenth-century positivists, adapting ethics to the method of the natural sciences, he did not promote a dogmatic but rather a "reforming" reductionism. He did not claim that we can immediately reduce the moral judgments of ordinary language to the judgments of the natural sciences but admitted that, in their relative confusion, they were not really statements of "natural" facts, and instead proposed a reformulation that would make them reducible to those of the natural sciences[6]. Bearing Perry's theses in mind, we can see why Moore called the alleged fallacy he contested "naturalist" because it was an undue passage concerning the definition of ethical terms made chiefly – at least it seemed to him in the first phase – by the naturalists who were his contemporaries. After 1903, Perry developed a position linked to the motives and concerns of the old nineteenth-century "metaphysical naturalists", negatively mirroring Moore's anti-naturalism.

John Dewey started with an attitude partly similar to that of metaphysical naturalists but reached conclusions almost opposite. Dewey presents his thought as a form of "naturalism" in that it overcomes the dichotomies between matter and mind or between sensitivity and reason. He describes it as humanistic naturalism, as opposed to the anti-humanistic one of the nineteenth-century social Darwinists who tended to interpret human history as a "struggle" for the survival of the fittest. He argues that the adaptation required for the group's survival in the context of evolution implied development not so much of aggressive abilities as collaborative skills, needed for the care of the weakest members of the group and the development of the skills of all members. Dewey started with a concern close to positivism: the unity of the natural and the moral sciences. He reversed the positivist conclusions yet by proposing "instrumentalism", a formula according to which the

---

[5] See D. Koppelberg, entry: "Naturalismus/sierung", in H.J. Sandkühler (ed.), *Enzyklopädie der Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie*, 4 vols. (Hamburg: Meier, 1999), vol. 1, pp. 904-914.

[6] R.B Perry, *Value and its Moving Appeal*, "Philosophical Review", 41 (1932): 337-350, p. 337-338; cf. S. Cremaschi, *L'etica del Novecento*, pp. 26-28.

objectivity of scientific knowledge is, for its social character, also a moral value, and ethics has a "scientific" character in that here too creative intelligence must be exercised to predict and control events carrying values that are events placed in a network of objective relations. There is, therefore, no clear division between scientific knowledge and moral knowledge, not because ethics should follow the model of natural science but because the science of nature is also practical knowledge. The "experimental" theory of ethical judgments that makes the criterion of morally "good" or "right" depending on the concrete context is parallel to the instrumentalist reconstruction of science and, like scientific hypotheses, moral judgments also have as a criterion of validity the possibility of promoting the richness of our existence. Therefore, neither any specific moral meaning of "good" exists, i.e. what is good is what leads to more significant human development, nor are there specific moral values but only a multiplicity of objective values that are resolved in the "satisfactory" character of experience, i.e. in the satisfaction of needs and interests. In essence, Dewey's "naturalism" has the characteristic point of denying the existence of a moral good separated from other meanings of good, a point that closely follows the difference between Aristotle and Plato[7].

3. Moore's anti-naturalism

Since 1903, "ethical naturalism" has become the current description of ethical theories in Anglo-Saxon philosophy that fall under the criticism of Moore. First, therefore, this description was coined by critics of so-called naturalism, and then, Moore's opponents adopted it as a banner.

Non-naturalism for Moore is an alternative between two different positions: naturalism and supernaturalism. The "non-natural" properties would come under a different domain of reality than the one that religious and maybe "metaphysical" ethics claim to describe. On the other hand, the naturalistic fallacy would have been committed not only by utilitarians and other "naturalists" but also by so-called "metaphysicians" such as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. At some stage, Moore admitted he should have better called it "naturalistic and metaphysical fallacy". In this way, he closed the circle by classifying among the naturalists also those who would have been among the most ferocious enemies of American naturalists, Continental positivists and British utilitarians, that is,

---

[7] See J. Dewey, "Valuation and Experimental Knowledge" (1922), in *The Middle Works (1898-1924)*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, ILL, 1973-76, vol. 13, pp. 3-28; *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), in *The Middle Works*, vol.14; cf. S. Cremaschi, *L'etica del Novecento*, pp. 15-26.

Aristotelians and Thomists. When faced with such a surprising classification, we may legitimately wonder if there is any defect in the starting point. We may ask whether, besides not being a fallacy, the naturalistic fallacy was hardly naturalistic.

The mentioned questionable starting point is what justifies on which the distinction between naturalism and non-naturalism depends. In reality, this fallacious claim consists of at least two different things. In 1922 Moore admitted that he had confused two different criticisms of previous philosophers: (a) reductionist fallacy, in which one could recognise three different arguments: (i) that propositions concerning natural properties always refer to what exists in time and propositions concerning metaphysical properties refer to what exists even if not in time, and that therefore propositions on intrinsic value are similar to mathematical propositions, focusing on something distinct from existence; (ii) that natural properties are the properties of the natural sciences and that therefore ethics is not a branch of the natural sciences or of psychology but a discourse with a nature different from that of the sciences; (iii) that the goodness of a situation depends on its other properties and that these are not dependent on each other and therefore the goodness of a state of things does not derive deductively from the presence of its other properties, but is added or not depending on the case; (b) co-extensive fallacy, or the confusion between co-extensiveness and identity: if even all things that are good also have another property, like all things that are yellow produce a specific type of vibration of the air, you cannot delude yourself, however, to really define the good by simply enumerating those other qualities as if they were simply identical to goodness. Moore's thesis that the definition of quality "goodness" would be an invalid form of reasoning would only hold up if we accepted a highly demanding notion of "definition", which would identify it with the analysis in simple components. Moore wrote in 1903 that a definition "enunciates which are the parts that invariably make up a certain whole; and in this sense, "'good' has no definition because it is simple and has no parts", but in the writings on the theory of knowledge Moore highlighted the "paradox of analysis" that an analysis understood in this way encounters, but did not draw the consequences for his previous ethical theory[8].

In conclusion, the very category of 'naturalism' that became established in twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon philosophy resulted as a residual category from an unnecessary step taken by Moore himself, that from the thesis that *it is not possible to analyse goodness* in terms of natural properties to the claim that *goodness cannot be in itself* a natural property. After Moore, the word came into use with oscillations and great vagueness, including all the authors who did not like the dominant opinion in

---

[8] G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (1903), ed. by T. Baldwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), § 10; *The Justification of Analysis*, in *Lectures on Philosophy*, Allen & Unwin, London 1966, pp. 165-172; cf. S. Cremaschi, *L'etica del Novecento*, pp. 31-38.

the Anglo-Saxon ethics of the first half of the twentieth century, including Hobbes, Hume, Bentham, John Stuart Mill. The common trait of all these authors is that they assume that the meaning of "x is good" is revealed by the fact that the speaker or the well-informed average person wants or would like x. In short, the dominant currents in early twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon philosophy professed a firm faith in the division between facts and values. This division would definitively separate the object of the empirical sciences, facts, from values, the object of choice. Besides, this division would be the necessary effect of the progress carried by modern science, not so much the empirical sciences as the formal sciences in particular logic. An implication would be the confinement to the prescientific past of Plato, Aristotle, Thomas, the modern theorists of the law of nature (a notion that seemed particularly horrible because it seemed to evoke, already in the name, all the errors of "naturalism"), and the semi-metaphysical ballast still weighing down Hobbes, Hume, Bentham and Mill. Hume himself, the author of Hume's law, and Bentham, who had clearly understood that many 'oughts' show up in ethics without previous justification, were classified as naturalists because they so redefined moral predicates as they could fit the language of an empirical science such as psychology.

4. Neo-naturalism

Often the troubles in philosophy begin when someone rescues a term invented as an insult and makes it a flag. For a process of this kind, "neo-naturalism", or "naturalism" tout court, was called for some time the position of critics of Moore in the fifties, in particular, Philippa Foot and Peter Geach, who challenged the refutation of the naturalistic fallacy. These authors asked themselves the question whether, finding some example of a "must" that does not imply a first-person imperative or an example of a "good" in which the criteria are not the object of choice, we can define them as simply non-prescriptive and not evaluative uses of "must" and "good". Geach argued that the use of "good" is different in expressions such as "a good watch", "a good farmer", and "a good man"; only in the latter case does Hare's argument apply; Moore's arguments on the nondescriptive character of the term good would be valid only in specific borderline instances in which no context is involved. According to Foot, evaluative expressions related to virtues and vices, such as "improper" and "brave", have criteria of factual application; there are premises that, under the meaning of these terms,

imply the conclusion "so he behaved improperly"; but this is an evaluative conclusion; it follows that there are circumstances in which there is a legitimate transition from is to ought[9].

Macintyre took up the considerations of these authors and placed them at the basis of his virtue ethics. Macintyre's first-phase position is 'naturalism' because it is descriptivism. But for Macintyre's first phase, the virtues are conceivable only within the ambit of a particular tradition, and therefore, his naturalism, strangely enough, goes with epistemological relativism of a para-Wittgensteinian kind. The descriptive characteristics from which the meaning of the term good depends are descriptions shared in a Wittgensteinian linguistic community. Note that the general philosophy surrounding this metaethical thesis is at the antipodes of that of naturalism of the late nineteenth century: empirical sciences do not matter, human nature is variable, prejudice does not need to be overcome by science, but prejudices of a given time and place should be contextualised and, in a sense, justified. The first Macintyre contends that a definition "enunciates which are the parts that invariably make up a certain whole; and in this sense, 'good' has no definition, because it is simple and has no parts", but in the writings on the theory of knowledge Moore highlighted the "paradox of analysis" that an analysis understood in this way encounters, but did not draw the consequences for his ethical theories.

In conclusion, the same category of "naturalism" that was established in the Anglo-Saxon twentieth century after Moore was a residual category, the result of an unjustified passage made by Moore, from the thesis that it is not possible to analyse goodness in terms of natural properties to that which goodness cannot constitute in itself a natural property.

After Moore, the term came into use with oscillations and great vagueness, including all the authors who did not like the dominant opinion in the Anglo-Saxon ethics of the first half of the twentieth century, including Hobbes, Hume, Bentham, John Stuart Mill. Nevertheless, all of these authors share the claim that the meaning of "x is good" is the fact that the speaker, or the well-informed average person, wants or would like x. In short, in the first half of the twentieth century, the dominant currents in Anglo-Saxon philosophy professed a firm faith in the division between facts and values, a division that would definitively separate facts, object of the empirical sciences, from values, object of decision, choice, preference, attitude, and which would inevitably have been brought about by the intellectual progress brought about by modern science – not the empirical sciences as for nineteenth-century positivism but the formal sciences and in particular logic – and which would definitively confine in the prescientific past the "metaphysical" dogmatism of Plato, Aristotle, Thomas, modern theorists of

---

[9] P. Geach, *Good and Evil*, "Analysis", 17 (1956), no. 2: 33-42; Ph. Foot, *Moral arguments*, "Mind", 67 (1958), no. 268: 502-513; cf. S. Cremaschi, *L'etica del Novecento*, pp. 73-74; Ch.R. Pidgen, "Naturalism", in P. Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 432-441.

the law of nature (notion that seemed particularly horrible because it seemed to evoke, already in the it was discovered Aristotelian even though he defended an ethical Aristotelianism without the doctrine of human nature and Aristotelian metaphysics, which in the second phase became Thomist and finally in the third phase, has become a 'biological' Aristotelian, has rediscovered vulnerability as a fundamental quality of the human animal, considered in its human nature as a set of biological characteristics, a quality that allows virtues no longer objective but relative, as in the first phase, but instead objective and universal[10].

5. External realism as naturalism

This line is the so-called Cornell school, which is the current that includes Peter Railton, Robert Boyd, David Brink. This group is a real school, united not only by theoretical reasons but also by belonging to a political group, that of an American "socialist" left, which believes in the existence of social classes, believes in the alliance between science and progress, is hardly fascinated by European culture, and detests the liberal "left" of the East Coast, relativist, sceptical and pro-European. The message, read superficially, could sound as follows: enough with the ethical "relativism" of non-cognitivists of various kinds and their descendants that does not allow to state the existence of values and objective interests clearly. A note by Boyd gives an example of this inspiration where he writes:

My interest in the question of moral realism initially arose from my involvement in the anti-Vietnam War movement of the late 1960s and was sustained in significant measure by my participation in subsequent progressive movements. I have long been interested in whether or not moral relativism played a progressive or a reactionary role in such movements; the present essay begins an effort to defend the latter alternative. I wish to acknowledge the important influence on my views of the Students for a Democratic Society (especially its Worker-Student Alliance Caucus), the International Committee against Racism, and the Progressive Labor party. Their optimism about the possibility of social progress and about the rational capacity of ordinary people have played an important role in the development of my views[11].

---

[10] See S. Cremaschi, *L'etica del Novecento*, pp. 178-180.

[11] R.N. Boyd, *How to be a Moral Realist*, in G. Sayre-McCord (eds.), *Essays in Moral Realism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 181-228, pp. 352-3.

The message of these authors seems to be that they do not advance a moral semantics that constitutes the denial of Moore's semantic non-naturalism. Instead, they argue for an ontological moral naturalism, that is, "external" moral realism affirming that moral facts exist but are reducible to facts of a non-moral nature, the well-being or development of the potential of human beings. Moreover, they contend that the method of ethics should be "naturalistic" in the sense of making it empirical research similar to that which is considered proper to the natural sciences; the very definition of morality and the characteristics of rationality that governs moral judgment arise from an investigation of 'natural' facts, that is, of the same facts that are the object of the empirical sciences[12]. Going into more detail, the theses are: (i) the metaphysical thesis of the existence of moral facts and moral propositions that are true and objective, whose truth is therefore independent of our theorization[13]; (ii) the semantic thesis on the nature of moral language – which according to Railton is the same thesis as Perry's – which provides for naturalistic definitions of the "reformer" type of goodness (understood as non moral goodness) and justice (moral); The reforming definition implies that ethical asserts do not necessarily have to reflect the meanings used by the speakers, but have to be reformulated in order to achieve greater clarity and plausibility; the adequacy of the definitions must be verified on the basis of the fact that they satisfy certain constraints of intelligibility and functionality such as clarity, non-circularity, the ability to render the normative force of the terms, the ability to participate in empirical theories worthy of interest, while the burden of proof remains that the empirical theories constructed are good theories[14]; (iii) the thesis of moral epistemology that supports our ability to achieve some knowledge of moral facts[15]; (iv) the externalist theory on the motivation of the agent: the existence of moral facts is not in itself sufficient to defeat the objection of the immoralist who can still object that they exist but that one can do without taking care of them; it is not rational not to take account of moral considerations not on the basis of considerations of a

---

[12] See D. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundation of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; N.L. Sturgeon, "Moral Explanations", in D. Copp - D. Zimmerman (eds), *Reason, Truth and Morality* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman,), pp. 47-78; M. Devitt, *Moral Realism: a Naturalistic Perspective*, "Croatian Journal of Philosophy", 2 (2002): 1-17; P. Railton, *Moral Realism*, "The Philosophical Review" 95 (1986): 163-207; *Some Questions about the Justification of Morality*, "Philosophical Perspectives", 6 (1992): 27-53; Lutz, M. and J. Lenman, "Moral Naturalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/naturalism-moral/>.

[13] R.N. Boyd, "How to be a Moral Realist", p. 181.

[14] See D. Brink, *Moral Realism*,

[15] See P. Railton, *Moral Realism and the Foundation of Ethics*, ch. 2.

moral nature themselves, but on the basis of considerations on the world, on agents, on rationality[16]; (v) a consequentialist normative ethic in the broad sense, more inclusive of utilitarianism in that it includes actions and motivations alongside the consequences of actions, an ethic that "the experience of humanity" has led progressively to select through trial and error[17]; according to Railton, the justification for normative ethics lies in the fact that there are fundamental interests that conflict with other passengers; the norms can be genetically explained and it can be highlighted how they sometimes conflict with certain long-term interests and therefore their reformulation can be justified[18].

The most decisive doubts arise on what seems to be the most demanding theoretical thesis and also the one destined to give the theory its unity: the externalism of motivation, or the view according to which it is not rational for reasons of a non-moral nature to refuse to give weight to moral considerations. The problem is how to justify normativity on a 'naturalistic' basis. We may doubt indeed that such justification may be possible. Brink's answer is instead that there is an "external" motivation for the collective utility of having a system called morality, but this far from new answer is that of the young Hume, already criticised in Adam Smith's famous chapter on "why utility pleases"[19]. If there is this collective utility, why should I have the motivation to pay for the costs of producing collective goods and not be a free rider instead? The answer is then not too paradoxically the same as the extreme antirealist Mackie, who has the merit of seeing the paradox of his position, hence the name of error theory that characterises it: the fact of being true (according to him) but to undermine – if known – the foundations of the same system[20] (20). On the other hand, brink and the other exponents of Cornell's school announced as a discovery a thesis that had somebody had already formulated and somebody else immediately attacked in the eighteenth century. They leave us with the same difficulty as some popular formulations of utilitarianism, for example, Brandt's, that is, they leave us with a theory of moral motivation that can only work for agents who already have some minimal moral motivation.

In conclusion, if we consider the history of twentieth-century English language ethics, the appearance of "non-Platonic" realism was one of the moves that remained available in the chess game opened by

---

[16] See D. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundation of Ethics*, ch. 3.

[17] See D. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundation of Ethics*, ch. 5.

[18] See D. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundation of Ethics*, ch. 8.

[19] D. Hume, "Of an Original Contract" (1742), in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. by E.F. Miller, Liberty Classics, Indianapolis (In) 1987; cf. D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740), ed. by D.F. Norton and M.J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), book III, part 2, section 1; A. Smith, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), ed. by A.L. Macfie, D.D. Raphael (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), part 4, ch. 1.

[20] J.L. Mackie, Ethics, Inventing Right and Wrong (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1978), p. 63.

Moore. Indeed, once Moore's critics drew attention to the queerness of Moore's non-supernatural but non-natural properties. Once other critics drew attention to the weakness of post-Moore forms of non-realism, the option remained of adopting Mackie's ontological nihilism or one of the following positions: Gibbard's expressivism, constructivism such as that of O'Neill and Koorsgard, or the 'external' realism of the Cornell school. The latter appears to be a form of "naturalism" because the alternative to Moore's times appeared to be between semantic naturalism and semantic non-naturalism. The level has changed from semantic to ontological, but the alternative is still described as such. In reality, the alternative was not well described even in Moore's time because, even then, it resulted from an investigation of 'natural' facts, that is, of the same facts that are the object of the empirical sciences.

6. Genetics, neurosciences and the naturalisation of morals

The German school of *Philosophische Anthropologie*, that is, Plessner and Gehlen, already made a significant contribution in the 1930s to understanding the instinctual dimensions underlying morality, and Konrad Lorenz's ethology that took up a lot of Plessner and Gehlen's work made several suggestions on animal behaviour as a key to human behaviour. Let us mention an example from Lorenz: the behaviour of male turkeys who have been won in combat and expose the neck to the opponent to allow him to deliver a mortal blow, triggering inhibition of aggressive behaviour in the winner. Lorenz invites us to reread the precept of turning the other cheek of the Sermon on the Mount in the light of this behaviour, asking ourselves if the evangelical teaching did not want, instead of prescribing martyrdom at all costs, to teach an effective way of putting an end to conflicts[21].

Quine's 'epistemology naturalised' consists in eliminating the size of the transcendental dimension still surviving neopositivism or logical-empiricism, making the theory of knowledge an empirical, fundamentally biological science of the cognitive processes of the organism *homo sapiens*[22]. A program of naturalisation in ethics could be a program of study of morals as fields of phenomena that renounces to make them preventively a privileged field, where a dimension a priori should play a special and different role than in other areas, taking this field away from science and reserving it to a subdiscipline of philosophy. We will see that the line of biological studies of moral behaviour has

---

[21] K. Lorenz, *Das sogenannte Böse* (Vienna: Borotha Schoeler Verlag, 1963).

[22] W.V.O. Quine, "Epistemology naturalized", in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. 69-90.

precisely implemented a "naturalisation" of this kind. The strand of "external realism" has gained credibility also on the wave of the Quinean response to the crisis of the old analytical philosophy, but in reality, it was associated only for extrinsic reasons. An actual 'naturalisation' of ethics was instead a phenomenon centred in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This research programme coincides with the publication of the work of Edward Wilson *On Human Nature*[23] which gave rise to a controversy with a vast echo around the "sociobiology" approach that claimed that human behaviour and that of many animal species – Wilson's prime example are termites – is "fundamentally" similar and both are regulated by a "moral". It happens to meet references to these developments as contemporary ethical "naturalism", suggesting a continuity between these developments and the previously discussed forms of "ethical naturalism", a continuity that is hard to prove.

Let's come to the positive content of the sociobiological texts. The theme on which they try to provide a scientific contribution is the phenomenon of 'altruistic' behaviour widely present in many animal species, whose widespread presence contributes to allowing group life and the group's survival. The next step taken by sociobiologists is speculation on the causes of altruism and the ability to sympathise[24]. In this context, the controversial hypothesis of the "selfish gene" appeared. The idea is that "altruistic" behaviour promoting the survival of individuals close to the agent by kinship aims at perpetuating a genetic heritage[25]. It is well known that the transposition of a category related to conscious action such as that of selfishness to entities that are not individuals capable of acting as genes has raised, to say the least, considerable perplexity. Subsequent developments, those of the 'second sociobiology', have tried to explore a phylogenetic model that considers both the genetic endowment and the cultural endowment[26].

A similar discourse can holds for subsequent development, that of neuroscience applications to the study of moral behaviour. Here, the secret of the origin of altruism has been sought in the capacity of "sympathy" with which human beings are endowed to such an extent as to render it an almost unlimited resource; this would have originated from the propensity of the human beings to come

---

[23] E.O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978); cf. *Sociobiology: the New Synthesis* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1975).

[24] Ph. Kitcher, "Four Ways of 'Biologicizing' Ethics" (1993), in E. Sober (ed.), *Conceptual Issues in Evolutionary Biology* (Cambridge, MASS: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 439-450; M. Ruse - E.O. Wilson, "Moral Philosophy as Applied Science" (1986), , in E. Sober (ed.), *Conceptual Issues in Evolutionary Biology,* pp. 421-432; on the *status quaestionis* see E. Sober, "Evolution and Ethics", in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 10 volls (London: Routledge, 1998), vol. III, pp. 472-476

[25] R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

[26] C.J. Lumsden & E.O. Wilson, *Genes, Mind and Culture. The Coevolutionary Process* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981); *Promethean Fire* (Cambridge, MASS: Harvard University Press, 1981).

easily convinced and manipulated and to eliminate the sources of disagreement with the others, propensity that in turn would depend on the production of endorphins that would act as a "reward" for the reached agreement with the others. Expanding these suggestions has developed what has been called since 2002 "neuroethics", a research program that studies the activation of different brain areas in conjunction with the formulation of moral judgments. These developments suggest that moral choices result primarily from unconscious and involuntary decisions taken by brain mechanisms selected during the evolutionary process. The result is a universal system of rules on which distinct moral rules would be inserted, perhaps like the grammars of different languages and Chomsky's "deep grammar". The interpretation to give of these results is far from obvious. It does not impose reductionist theses, or the denial of free will, or the existence of a single natural universal morality that does not depend on culture.

We could comment that discovering deeper mechanisms accounting for 'moral' behaviour is a legitimate possibility. But the explanation of phenomena of 'altruistic' behaviour with underlying mechanisms would not represent an 'explanation' of moral behaviour as a whole because the identification of morality in its entirety with altruism results from a naive theorisation of moral phenomena. This explanation does not imply a dissolution of altruistic behaviour with a reduction of altruism to selfishness. A scientific explanation never leads to conclusions about the 'essences' of the phenomena. The reduction of one level of phenomena to another is always possible, albeit not always useful. Moreover, the successful reduction does not explain away the reduced phenomena. Finally, "it is one thing that the naturalist approach is possible (...) and a very different one that we have already discovered it"[27].

In conclusion, "morality", that is, the codes of norms to which the members of the various human groups are socialised, are institutions placed in human societies at a certain level, which we can isolate for theoretical purposes but which remains rooted in biological, psychological, cultural, sociological and linguistic dimensions. The "moral" institution is not a thing in itself but simply a domain of objects that we separate with a conceptual operation – not arbitrary but not reducible to a reflection of something existing *in re* – from the whole of human society as a whole. We can then study the empirical, biological, ethological, psychological, anthropological, sociological dimensions, or the logical and linguistic-pragmatic dimensions of this institution. Moreover, if we examine this complex of phenomena with the approach of the empirical sciences – what is all very well to do – we will

---

[27] J.F. Danielli, *Altruism and the Internal Reward System or the Opium of the People*, "Journal of Social and Biological Structures", 3 (1980): 87-94; cf. M.D. Hauser, *Moral Minds* (New York: Ecco, 2006); P.M. Churchland, *Towards a Cognitive Neurobiology of the Moral Virtues*, "Topoi", 17\2 (1998): 83-96; M. Motterlini, *Economia emotiva* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2006); M.S. Gazzaniga, *The Ethical Mind: The Science of Our Moral Dilemmas*, Ecco Pr, 2006.

have a lot to discover, but we will remain within a horizon that we have helped to determine with our intervention as acquaintances, as the epistemology of the twentieth century has taught us. We will have as a result: (i) a multiplicity of levels or domains of possible objects, none of which is privileged and or provides the foundation for the others, certainly not the biological one; (ii) we will never reach a zero level, that of brute facts because facts are constructed, they are all 'facts', but they may always be 'brute facts' in relation to other facts; the biological, linguistic, anthropological, sociological sciences applied to morals would give us a lot but not a moral epistemology or a theory of moral motivation.

If the program were to derive from empirical research more justified assertions about the phenomena of human behaviour and build theories on this behaviour, and in particular on that family of phenomena that we group to constitute the field of "morality", the result would be destined to remain irreparably neutral concerning numerous alternative philosophical theses: we can study everything and explain 'everything' of that field of phenomena that we have provisionally isolated at the genetic, logical, neurological, ethological (as well as sociological, anthropological, economic), and then the same complex of phenomena discuss another side, the logical-linguistic-pragmatic. If we do not consider this side of the "moral" phenomenon, that is, the minimum of a priori structure that we must recognise, we will never have a justification for normative ethics.

7. The alternative between naturalism and anti-naturalism as a pseudo-problem

The conclusion is that we are discussing a pseudo-problem. More in detail:

(i) the "moral" social subsystem can be studied as a field of phenomena at a biological, ethological, anthropological, sociological, economic level;

(ii) can instead be studied in its logical, linguistic, pragmatic structure;

(iii) the two things are not alternatives, but it is not clear that there is a way to unify them and that this unification is necessary; in particular, any 'explanation' of the origin of morals will probably give us good arguments against immoralism by illustrating the indispensable function of morals, and not the demystification of the morals of the post-positivists of the late nineteenth century, but it will never give us the justification of morals; for the second way perhaps we can provide a 'justification' of morals, without which we cannot prove that morals become obligatory 'for me';

(iv) the black beast "intuitionism" and the black beast "Kantian ethics" have strong points that no one has undermined: that the reason for keeping a promise is that we have made it; this is the basis of some form of realism – if we go into metaethics, which is not indispensable to argue about ethical issues – but this realism does not need to be Moore's strange Platonism, and the separation between practical reason and theoretical reason of Kant and Aristotle perhaps presents us with another way of discussing the problem in which 'realism' becomes more modestly a kind of possible objectivity of practical reason and thus ceases to be the description of a world of facts and thus loses many of its problematic characteristics that were the basis of the Anglo-Saxon disputes of the twentieth century;

(v) one of the senses of 'naturalism' that we should preserve is that which has been attributed to Dewey and together with Aristotle, that is, the idea that the meaning of moral good is not equivocal in respect to the meaning of good in other senses, that morality does not pursue ends that are also moral in nature, but ends such as long and healthy life, the development of physical, cognitive, emotional faculties; this naturalism on the definition of good is not in continuity with the naturalism of external motivation and with the naturalisation of research programmes on the biological bases of morals; a naturalism of this kind does not necessarily go in the direction of the reduction of ethics to the empirical sciences, but leaves room for an ethical discourse that is not an empirical science, even if it can be a 'customer' of research in the empirical sciences on whose fallible and perfectible results moral evaluations will be based;

(vi) we may work on scientific theories of morality, understood as a cluster of phenomena with a different character; we might be encouraged to rethink assumptions of philosophical doctrines when scientific hypotheses are more corroborated; such hypotheses yet will never provide direct evidence against any philosophical doctrine as such, and different philosophical claims will remain compatible with the (provisional) results of scientific research programmes; last, neither genetics nor neuroscience is the bottom level to which other sciences should pay a toll.