

Review of

*Against Nature*

Lorraine Daston

The MIT Press, 2019

96 pages, paperback, \$13.95

Lorraine Daston's recent monograph *Against Nature* is, according to the book's back cover, "[a] pithy work of philosophical anthropology [that] asks why we continually seek moral orders in natural orders..." Originally published in the "De Natura" series, in 2018, with Matthes and Seitz Berlin, the book is now available as part of the MIT Press's "Untimely Meditations Series."

Though the relationship between morality and nature has been previously analyzed by various philosophers, Daston takes a different tack. Unlike G.E. Moore, who famously argued that it's fallacious to derive an 'ought' from an 'is' (Moore 1967), and unlike John Stuart Mill, who argued that nature is frequently disvaluable (Mill 1874), Daston doesn't attempt to criticize the moralization of nature. Nor, for that matter, does she attempt to defend the claim that nature should be morally valued. Instead, she seeks to explain why, in spite of compelling objections to the contrary, human beings continue to invest nature with moral authority. More specifically, Daston thinks that the explanation has something to do with the sort of beings we are: something to do with human nature.

*Against Nature* is comprised of eight chapters in total. Chapters 2, 3, and 4, are about three different, but related, senses of the word 'nature.' The first sense is specific nature. Specific nature is what we have in mind when we claim that it's in something's nature to do, or to be

something. In other words, specific natures are essences: they're the properties that make something the kind of thing it is, i.e., the properties that make a human being a human being, a tree a tree, a squirrel a squirrel, etc. (7). The second sense is local nature. Local natures, according to Daston, are "the characteristic combinations of flora and fauna, climate and geology that give a landscape its physiognomy: the desert oasis or the tropical rainforest, the Mediterranean shore or the Swiss Alps (15)." Though local nature is an old concept, local natures were reimagined by 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century theorists as systems, each of which is comprised of interconnected elements that have their own distinct roles, i.e., local natures were reimagined as ecosystems (18). The third sense of 'nature' refers to universal natural laws: the sort of laws that scientists posit in their efforts to understand the phenomena (23).

So why do human beings currently, and throughout history, imbue nature's orders with moral authority? Daston's threefold answer is provided over the course of Chapters 6 and 7. The first piece of the puzzle is that normativity (including moral normativity) has a conceptual connection with order (48-51). More specifically, norms have a certain amount of consistency and generality built into them, and norms are a basis upon which people predict each other's behavior and form expectations of one another. The second piece of the puzzle is that we use representation to understand things (52-53). Using the various natural orders, we encounter and perceive, to try to understand morality, is something that comes naturally to us, so to speak. The third and final piece of the puzzle is that natural orders are far more numerous and visible than human-made orders are (55-64).

Since *Against Nature* is short, readable, and inexpensive, I think that buying it is well worth the reader's resources. The word 'nature' has a number of different uses, and Daston's efforts to distinguish them and yet also show how they're related, will be of interest to

philosophers working in metaphysics, epistemology, the philosophy of science, environmental philosophy, and moral philosophy. As a bonus, the book contains a series of illustrative figures, e.g., an image of Schopin's *The Children of Israel Crossing the Red Sea*, and a photo of the Strasbourg Cathedral's Astronomical Clock. The book is engaging enough without these images, but they're entertaining nonetheless.

Though Daston briefly mentions John Stuart Mill's critique of nature (4-5), one problem with her book is that she never explicitly discusses his distinction between the wide and narrow senses of 'nature', i.e., his distinction between an amoral sense that literally includes all phenomena; and a narrower, moralized sense that specifically refers to that which exists, or occurs, independently of human agency. To be fair, Daston seems aware that we frequently employ the narrow usage of 'nature': she notes that we use the word to distinguish that which is inborn from that which is cultivated, and that which is wild from that which is civilized (7). She also observes that while some cultures distinguish the human from the natural, others don't (57-60). Still it would have been useful for her to explicitly discuss Mill's distinction and how it relates to the three senses of 'nature' that she herself distinguishes. Upon inspection, Mill's narrow sense of 'nature' was sometimes implicit in Daston's observations. For example, in Chapter 2, Daston is careful to note that the categories associated with specific natures are different from human-made categories. Things with specific natures (things that belong to natural kinds) reproduce themselves, whereas human artifacts do not (12). Of course, the distinction between natural categories and human-made categories, presupposes Mill's narrow sense of 'nature'.

In other places, Mill's narrow sense challenges Daston's claims. For example, in Chapter 8, Daston contends that nature isn't inherently conservative. Though she's right to claim there

are many natural orders to choose from, and that some of those orders, when moralized, yield reformist or revolutionary conclusions, rather than conservative ones, e.g., the matriarchal social structures bees form (68-69), narrow nature does seem to be inherently conservative. After all, progress requires the exercise of agency. Social progress requires that we critically analyze the norms we grew up with and make conscious changes to them. Medical progress requires that we use our agency to challenge natural states of affairs, e.g., to cure disease and to prevent death. One particularly important form of progress – reducing wild animal suffering – will require significant interference with narrow nature. Most individual wild animals die painfully at a very young age, and those who live to maturity suffer significant burdens such as disease, parasites, recurring hunger, and the threat of predators. Significantly improving their lives will require that we interfere with wild ecosystems (Johannsen 2021).

Notwithstanding my concerns above, *Against Nature* is an engaging book that substantially contributes to our understanding of the relationship between morality and nature. I highly recommend it.

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## References

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