

Ronnie de Sousa, French Philosopher?

Arina Pismenny

Abstract Although trained in the Anglophone analytic tradition, the French education of his formative years seems to have left its mark on Ronnie de Sousa's thinking and writing. He appeals to temperament as an explanation for fundamental attitudes to life: neither the quest for a source of meaning in God or nature, nor his own tendency to relish life's meaninglessness can be grounded in reason. To show this, Ronnie has argued that there is no such thing as human nature, and that appeals to evolution can neither guide us in choosing how to live, nor give us good reason to prefer the "normal" to the "deviant". Instead, aesthetic reasons deserve to be given more weight than is granted by the alleged overriding character of morality.

"It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy up till now has consisted of – namely, the confession of its originator, and a species of involuntary and unconscious autobiography..."

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

It may not be apparent from a brief review of Ronald de Sousa's (or Ronnie's, as he prefers to be called) CV that his life as a philosopher began in French. He reveals in his interview for the *Emotion Researcher* (Price 2018) that his French high school teacher anointed him a philosopher on the basis of an essay on a skeptical quotation from Montaigne. At Oxford, under the tutelage of David Wiggins, and at Princeton, under the even sterner supervision of the philosopher of mathematics and language Paul Benacerraf, he acquired a disdain for what he has termed the 'insights of middling quality swaddled into a weight of pompous and obscurantist convolutions' of Continental philosophy (2011, p.189)¹. His career was set on a firmly analytic course.

More recently, however, some themes have emerged in his work that have a distinctly Continental flavour. My aim in these comments is to suggest that Ronnie has, after all, come closer in style and views (at least to someone untutored in the intricacies of Continental philosophy, such as myself) to the French Continental tradition.

¹ In what follows unqualified dates in parentheses refer to de Sousa's works as listed.

I have in mind especially some of his speculations about the importance of temperament in the determination of philosophical views, together with his defence of the sort of views he is himself inclined to regard as reflecting his own philosophical temperament, in which he appears to find comfort in a quasi-religious hope that life is utterly meaningless. I will focus, in particular, on his ambivalent attitude to the role of human nature and individual natures as guides to life, and to his suggestion that the facts of evolutionary biology should inspire us to be existentialists.

Ronnie's thoughts about temperament are expressed in "What Else is There?", Chapter 5 of *Emotional Truth*, he writes of the 'dark secret of philosophy':

Despite its commitment to reason and argument, the broad lines of every philosopher's positions are determined by innate temperament. The arguments pile up later, to justify temperamental convictions. . . This holds for styles of philosophizing as much as for schools of thought: by temperament, I suspect, one sort of philosopher aspires to emulate literature; another looks for clues to science and especially to biology; and a third is keen to apply strictly analytical tools to the question of how best to live. (2011, p 139).

More recently, in "Meaning and Individual Temperament", a paper delivered to a conference of the Meaning Network and published in the appropriately obscure *International Journal of Existential Psychology & Psychotherapy*, he writes:

Questions about the meaning of life elicit deep-seated disagreements driven by temperamental polarities, which in turn define fundamental attitudes, notably toward three questions: (1) How should we live in time? (2) Where does meaning come from? And (3) is there intrinsic value to suffering? Attitudes toward these questions come in two main packages I call 'Heavy' and 'Light'. (2019).

The 'Heavy' vs. 'Light' terminology is inspired by Milan Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Kundera 1984). Ronnie provides a number of considerations in favour of the Light package of views concerning meaning, while at the same time insisting that neither package of attitudes can be rationally justified. While most of us can agree that some things are more important than others, some of our deepest existential concerns 'consist of polarities of values, about which many of us tend to have opinions as unshakable as our justifications for them are feeble.' (2016, p. 2).

Conventional wisdom, by and large, is on the side of the Heavy package. Ronnie identifies three themes characteristic of that package. One concerns our attitude to time, and the relative weight we ascribe to the present vs. the future: the present or short-term is often to be sacrificed for the sake of the future or the long-term. Another, perhaps the most telling, concerns the source of meaning in an individual human life: the Heavy package involves seeking, by default, some external, higher purpose or reason, in most life events. In the Light package, by contrast, life events are viewed as essentially random. The Heavy regards the source of meaning as ultimately grounded in some higher purpose, typically represented by a caring God whose mysterious ways are somehow to be reckoned as ultimately good even when they do not appear to be so. Ronnie's preference for the Light attitude is expressed in his Parable of the Pebble:

Once upon a time, a man walking on a beach found a pebble that looked oddly like a human face. Amazed at this product of millions of years of random friction by stones, sand, and water, the man took it home. He treasured it: often he looked at it, haunted by its accidental beauty. One day, he showed it to a guest who said: "Oh, no, I'm sure it's one of Nick's rejects—that hippie sculptor who carves souvenirs for tourists. He sometimes dumps his botched ones back onto the beach . . ." Now the pebble was nothing but the charmless reject of a mediocre craftsman. All the strange wondrous beauty the man had loved was gone. (2011, p. 191).

As I illustrate below, the tendency to regard aesthetic criteria as relevant to the adoption of metaphysical or even moral views is manifested in some of Ronnie's other philosophical stances.

A third crucial part of the Heavy package, which Ronnie ascribes specifically to Christian as opposed to most other traditions of wisdom or religion, consists in the claim that suffering is not merely instrumentally good in certain obvious ways – as when pain at the dentist is endured for the sake of healthy teeth – but is good in itself. This last doctrine, unlike the first two, is not often, in the contemporary world, regarded as commonsense; but its centrality to Christian doctrine is attested by the Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris* ("On the redeeming power of suffering") of Pope John Paul II (1984). John Paul II writes: 'Suffering seems to belong to man's transcendence: it is one of those points in which man is in a certain sense "destined" to go beyond himself, and he is called to this in a mysterious way'. And the mystery, Ronnie comments, is a four-fold one. His biting summary of 'the core story of Christianity' puts it this way:

God entraps two innocent creatures into disobedience. Their ‘sin’ is motivated by the desire to acquire knowledge of right and wrong. (Such knowledge, one might think, would be a prerequisite to understanding why their disobedience was wrong in the first place. That’s a first mystery.) God then punishes not only his two original victims but the entire human race. (Second mystery.) After a few thousand years, God changes his immutable mind. (Third mystery.) He arranges to become human and be tortured to death. This, we are told, will ‘redeem’ the creatures he had (so unjustly) punished. (Fourth mystery.) Does this ‘redemption’ amount to removing the curse of suffering? No. On the contrary, suffering has now become ‘essential to the nature of man’ (John Paul II, 1984). Not only are we meant to continue to suffer, as before, but now we are supposed to rejoice in it, like the Apostle Paul, ‘because of all those whom it can help—just as it helped him—to understand the salvific meaning of suffering’ (ibid.).

These comments forcefully express Ronnie’s attitude to the peculiarly Christian version of the Heavy package. His satirical take on Christianity does much to illustrate the Light view – a view shared by many historical figures, from Lucretius through Dawkins, that the vision presented by theistic religion of human beings as the instruments of some grand design, far from being reassuring, is in fact a nightmarish one.

It would be hard to deny that in several respects the Heavy package passes for common sense. It is generally regarded as a universal principle of practical reason that one should regard one’s future prospects as more important than one’s present comfort. We need to save for our retirement; to preserve our health; and indeed, to leave the world in a better state than we found it for future generations. Equally proverbial, however, is the thought that the course of history is essentially chaotic: that even if it is from the physical and metaphysical point of view deterministic, we can never be certain that we have any future, let alone just what it will bring. So, *carpe diem!*

If Ronnie is arguing that one should simply ignore the future, it may be an instance of his conversational quip to the effect that when your hair is sufficiently white, anything you say will be interpreted charitably. In this case, the role of temperament is obviously a matter of degree and emphasis; but it remains plausible enough to claim that a temperamental gulf exists between those who plan their lives from an early age and those who believe that wisdom lies in being prepared to respond to the unexpected. In the *Emotion Researcher* interview already mentioned,

Ronnie claims that in most of his life he has done what seemed to be “the next thing”, rather than decided that his life should take one or another direction determined by careful deliberation. In his “Learning to be Natural” chapter (2000), Ronnie has explored the puzzle posed by the Daoist principle of *wu wei*, sometimes translated “don’t act”, as a way of being natural, echoing the Christian biblical mention of the lilies “that toil not, neither do they spin”. As a piece of practical advice, *wu wei* is profoundly paradoxical, if not blatantly contradictory: trying not to act is itself an action. Whatever our position on free will, there is no escaping the Sartrean verdict: we are condemned to be free: ‘I cannot choose not to choose, for if I did, then that too would be a choice.’ (2000, p.289); (cf. Slingerland 2014).

In order to make it more intelligible, the Daoist principle is often interpreted as one of the many precepts of wisdom that endorse ‘living according to nature’. But what that amounts to, beyond the trivial advice to avoid attempting what is physically or logically impossible, is hard to specify. In that same article, Ronnie writes:

Suppose, for a moment, that some omniscient angel revealed to me my essential human nature. And imagine that I vowed, in gratitude for this knowledge, never again to do anything not specifically enjoined by my nature. It is obvious that my project would be a hopeless one. It may be inscribed in the list of my essential properties that dry food is good for me, or that I am to eat greens, but it won't tell me which to choose between dried spinach and dried broccoli. It may even tell me that I should strive to fulfil my nature, develop my talents, find myself, achieve something in life; but it won't decide what that consists in for me. For what the angel revealed was Human Nature, and even if there were such a thing, it would have to be realizable in countless different ways: my Human essence won't tell me which option is right for this variant of it, *me*. (2000 p. 290).

The implication is that insofar as there is a nontrivial sense in which human nature exists as a biological fact, such a conception of nature can give us little guidance about how to live, despite the long line of philosophers who have advocated that we look to nature as a guide to life. The case for human nature is sometimes qualified by the reservation that while evolutionary biology ‘very much supports the notion of human nature, just not an essentialist one.’ (Cleary and Pigliucci 2017). But that nuance, which is supposed to separate the claim that humans have a nature from the claim that they have essential characteristics, is a subtle one, and I will not attempt to address it. I suspect, however, that Ronnie would reject it: in a number of places,

notably in “Restoring Emotion’s Bad Rep” (2006), he lists a number of ways in which it would be absurd, in the light of the mechanisms of evolution, to expect natural selection to have endowed us with consistently good (or, for that matter of consistently bad) “natural” traits.

To cite here but one factor that is often overlooked when natural selection is accorded a role analogous to Providence, the mechanism of frequency-dependant fitness guarantees that where there are competing alternatives, such as empathic altruism or psychopathic indifference to the sufferings of others (or even one’s own future selves), both are likely to remain in equilibrium without either ever spreading to all members of the species. Both are equally natural.

Ronnie has articulated several objections to the notion that we could get a nontrivial guidance for life from the mandate to be ‘natural’, despite its surface attractiveness. In ‘Individual Natures’ (1998), he proposed an argument from what he called the “actuarial paradox.” On the one hand, there is good reason to believe that unique genetic and epigenetic characteristics, together with idiosyncratic upbringing, determines not a specific human nature, but each person’s *individual* nature. On the other hand, such individual natures are necessarily beyond the reach of any investigation based on inductive evidence. He writes, ‘while human beings are subject to various laws of nature, there are no laws that apply to them as a kind "human being.”’ (1998 p. 5). For species, from a Darwinian point of view, are regarded as individuals rather than as kinds defined by necessary and sufficient conditions. (1989). Hence there are no laws applicable to humans as a natural kind. The claim ‘is not that biological organisms don’t behave as they do in virtue of certain causal powers; but rather that the causal powers in virtue of which they behave as they do are not ones they have in virtue of being members of a certain species.’ (1998 p. 7). Ronnie notes that biology has produced a sort of inversion of our understanding of the relation of species to individuals. While originally species might have been regarded as the paradigm case of a natural kind, evolutionary biology conceptualizes them rather as spatiotemporal individuals consisting of all those specimens that any given species comprises. Conversely, any single individual specimen human being, if indeed it has a nature, can be regarded as a natural kind—of which only one exists. As such, it makes sense to think of an individual’s behaviour as being governed by laws that apply to them alone. The problem that arises from this way of thinking is that the discovery of laws by inductive science requires us – among other things – to establish certain statistical if not universal generalizations that apply to things of that kind. Now on the assumption that human beings can

be categorized into groups, we can seek statistical information about the members of those groups. We could then narrow down the probability of any common class of events – the likelihood of graduating from high school, say, or susceptibility to a certain form of cancer, or life expectancy – by getting statistics about each of the different groups to which an individual belongs, and combining those statistics in some appropriate way.

To see this, consider an actuary trying to arrive at an accurate estimate of an individual client X's life expectancy. They might reason thus:

On learning that X is an American, I know that X's life expectancy (L) is 76, say. Add that X is female: L increases if she is white, but decreases if she is black. Add that she has a Ph.D.: L goes up again. Add that she is a smoker: L goes down. Add that her parents were both alive at 95: L goes up. And so on and on.... The smallest class, that is, the class of *American female Black PhD smokers born of long-lived parents*, is the maximally relevant class. (1998 p. 10).

The actuary now faces two problems, Ronnie claims. The first is that the way these different statistics combine is nonmonotonic. That is, each piece of statistical information will bear on the final estimate in a way that is not independent of the other statistics with which we are attempting to combine it. The reason is that the same factor may affect some groups differently than others. 'In general, for example, being female raises life expectancy. But in some cultures – where there is widespread female infanticide and bride murder, for example – it may lower it.' (p. 11).

One cannot, therefore, assess the impact of each group statistics on an individual in isolation from each other. The only way to get around this is to obtain statistics that apply to the 'maximally relevant class' in question. But that is what gives rise to the actuarial paradox: while it seems clear that, in general, the more information the actuary acquires, the more accurately they can assess X's likely life expectancy, it is easy to see that at some point the acquisition of more knowledge will raise the margin of error in virtue of the decreasing size of the sample involved. At the limit, X will be the only member of her class and therefore no statistical information will be available at all. 'There will be no interesting statistics about American female Black Ph.D. smokers born of long-lived parents with factor X in her genes, if there is only one of them.' (p.12). In short, Ronnie concludes, there is no meaningful conception of either

general human nature as a species characteristic; and even individual natures while there is reason to think the concept makes sense, remain epistemically out of reach.

Another line of attack that Ronnie has pursued against a form of the idea of human nature is directed against the notion of natural law derived from Aristotelian and Thomistic antecedents. He has summed up his view of the Natural Law tradition as a ‘bait and switch strategy’ (2017, p. 147):

The “bait” is the promise that nature itself will somehow reveal what it “intends,” allowing us to uncover its laws in the sense in which that term is understood in science. The “switch” occurs when encountering exceptions to the alleged law: instead of regarding these as falsifications of a hypothesis, the natural law theorist condemns them as normatively unacceptable on the basis of their incompatibility with that “law” – thus begging the question by switching from the scientific to the legislative use of the word. The idea that we should regard what is statistically normal – located somewhere under the mode of the Bell curve in any particular case – as *normative*, while what is in the tails of the curve is “deviant” is grounded in Aristotle’s proposal that what is natural should be identified with ‘what happens always or for the most part’. But that, Ronnie argues, makes no sense in light of evolutionary theory. The simple reason is that ‘at each step on the way from our single-celled ancestors to us humans, there must have been a statistically rare genetic change. If all your ancestors had been normal, you would be a bacterium. We all descend from millions of freaks.’ (2008, p. 223).

Ronnie concludes, then, that not just the idea of conforming to human nature, but *a fortiori* that of aspiring to *normality* is one that is not consistently encouraged by meditating on evolutionary theory. On the contrary, biology suggests that while not all exceptions are good, yet any trait we regard as progressive when compared to those of our ancestors (at least if becoming more like modern humans is regarded as progress) began as an exception, which was then favoured by natural selection. What evolutionary biology suggests, then, is that there is nothing wrong with cultivating our difference. There is no reason to favour tradition rather than change, and no principled reason to prefer what is frequent rather than what is eccentric. Ronnie has stressed that this is true where the norms are social as well as in terms of evolution: if a practice or tradition can be justified by its beneficial effects, there is no need to appeal to tradition: ‘The

appeal to tradition, like appeals to faith or patriotism, is the last recourse of the scoundrel who has already lost a rational argument.’ (2011, p. 134).

The lines of argument about the role of nature and the natural in our attitudes to life have consequences for Ronnie’s views about a number of other topics, including rationality. As some of his critics have pointed out (e.g. Salmela 2014), his assimilation of emotional truth to fittingness or the attainment of its formal object is a somewhat arbitrary oversimplification; but it leads him into an intriguing examination of the rationality of suicide to be found in the chapter entitled “Perversion and Death” included in (2011). In that chapter, he invokes Richard Jeffrey’s *Bayesian Logic of Decision* (Jeffrey 1965) to argue for what might be regarded as the existentialist claim that no attitude to death can be considered as any more rational than any other. Ronnie first shows why Epicurus’s famous argument to show that death is not to be feared, which notoriously is found comforting by some and completely unpersuasive by others, is strictly fallacious. The reason is that it presupposes that our attitude to a future unknown state must be adjusted to the phenomenal character we attribute to that state. Actually, Ronnie himself recommends something he calls the ‘Philebus Principle’, PP, which says that ‘A pleasure of anticipation should be proportional in intensity to the anticipated pleasure it relates to’. PP, he notes, ‘makes excellent biological sense’, insofar as pleasures or anxieties of anticipation might be expected to guide us in our choices about the future. (2011 p. 13). Following the logic of PP, any feeling I have about my future death should be proportional to zero, insofar as death is ‘taken seriously’ rather than being conceived as merely ‘a sort of emigration’ (2011, 173). That suggests that, strictly speaking, the correct attitude to death should be complete indifference. Nevertheless, citing Philip Larkin, Ronnie concedes that for many people the complete absence of experience is precisely just ‘what we fear—no sight, no sound, / No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with, / Nothing to love or link with.’ (quoted 2011 p. 171.) Still, while Larkin’s position is indeed both possible and common, it looks like the fear of death is, after all, irrational.

Against this, Ronnie argues that the choice of death is necessarily *non-rational*. The argument is based on Jeffrey’s (1965) Bayesian logic of decision. Jeffrey’s theory of decision is grounded in the possibility of establishing, for any agent, a unique preference ranking calculated on the basis of past choices. Past choices are interpreted as revealing degrees of desire and subjective probability, which determine the expected utility of any given option. The theory plays a dual role: in the third person, it can explain an agent’s choice on the basis of their

subjective degrees of belief and preference rankings; in the first person, it can serve to rationalize a prospective choice by showing it to be consistent with the agent's revealed preference ranking. Ronnie's argument is that since all our past choices have selected one act or experience over another, we can have no evidence for any preference in which the absence of any experience was compared to any possible act or experience. Absolute nonbeing has never been one of the options under consideration. In consequence, 'for Bayesian decision theory, death is an absolutely incomparable choice. It must then follow that a choice of death cannot be deemed either rational or irrational.' (2011, p. 183). Thus, on the basis of an analytic argument appealing to Bayesian decision theory, Ronnie seems to have made the choice of suicide into a pure existentialist leap that cannot be assessed on the basis of rationality.

Depending on one's views about the relation between morality and rationality, the fact that a choice is arational might not determine whether it could be assessed as moral or immoral. Ronnie is on record as having vigorously attacked as immoral the prohibitions on suicide and physician-assisted death which have only recently begun to be relaxed in Canada as well as in certain jurisdictions in Europe and the U.S. (To get a sense of the vehemence with which he has attacked the religious case for prohibiting the choice of death, I recommend his review of a 2005 book by a Catholic disciple of a prominent theologian, who attacked Sue Rodriguez, a victim of Lou Gehrig's disease who had sought permission to procure medically assisted death. (2005). It will show, if nothing else, that Ronnie has not always been nice.)

Ronnie's stance on the 'correct attitude to death' seems to be one that one might expect to find in a French existentialist. As further illustration of what I interpret as a general shift towards a more "Continental" style of philosophy, I want to comment on his increasingly subjectivist interpretation of the grounding of morality in emotion.

In his first book (1987), as well as in some of the essays in *Emotional Truth* (2011), Ronnie adopted a broadly sentimentalist line, endorsing a view of moral principles as essentially rationalizations of certain prosocial emotions. But he has veered into a kind of moral nihilism by rejecting any appeal to the irreducibility of normativity in favour of a purely naturalistic account. Psychologically, normativity simply involves the endorsement of first-order emotions. Citing Prinz's (2007) argument for moral relativity, Ronnie asserts that 'endorsement . . . is nothing more than an emotion that takes another as its object.' (2011, 140). That introduces a circularity, but 'not all circles are vicious'. If that leaves morality devoid of foundations, so much the better:

‘True foundationalisms are always question-begging by definition; holistic circles, like the one I advocate, are virtuous if they are large enough.’ (ibid.) Recently Ronnie seems to have taken this skeptical view to the point of rejecting the very idea of morality, first in a paper that, significantly, was published in French (2019), then in a provocative piece on *Aeon* urging us to “Forget Morality” (2021).

That, some might think, is taking Continental style existentialism a tad too far. Be that as it may, I want to end by mentioning another aspect of Ronnie’s ambivalent attitude to the relevance of nature to value. It is what might be called an aesthetic bridge from fact to value, which is at the heart of his suggestion that biology, while it does not *justify* anything, can plausibly, nevertheless, be used to *inspire* certain attitudes. Though here again, as we shall see, the direction of the inspiration will be radically affected by intellectual temperament.

For the “aesthetic bridge” I have in mind, let me return to “Nature’s Purposes and Mine”, (2017). That paper’s central question concerns ‘how biological knowledge can have a bearing on our philosophical conception of ourselves as human beings.’ (2017, p. 142). It begins by pointing out that any philosopher wishing to insist on the unbreachable character of the is-ought gap, or the error committed by the “naturalistic fallacy”, is left with no premises on which to ground normative principles. ‘If [the] reason [justifying a normative claim] cannot consist of any facts, must it consist of some nonfact?’ (2017, p.143). Available non-facts would seem to be limited to fictions or falsehoods, logical truths, and normative principles other than the one we are seeking to justify. The third option avoids the naturalistic fallacy only at the cost of circularity: insofar as not everybody agrees as to what the foundational moral or normative principles should be, every proposal along that line must beg the question against every other. The second option has seemed promising to Kantians, but, as Ronnie sees it, the idea that any valid practical norm can be justified through a chain of reasoning that ultimately rests on an agent’s ability to recognize their nature as an agent endowed with free will convinces no one outside the Kantian Faith. As for the first option, it has indeed been espoused by some moral philosophers who describe themselves as fictionalists (e.g. Joyce 2019). It seems something of a dodge, and doesn’t help to answer any specific question of morality or value in one way rather than another (2021).

To most ethicists, these dismissals will seem preposterously hasty. They seem to be just the kind of thing that Continental philosophers are accused of trying to get away with. But even if one rejects as inadequate these negative assessments of most existing ways of attempting to

justify morality, Ronnie's positive suggestion seems worthy of attention. It consists in conceding the obvious point that our behaviour, and the norms we are inclined to appeal to in arriving at decisions about it, must be guided by facts in some way, even if no normative claim ever *follows* from any facts. '[N]o normative statements can be justified at all unless we relax the constraints on the range of statements admissible in their support.' (2017, p. 143). Rather than requiring our premises to entail the normative conclusions we are interested in, the trick is to identify statements of fact that, in some weaker yet acceptable way, lend support to our conclusions. As an example, Ronnie adduces John Stuart Mill's observation that 'the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people do actually desire it.' He acknowledges that Mill's analogy *desirable* and *visible* is logically defective, since *visible* means what *can* be seen, while *desirable* refers to what *deserves* to be desired. Yet, he claims, Mill is surely right: 'What counts is that we are strongly inclined to take desire as a reason for judging something to be desirable. If no inference is any better than that, then Mill's inference seems to be reasonable, even though it is sanctioned neither by logic nor by semantics.' (2011, 156).

Most cases are less simple than the fact that the existence of a desire for X is *prima facie* a plausible reason for regarding X as desirable. In the more general case, what sorts of considerations would count in favour of an inference from a set of facts to a normative or evaluative claim? Here Ronnie points out that a somewhat unlikely group of thinkers converge on the observation that both in ordinary reasoning and theory construction we look for a *reflective equilibrium* in which we attempt to reconcile general intuitions with particular observations. We sometimes do this by adjusting the former to the latter, and sometimes by correcting the latter in the light of the former. Just as Hume instructs us, in effect, and to be satisfied with the fact that induction is a practice that we just follow, and for which we can provide no noncircular justification, 'the same holds for deductive inference: in a mode of reasoning that looks "flagrantly circular," as Nelson Goodman pointed out, "[a] rule is amended if it yields an inference we are unwilling to accept. An inference is rejected if it violates a rule we are unwilling to amend".' And he continues by noting an unexpected consensus among very different historical figures:

The lineage of this idea goes back, before Goodman and Rawls, to Nietzsche and Hume. Rawls's appeal to reflective equilibrium is of a piece with Goodman's characterization of the predicates we commonly use as "entrenched" in existing projective practice; in turn, it

reflects Nietzsche's contention that instead of vainly attempting to justify ethics, we should attend instead to its genealogy. It is also clearly in harmony with Hume's reduction of our inductive knowledge of cause and effect to "custom and habit". (2017, p. 156).

Once we accept that facts can, under the right circumstances and in the light of what we desire, provide us with the reasons for preferences, the normativity of which they do not entail, we could accept a much broader range of reasons for approving of certain choices or preferring certain outcomes. This gives rise to the a sort of unargued associative move that analytic philosophers regard as characteristic of Continental philosophy: he seems simply to jump to the suggestion that the fact that a certain pattern is aesthetically agreeable is a good reason to emulate it. If that is allowed, then we could see how finding beauty in some of the patterns exhibited by the natural facts of evolution might inspire one to regard such patterns as desirable in one's own life. And that, in effect, is what Ronnie proposes in the last pages of the essay under discussion.

In those pages he invites us to consider the role of individuality and diversity in the living world. In all living things whose method of reproduction involves recombinations of genes, no two individuals resemble one another exactly. That mere fact may strike us as aesthetically marvellous: it may inspire us to strive 'to make of ourselves, in a phrase once used by the French writer André Gide, 'Ah, the most irreplaceable of beings"'. (2017, p. 157).

The flip side of individuality is diversity. Without diversity, there would be no evolution. While social life undoubtedly puts pressure on all of us to conform, it seems as if life itself modelled the pursuit of diversity:

'Diversity in forms of life is attractive from both an ecological and an individual perspective. On the one hand, when plant species disappear, we may lose potential cures for diseases yet unheard of. But, on the other hand, we also value diversity for its own sake. The living world's astounding range of forms of life is awe inspiring. Analogously, the multiplicity of possible experiences appears as a gift bestowed on us by nature herself, which it would be churlish to reject.' (2017, p. 157)

Whether any particular person finds it churlish or not is obviously a very good example of the way our attitudes at a very fundamental level depend on individual temperament. The form taken by Ronnie's existentialism, then, is itself an illustration, in its arbitrariness and its refusal to appeal to any moral foundations for the rational justification of our deepest choices of life

patterns, of his insistence that what makes our own lives meaningful is temperament rather than deliberative rationality.

References

Works by Ronald de Sousa:

1987. *The Rationality of Emotion*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
1989. “Kinds of Kinds: Individuality and Biological Species.” *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science, The Dubrovnik Papers: Philosophy of Biology*, 3 (2): 119–35.
1998. “Individual Natures.” *Philosophia* 26 (1): 3–21.
2000. “Learning to Be Natural.” In *Being Humans: Anthropological Universality and Particularity in Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Neil Roughley, 287–307, 313–310. New York: Walter de Gruyter.
2006. “Restoring Emotion’s Bad Rep: The Moral Randomness of Norms.” *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 2 (1): 29–47.
2008. “Gender Dichotomies, Sexual Continua, and Emotional Taxonomy.” In *Gender Feelings*, edited by Verena Mayer and Daniela Rippl, 215–32. Paderborn, DE: Wilhelm Fink Verlag.
2016. “Meaning and Individual Temperament.” *International Journal of Special Issue Existential Psychology & Psychotherapy*, Special Issue: Proceedings of the 2016 Meaning Conference, 1–14.
2017. “Nature’s Purposes and Mine.” In *How Biology Shapes Philosophy: New Foundations for Naturalism*, edited by David Livingston Smith, 141–60. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2019. “Pour Un Amoralisme: Polémique.” *Ateliers de l’Éthique* 14 (1): 172–89.
2021. “Forget Morality.” *Aeon*, April 24. <https://aeon.co/essays/five-reasons-why-moral-philosophy-is-distracting-and-harmful>.

Works by others:

- Cleary, Skye C., and Massimo Pigliucci. 2018. “Human Nature Matters.” *Aeon*, April 25, 2018. <https://aeon.co/essays/theres-no-philosophy-of-life-without-a-theory-of-human-nature>.
- John Paul II, Pope. Apostolic Letter. 1984. “*Salvifici Doloris*,” 1984. Vatican: Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.html.
- Joyce, Richard. 2019. “Moral Fictionalism: How to Have Your Cake and Eat It Too.” In *The End of Morality: Taking Moral Abolitionism Seriously*, edited by Richard Joyce and Richard Garner, 150–65. New York: Routledge.
- Price, Carolyn. 2018. *The Rationality of Emotion: Biology, Ideology and Emotional Truth: Interview with Ronald de Sousa*. Emotion Researcher. <http://emotionresearcher.com/the-rationality-of-emotion-biology-ideology-and-emotional-truth/>.
- Prinz, Jesse. 2007. *The Emotional Construction of Morals*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Salmela, Mikko. 2014. *True Emotions*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Slingerland, Edward. 2014. *Trying Not to Try: Ancient China, Modern Science, and the Power of Spontaneity*. New York: Broadway Books.