

REALISM WITHOUT OBJECTIVITY CAN ONE BE BOTH REALIST AND QUIETIST IN ETHICS?

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ABSTRACT

If there is a substantial stake in the philosophical discussion about moral realism, then this concerns the viable answers to questions like the following: Does our concept of reality allow for “stuff” like goods, values or obligations which seem at first sight abstruse? Can room be made for a subset of “facts” united by the property of somehow belonging to the (admittedly vague) field of morality? Is there an accessible theoretical space wherein a form of impersonal or at any rate non-special knowledge of these facts can be developed? In the essay, I take a stand and argue for a variety of moral realism that is disconnected from any sense of moral anxiety. Simply put, I assume not only that, as a rule, the quality of a society’s moral life does not depend on the meta-ethics prevailing in the (notoriously thin) community of moral philosophers, but that there are non-realist moral theories that, ideally, can be regarded as effective bulwarks against immorality or amorality. Nor I think that there is an a priori incompatibility between a realist stance in ethics and a non-panadaptationist view of biological evolution, which does not purport to explain all that exists and matters in people’s lives exclusively in the light of its reproductive fitness. As a result, I see the relevant dispute as revolving around the (comparatively) higher or lower plausibility of the reconstruction of the conditions of intelligibility of moral experience, as it manifests itself in the human life-form or, more modestly, in the societies or cultures inhabited by the philosophers contributing to the debate of interest here.

KEYWORDS

Morality, realism, neo-Darwinism, sense for reality

Moral knowledge is not simply intellectual grasp of propositions; it is not even simply intellectual grasp of particular facts; it is perception. It is seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling
Martha C. Nussbaum

1. MORAL ANXIETIES

If there is a substantial stake in the philosophical discussion about moral realism, then this concerns the viable answers to questions like the following: Does our concept of reality allow for “stuff” like goods, values or obligations which seem at first sight abstruse? Can room be made for a subset of “facts” united by the property of somehow belonging to the (admittedly vague) field of morality? Is there an accessible theoretical space wherein a form of impersonal or at any rate non-special knowledge of these facts can be developed?

Questions of this kind may assume a dramatic tone and a more than theoretical significance if a positive answer is taken to be the inescapable condition for safeguarding something that is seen as essential in the human life-form. In this case, acknowledging the existence of moral facts is understood as the necessary outcome of a transcendental argument, where a realist view of morality appears as the only consistent way of making sense of a true moral experience, whether the latter is conceived of in evaluative or in prescriptive terms.

As I frame in broad terms my take on the issue of moral realism, I have in the back of my mind familiar stances such as: (1) anti-relativism (in the wide spectrum ranging from Dostoyevsky’s to Diego Marconi’s or Roberta De Monticelli’s),¹ where giving up objectivity is sensed as a kind of surrender to the view that, as long as value judgments are concerned, “anything goes”; or: (2) anti-materialism, where an idea of nature in which no room is left for something that does not fit with the scientific worldview is fiercely disputed (as in, for example, Thomas Nagel’s *Mind and Cosmos*).

In what follows, I want to take a stand and argue for a variety of moral realism that is disconnected from this sense of urge. Simply put, I assume not only that, as a rule, the quality of a society’s moral life does not depend on the meta-ethics prevailing in the (notoriously thin) community of moral philosophers, but that there are non-realist moral theories that, ideally, can be regarded as effective bulwarks against immorality or amorality. (What I am gesturing at here is that I am unable to see any logical fallacy in, for example, a constructivist theory of

¹ Cf. D. Marconi, *Per la verità. Relativismo e filosofia*, Einaudi, Torino, 2007; R. De Monticelli, *La questione morale*, Cortina, Milano, 2010.

human rights.) Nor I think that there is an a priori incompatibility between a realist stance in ethics and a non-panadaptationist view of biological evolution, which does not purport to explain all that exists and matters in people's lives exclusively in the light of its reproductive fitness.² As a result, I understand the relevant dispute as revolving around the (comparatively higher or lower) plausibility of the reconstruction of the conditions of intelligibility of moral experience, as it manifests itself in the human life-form (if something like this exists) or, more modestly, in the societies or cultures populated by the philosophers contributing to the debate of interest here.

If my way of framing the issue succeeds, it will lead to a quietist conclusion in two different senses. On the one hand, because its goal goes no further than showing the relative superiority of a realist account of moral experience by capitalizing on a style of reasoning which, while retaining the form of a transcendental (or abductive) argument, gives up any inescapability claim as to its conclusions and content itself with making plausible a *prima facie* baffling claim, i.e. that strange things such as moral "properties" are part of the furniture of the world. On the other hand, turning an unfathomable enigma into an ordinary fact should have the side effect of dissolving the anxieties that have been piling up around the alleged "queerness" or *Sonderstellung* of the human form of life in the physical world during the last centuries. Such anxieties account for, among other things, the disproportionate role played by the naturalistic fallacy argument in modern ethical discussion. If I had to resort to a slogan to sum up my aims in this essay, I could say that I would be glad to expand the philosophically beneficial effects of deconstructing the "myth of the given" to the ethical field.

2. IN SEARCH OF REALITY

The semantic density and the historical stratification of the concept of "reality" (as well as of "fact" or, for what it is worth, "objectivity") is what makes the controversies on moral realism unpalatable to those who have managed to retain a residual theoretical naiveté and a tad of detachment from philosophical encyclopaedism. It is actually unclear how this kind of complexity can be handled without paying an excessive price in terms of ambiguity and vagueness. (In many

² For an excellent exploration of the theoretical limits of "Darwinism in its current scientific incarnation," see D.J. Depew, B. Weber, "The Fate of Darwinism: Evolution after the Modern Synthesis," *Biological Theory*, 6, 2011, pp. 89-102.

regards, it cannot even be taken for granted that the concept of reality is a coherent concept.) Yet, one has to make as explicit as possible the tacit background of this worn-out notion and try to turn the familiar into something questionable, lest one loses the grip on the whole issue. Provided that moral realists wish to make room in the ordinary understanding of reality for the idea that ethics is a phenomenon in its own right, there has to be some form of agreement on the use one wants to make of a term that has neither rigid reference nor an uncontested sense.

I begin with this caveat because my main aim here is to understand whether the current philosophical discussion is open to a view that I see as heavily underrepresented. This view is firmly positioned in the realist camp – if by moral realism we mean an outlook that rejects the intellectually sophisticated idea that morality is a purely human construct, more precisely an expression of the human will – although its followers shy away from interpreting “real” as an epistemic property, i.e. as the content of a justified true belief.³ For this variety of moral realism, in other words, it is enough to figure out compelling reasons to hold the common-sense belief that moral experience makes somehow “contact” with what is out there and, consequently, that the resistance felt by most people to getting rid of any moral scruple does not result from a mere psychological conditioning. Even in the unlikely event that a universal agreement could be reached about this, the consensus would not exempt us from a truly open debate on another no less evident aspect of moral life. I am thinking here of the cognitive underdetermination of every moral doctrine and the considerable diversity of opinions regarding goods, values and duties within the human community. This is no surprising realization for those who, like myself, see knowledge, i.e. the endeavour to deliver justified beliefs about the world, as a power that is by its very nature more de-realizing than functional to strengthening our contact with reality. I shall return to this at greater length below.

Seen in this light, it is not surprising that adhering to a form of moral realism should not necessarily lead to the controversial claim that a universal cognitive convergence based on the access to the objective truth of ethical bastions (whether value judgments or prescriptions) is a reachable target even if only in the long

³ As far as I can see, my take on the maddeningly difficult issue of the difference between “reality” and “existence” is largely Kantian. For a useful résumé on the topic, see W. Schwarz, “Kant’s Categories of Reality and Existence,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 2, 1987, pp. 343-346, especially p. 346: “Reality is always given, but existence is *problema*”.

run. The hypothesis that I would like to test, rather, is whether there is something in the very nature of moral “realities” that makes such an outcome highly unlikely. Mine is the burden of not so much demonstrating – this would be a task beyond my strength – as to gesture at a plausible account of moral experience that, in light of what we know about our species and the physical world in which we live, should make sense of the mediated influence exerted by stubborn moral facts upon the deliberations and conducts of moral agents.

To cut a long story short, in the view I am advocating here, the sense of reality precedes its representation. It is, in other words, a natural response to our engagement with things and agents whose behaviour is independent of our will and desire. What’s more, a consistent concept of reality as it is in itself is premised in the representationalist outlook on the possibility of having access to a “view from nowhere”, which, however, can only be the product of a counterfactual abstraction with a regulative function in the ordinary cognitive performances. The latter, in fact, are never contingent on a frontal relationship with the totality of experience.⁴ Reality as such, to sum up, cannot be an object. It is better conceived of as an environment, a tacit background, or an exploratory field.

This, at any rate, does not mean denying that there is a mutual influence between the sense of reality and the various cognitive deeds that capitalize on that original contact with what is out there. Anyone who has read without bias the engaging fifth chapter of *Mind and Cosmos* knows what I am talking about.⁵ In those pages, rowing against the current, Nagel challenges the plausibility of a neo-Darwinian view of the evolution of life and cosmos starting from an overriding insight on the reality of values, or better on the self-evidence of the realm of morality as the quintessence of what is real in people’s lives.

Value judgments and moral reasoning are part of human life, and therefore part of the factual evidence about what humans are capable of. The interpretation of faculties such as these is inescapably relevant to the task of discovering the best scientific or cosmological account of what we are and how we came into existence. What counts as a good explanation depends heavily on an understanding of what it is that has to be explained.⁶

⁴ On this point see J. McDowell, *Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World*, in Id., *Mind, Value, & Reality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 1998, pp. 112-130, especially pp. 118-122.

⁵ T. Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

The daring conclusion reached by Nagel reverses the influential argument offered by Sharon Street: “since moral realism is true, a Darwinian account of the motives underlying moral judgment must be false, in spite of the scientific consensus in its favor.”⁷

Like John Dupré,⁸ I too have the impression that Nagel’s conclusion is hasty. It seems motivated less by a distrust in Darwin’s ability in accounting for life’s unity in diversity than by his impatience with a number of controversial philosophical extrapolations about the impact of the Darwinian revolution on some metaphysical imaginaries inherited by our intellectual tradition. This, however, does not undermine the force of the argumentative strategy adopted by Nagel. As far as I can see, it starts from a questionable, but non-negligible consideration. I would sum it up as follows. A substantial portion of the *Homo sapiens* species members systematically show that they possess a special kind of receptivity – answerability to moral norms – that puts them in a condition to distance themselves from self-indulgent inclinations and recognize their reasons for acting otherwise. Familiarity with values, therefore, does not arise from a representational, head-on stance towards the world that would lead to the discovery of a subset of *sui generis* facts (the domain of value). It is, rather, a recognition of a basic feature of our life-form, that, to quote an eloquent statement by Ronald Dworkin, “is self-contained and self-certifying.”⁹ In this regard, values are “as real as trees or pain.”¹⁰

The intuition is clear. But what notion or image of reality is compatible with this view of the natural attunement of human beings with “irreducibly normative facts or truths,”¹¹ which, however robust, seem to lose consistency outside their (non-contingent) embedding in the life of imaginative agents such as ourselves?

3. A SENSE FOR REALITY

⁷ Ibid., p. 105; cf. S. Street, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value,” *Philosophical Studies*, 1, 2006, pp. 109-166.

⁸ J. Dupré, “Review of *Mind and Cosmos*,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 29 October 2012, available at: <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/35163-mind-and-cosmos-why-the-materialist-neo-darwinian-conception-of-nature-is-almost-certainly-false/>.

⁹ See R. Dworkin, *Religion without God*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 2013, p. 16.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

¹¹ Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, p. 106.

In order to answer this question, some general remarks on realism are in order.¹² By it I mean, in a broad sense, the claim that we have sufficient reasons to believe that there is a world out there that is not reducible to the thoughts (concepts, images, beliefs) that have it as their reference or content. But where do these reasons come from? If I am not mistaken, they do not issue from particularly convincing justifications – which, the more refined they are, the more they appear vulnerable to sceptical doubts – but from the invitation to re-awaken a familiarity with reality that dwells in our less remarkable relations with the world and which, precisely because it lacks any drama, tends to go unnoticed.

After all, what does it mean to be born, to exist, if not to be immersed in reality, to be in contact with it? The very concept of reality (with the correlative distinction between it and appearance or delusion) presupposes a basic *sense of reality* which is not the product of a head-on view of the whole that can aspire to be included into the realm of objectivity. In its original meaning, reality can be likened to an atmosphere, a medium with which we are in contact on each side (and in this sense, neither subjective nor objective)¹³ – something that is never noticed: the “familiar” par excellence. Preceding even the distinction between inside and outside, it can be likened to the air for terrestrial animals or water for aquatic ones.¹⁴ What is familiar or well-known (*bekannt*), however, cannot become explicitly known (*erkannt*) without undergoing a radical metamorphosis.¹⁵ In point of fact, we do not entertain an epistemic relation *stricto sensu* with it. The reality, as such, is not amenable to justification: it is what it is. Nonetheless, an unproblematic contact with it is the precondition so that our cognitive relation with the various portions of the world that are delimited and thematically focused on does not spin frictionless.¹⁶

¹² For what follows see my “Realism, Relativism, and Pluralism: An Impossible Marriage?,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 4-5, 2015, pp. 413-422, from which I borrowed a few paragraphs.

¹³ On this *topos* see J. Habermas, *Von den Weltbildern zur Lebenswelt*, in Id., *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II: Aufsätze und Repliken*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M., 2012, pp. 19-53, especially pp. 20-21.

¹⁴ For an intelligent use of this image as food for thought about the risks of humans’ “natural, basic self-centeredness”, see D.F. Wallace, *This is Water*, Little, Brown, & Company, New York, 2009, p. 37.

¹⁵ On this point see my “‘What is Familiar is not Understood Precisely Because It is Familiar’: A Re-Examination of J. McDowell’s Quietism,” *Verifiche*, 1-3, 2012, pp. 103-127.

¹⁶ For a persuasive re-articulation of phenomenological realism see H. Dreyfus, C. Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 2015.

We could describe this sense of reality as an antisolipsistic or antiphenomenalist bulwark: it is the pre-thematic certainty that one does not have to do only with oneself or, in Bernard Williams' words, that in the pursuit of truth, "the struggle is with something other than oneself."¹⁷ Compared to this otherness which refuses to give in, the feeling of frustration that can be felt is very real. For it is not akin to a titanic revolt against something logically impossible (for example, that $2 + 2 = 5$ or the desire to "be monogamously married to each of four women at once"),¹⁸ but rather stems from the observation that a painful "conceivable alternative" is foreclosed to us for contingent reasons: because this is how the world is. A painful truth that we have somehow to come to terms with.

As I noted above, this basic sense of reality is usually dormant: it does not play a big role in the daily life of creatures like us who, like any other animal, are generally saturated (i.e. continually at grips) with the world around them. It is rather the unsaturability of our cognitive relationship with the world and the infinite extensibility of the connections between reasons that has a de-realizing impact on the epistemic subject. Perhaps, the example that best captures this loss of contact is the attempt to understand the cause-effect relationships apart from the agent's acquaintance with the incessant causal impingement of the environment through her own lived body. If (as it happens with special force in the modern age) this is amplified by a social environment that encourages people to take an objectifying stance towards the life-world, the feeling of being naturally in contact with a reality that does not depend on our ability to represent it or justify it can be severely undermined.

It must be emphasized, however, that a defence of realism along this line is compatible with a highly revisionist attitude towards the different regional ontologies. Indeed, once the exaggerated fear lest there may be a total disconnect between us and reality is exorcised, it is only natural to expect that the specific queries about the "consistency" of more or less complex theoretical constructs (atoms, biological species, society, love, the past, and so forth), about whose existence we are committed in our scientific or folk understanding of the world, lose much of their drama.

Hopefully, rephrasing the issue of our basic sense of reality in terms of the traditional problem of free will can be helpful. Metaphysically speaking, in the

¹⁷ B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ), 2002, p. 145.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

view sketched above, we are indeed free, but only situatedly free. To switch from an absolute (“negative”) to a situated (“positive”) understanding of freedom also means to relieve the anxiety that always goes together with the feeling of being released from any external, non-self-imposed constraint. Williams argued this point convincingly: “To be free, in the most basic, traditional, intelligible sense, is not to be subject of another’s will. It does not consist of being free from all obstacles. On the contrary, freedom has any value only if there is something you want to do, and if, moreover, the want you have is not one that you can change at will for another want. A central form of freedom, then, is not to be subject to another’s will in working toward something that you find worthwhile.”¹⁹

Human knowledge, precisely because it cannot operate apart from a practice of justification by reasons, has the appearance, *prima facie*, of a self-sufficient system of ideal relations. As John McDowell has claimed with good arguments in his instructive debate with Hubert Dreyfus,²⁰ imagining an “external” to the conceptual makes no sense once access is granted to the noetic realm. This is the portion of truth to be found in the coherentist theories of epistemic justification. However, this aspect of human rationality, while exposing each exercise of justification by reasons to the risk of unsaturability and rendering every theory partially undetermined, does not affect the basic sense of reality characteristic of any living being, which can always be reactivated at least obliquely (that is, with a *noluntas* gesture rather than with an authoritative act of will).

Let me illustrate this point with some examples. I may have to work hard to warrant my belief that the creature that devoured my sheep can be correctly identified as a member of the species *canis lupus*, but the fact remains that my desire that the sheep be still alive will be inevitably frustrated. I may entertain many reasonable doubts about the ontological consistency of money, about its delusional, if not “religious” nature, but that will not dissolve my worries about the state of my bank account, whose effects on my behaviour and my decisions will reactivate my natural sense of reality. Drawing attention to the power of reflectivity to undermine any claim to settle in a permanent centre of gravity does not mean to ignore the fact that such ex-centricity supervenes on the animal condition of spatio-temporally situated individuals, who are constantly at grips

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 145.

²⁰ See the exchange published in *Inquiry*, 4, 2007, pp. 338-377 and the later collection of essays edited by J.K. Schear, *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate*, Routledge, London, 2013.

with the world and whose experience is full of ordinary hackneyed truths.²¹ After all, the endless search for the right distance, which characterizes the human effort to feel at home in the world, is built on this structural tension.

4. RESISTANCE: THE STUBBORNNESS OF MORAL FACT

Who wants to sidestep the zero-sum game of the controversy between realists and anti-realists ought to be aware of these different, but not mutually exclusive, levels of our relationship with the real. This does not mean ignoring the fact that, by dint of exercising the capacity to distance oneself from the world and put it into perspective, and then reflectively distance oneself from one's own point of view as well (and so forth), the impression can easily settle in that the dichotomy between external and internal, subjective and objective, mental and physical, constitutes the zero or "absolute" degree of being a minded self, with respect to which the reliability of our sense of reality should be measured or checked.²²

If we should obsessively ask ourselves about everything that we experience whether it is subjective or objective, internal or external, dependent or independent from our representations or mental patterns, the sense that the world is something irretrievably lost – a ghost lingering on the ruins of our philosophical systems – would become almost inescapable.²³ And we would rejoice or complain depending on the different circumstances, temperaments or historical periods. As a matter of fact, though, what would be lost is not exactly the world, but a pictorial or photographic picture of the world, with respect to which only a detached observer could actually enjoy an abysmal freedom and the moral subject experience the sense of an infinite responsibility.

²¹ As Karsten Harries observed about Cusanus's principle of "learned ignorance": the contingent human "center does not bind reflection. And the same can be said of the body that places us on this earth, assigns us terrestrials our point of view and provides us with a natural measuring rod"; see K. Harries, *Origins of the Modern World Picture: Cusanus and Alberti. Seminar Notes*, Princeton, 2013, p. 48, available at: <https://campuspress.yale.edu/karstenharries/files/2012/09/Origins-of-the-Modern-World-Picture.-Cusanus-and-Alberti2-1abyk3t.pdf>.

²² On this point see B. Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978, pp. 64-66. About the reasonable disagreement (which is generally articulated in a first order dissent and some form of second order consent) as a "variable-sum game", cf. I. Testa, "I giardini culturali del relativismo," *L'ospite ingrato*, 1, 2008, pp. 59-72, in particular pp. 69-70.

²³ See R. Rorty, "The World Well Lost," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 19, 1972, pp. 649-665.

Freedom and responsibility: this coupling sounds all too familiar. What could be more ordinary for us than a subject who is willing to make any sacrifice in order to affirm freedom of choice or self-determination? Yet, on closer inspection, changing the world into an image – and the parallel relativization of one’s own viewpoint – is anything but an ordinary mental performance. It is not something that the individual can accomplish in total autonomy or spontaneity. It presupposes, among other things, a remarkable intellectualization and objectification of experience, for example through writing and embedding the thought-products in material supports that are maximally resistant to the corrosive power of time.²⁴

The philosophically most interesting and problematic step, however, is the meta-theoretical move that led to the segregation of the realm of spontaneity and agency within a non-natural space on account of their intangibility and their not being spatio-temporally located. Which, in turn, meant denying them any reality and causal efficacy. From this familiar standpoint, the suspension looks sensible and it may seem obvious that “moral facts” should take on the semblance of fabulous creatures, true metaphysical chimeras. Indeed, how can something both be a “fact” and belong to an ontological region where the properties of inertiality, stubbornness and resistance to the will are denied the pride of place?

This is notoriously the most troubling issue for the advocates of moral realism. An advantage, though, resulting from the quietist argument above is the weakening of the strictly epistemic question of whether a necessary condition for ascribing reality to something with which one makes experientially contact should be its total independence from the subject’s spontaneous agency. Since it precedes the fracture between subject and object, our sense of reality is untouched by this derivative doubt.

The point lies elsewhere: how can one envisage a form of contact with non-material realities such as values in which a variety of non-metaphorical resistance is experienced? If a personal commitment is the condition for a moral fact to constrain my behaviour and this supposes a voluntary recognition of its normative cogency, is not the denial of assent sufficient to make these alleged facts of life disappear from view? But, this being the case, how can one

²⁴ I tried to read the modern philosophical trajectory leading to the loss of the world against a Grand Narrative in “Quanto è moderno il relativismo? Il mondo messo in prospettiva e le svolte assiali dell’umanità,” *Filosofia e teologia*, 1, 2014, pp. 22-36.

legitimately claim the reality of such volatile things? What distinguishes them from fantasies or hallucinations caused by the deprivation of basic bodily needs?

The point is well taken. But it does not dig deep enough into the phenomenology of moral experience. A realist account of the stubbornness of moral facts moves back one further step and focuses on a purely receptive stage of the experience of value. This is the moment when the reality of ethics emerges under the vestige of a force field exerting a powerful influence on how life as a whole is lived and not as an object which may become the content of a that-clause. At this stage, the sense of resistance experienced by a moral agent comes down to the impossibility of reducing the contrast between the axiological polarities to the depthless and toothless alternative between the “I like it” and the “I don’t like it.” The sense of moral reality – the sense, that is, which is re-activated every time we utter a moral judgment or feel a moral sentiment – is all there. It adds up to the sense that there is no way out, that, no matter how hard we try, we cannot fill the gap dividing, for example, making or suffering an injustice or acting bravely and behaving cowardly. This is all we can get. The issue of the truth claims of specific moral evaluations or judgments is placed at another stage in thematising the moral phenomenon.

More concretely, this special sense of reality is the main resource at our disposal to comprehend the repulse felt by many when confronted with standard forms of moral nihilism or cynicism. A typical example of this stance towards life is the sovereign indifference with which Stalin regarded the victims of his crimes: “Who’s going to remember all this riff-raff in ten or twenty years’ time? No one ... Who remembers now the names of the boyars Ivan the terrible got rid of? No one. ... In the end they all got what they deserved.”²⁵ Once faced with such examples of total estrangement from the ethical substance of life, the proper response is not concocting an impeccable argument to show why we should or cannot but be moral, but dusting off our original experience as moral agents (which is encapsulated logically also in the so-called Hume’s law) that allows us to consider effortlessly such displays of insensitivity as a form of immorality rather than as the practical translation of a contestable metaethics (let’s say, an error theory).²⁶ In this sense, the contact with the moral reality (understood as a kind of gradient

²⁵ Quoted in J. Glover, *Humanity. A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, Yale University Press, New Haven (CT), 2000, p. 256.

²⁶ On this see C. Taylor, “McDowell on Value and Knowledge,” *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 199, 2000, pp. 242-249, especially pp. 244-245.

vector field) can be seen as the ethical life's *Urphänomen*, in which the agent is aware at a pre-thematic level of the influence exerted on her agency by a realm of norms and values irreducible to the superficial and non-compelling alternative: "I like it/I don't like it."

To sum up, the sense of moral reality can be described in terms of the pre- or proto-conceptual encounter with practical normativity as a fact of human existence. Put otherwise, making contact with the space of moral reasons means entering a realm of life within which there is ample room for a robust engaged exploration, susceptible of a (non-linear) progress under the guise of an oriented, yet non-cumulative, learning process. Here, a constant reconfiguration of the tables of duties, values and of the repertoire of moral emotions available to agents can be reasonably expected, as a rule and not as an exception.

5. MORAL AGENTS IN A DARWINIAN WORLD

As is broadly known, the weight of the vocabulary, the style of reasoning and the agenda of issues that, due to a convention rarely challenged, are grouped under the name of neo-Darwinism, has grown exponentially in the philosophical debate since the 1980s. This is partly the result of the explanatory power of what Dennett famously dubbed "Darwin's dangerous idea,"²⁷ partly a contingent consequence of Darwinian evolutionism's being the only *Weltanschauung* left on the field in the West after the demise of Twentieth-century secular ideologies. It is this kind of common sense that enabled Sharon Street to speak outright of a "Darwinian" dilemma for realist theories of value in an influential article and to suggest a perfect equivalence between her selective reception of Darwin's theory and "science" as such.²⁸

So I cannot bring my argument to a close without asking whether the quietist account of morality advocated above is compatible with a Darwinian view of the

²⁷ D. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1995.

²⁸ See S. Street, *A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value*, p. 154. For a full-fledged analysis of Darwin's philosophical legacy see my *Un'idea di umanità. Etica e natura dopo Darwin*, EDB, Bologna, 2007. I argued for a "liberal" interpretation of Darwin's thought in a review of P.S. Davis's book *Subjects of the World: Darwin's Rhetoric and the Study of Agency in Nature*, published on *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 10 October 2009 (available at: <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24194-subjects-of-the-world-darwin-s-rhetoric-and-the-study-of-agency-in-nature/>).

descent of man from other animal species, in whose lives it seems reasonable to assume that a robust exploration of the reality of ethics played no role whatsoever. The question is essentially how the emergence of a meaningful – although it is hard to say *how much* meaningful – novelty in the natural history of our planet can be explained in the light of the different time-frames within which human moral skills, on the one hand, and our reproductive fitness, on the other hand, made a difference. Do we perhaps kid ourselves when we emphasize the *biological* role played in human evolution by the access to a space of reasons? Couldn't it be a negligible “spandrel” in the immemorial history of life on earth?²⁹

These are challenging questions. They are especially difficult, *inter alia*, because we would need to oversee not just the past, but also the future evolution of biological organisms in order to answer them on an informed basis. Although many biologists are persuaded that there have been cases of (relative) acceleration of the process of diversification of living things in the past (think only of the so-called “Cambrian explosion”), there is no sufficient information available and, above all, no shared purely quantitative criteria to end the dispute to the satisfaction of all the contenders. Even the supposed “uniqueness” of the human species is regarded with varying degrees of scepticism depending on how people employ the category of biological “success” (which, as Darwin liked to point out, is a concept that should always be handled with care). The metaphor of the “struggle for existence”, on the other hand, is precisely that: a metaphor. There are, after all, many aspects in the appearance and behaviour of several animal species that can be traced back to a logic, so to speak, of “suasion” and ingenuity rather than brute force. This is the case, for example, of sexual selection based on cunning or “charm” (which, according to Darwin, is at the origin of the aesthetic sense in species in which the female exerts a choice) or the various forms of cooperation and non-violent competition between species. There are, furthermore, intraspecific relationship styles such as caregiving and play that, while not escaping *in toto* the selective pressure of reproductive fitness, open up spaces for individual action and creativity where freedom and agency matter more than the mechanical and impersonal pressure of natural selection.³⁰

²⁹ On the metonymical use of “spandrels” in arguing against panadaptationism, see S.J. Gould, R.C. Lewontin, “The Spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian Paradigm: A Critique of the Adaptationist Programme,” *Proc. Roy. Soc. London. B* 205, 1161, 1979, pp. 581–598.

³⁰ On sexual selection see C. Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (or. ed. 1871), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2004, pt. II and III; on parental care see S.B. Hrdy, *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding*, Harvard University Press,

While there is no doubt that, during evolution's long march, natural selection played a crucial role in checking the adaptive value of the enabling conditions (agency, consciousness, emotions, semantic memory, recognition capacities, etc.) that made possible the moral experience in humans, I do not see how this widely supported evidence prevents us from seeing the emergence of a new species (or of any other taxa employed in modern biological classification) also as an opportunity to explore hitherto unknown corners of reality. It is at least *prima facie* plausible, therefore, to consider this form of spontaneity as a variety of situated freedom which results in the discovery (or re-discovery) of aspects or "isles" of reality, rather than conceptualizing it as an emerging capacity to construct portions of artificial life that are then superimposed onto the only coherent and self-sufficient reality worthy of the name. The latter being the inert and always self-identical (apart from the distribution of its parts in space) matter in motion within which the only source of change lies in the causal power of natural forces. Such a conception of reality, in fact, is no less postulatory than that which depends on a (far from unreasonable) trust in our ability to respond reliably to the (actual) affordances of our intentional environment.³¹

To offer an example familiar to the readers of this article: how can the existence of lively discussions be explained? What is, in other words, the most plausible explanation of the fact that a significant number of members of the human species invest a great deal of psychological and intellectual energies with the intent to prevail in an exchange of arguments, i.e. to be recognized as right

Cambridge (MA), 2009; on animal play see G.M. Burghardt, *The Genesis of Animal Play: Testing the Limits*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), 2005.

³¹ On the "materialist exclusion" see C. Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 2016, pp. 204-211. For my part, I would extend the closing remark also to the phenomenon that, in the aftermath of the Darwinian Revolution, was often regarded (for understandable historical reasons) as the quintessence of human mind's projectivism: religious belief. Even if we were to agree on a moot definition of the believer's mindset as the psychological inclination to think that "there is more than meets the eye," it is hard to understand why we should be satisfied with the idea that this bent rests only on a subjective disposition, passed through the sieve of natural selection. Why not consider it, instead, as a reasonable response to the cognitive underdetermination ingrained in the experience of beings who are endowed with the ability to explore their surrounding environment and an insatiable curiosity which is non-saturable, at least at the level of mind-frames? In this sense, I see Weber's metaphor of "religiöse Unmusikalität" as more suitable to characterize a detached stance toward the question of the ultimate meaning of human existence, which he regarded as a topic more suited for "prophets" than for "professors" (with the predictable exception, incidentally, for those who helped to set up the rule).

about the matter? As far as I can see, there are three alternative interpretations at hand here. (1) It may be that the investment of energy has a direct adaptive value (which seems very difficult to prove in this case). (2) Or it may be that the investment has no direct, but only indirect adaptive value, to the extent that it is one of the many embodiments of the human impulse to dominate, which, taken individually, are indifferent with respect to their deeper motivation. (This account is close to the theoretical attitude which in philosophy usually goes under the name of “psychologism”). (3) Finally, it may be that the investment in an intangible goal is so intense because the action in which it is embedded does make contact with reality. In other words, we might be facing here a gratuitous, playful pursuit, whose satisfaction is not merely psychological. It is more like a challenge that you can win or lose *objectively* (just like a football or basketball game), and in which the main gratification comes from the fact that, while reality counters the effort, it can also yield to it, certifying the won challenge and the success of the endeavour.

If the claim that things like moral scruples (a variety of intelligence different from cunning) or romantic love (a form of personal care different from the mating drive) are mere epiphenomena of the only true reality – that is, a superficial veneer on a substance consisting of adaptive behavioural habits – does not sound sufficiently convincing, one can consider the hypothesis that the survival of non-directly-adaptive abilities may depend on the fact that the latter are strengthened from the outside by their responsiveness to a reality that is partially independent of their psychological manifestations.

There is nothing in Darwin’s outlook that is meant to stop us from articulating the insight that, in the course of biological evolution, opportunities for innovative forms of exploration of the surrounding environment have emerged and continue to emerge. They can be seen as life’s makeshift way to uncover what is hidden in the folds of reality. If we agree that the concept of reality still has a role to play in our efforts to understand ourselves and the world around us, we must be aware of how crucial to this process is the correct interpretation of the metaphor of the agent’s “grip on reality.” What is certain, however, is that the answer to this riddle is unaffected by the Darwinian explanation of the manifest diversity and underlying unity of the biosphere. We cannot expect the solution of so vexed philosophical issues to come from evolutionary biology or, let alone, from the antonym of armchair science, viz. (tacit) laboratory philosophy. The hospitality of our ontological repertoires is the key. My hunch is that this varies in proportion to

the importance we ascribe to our contact with the world and, hence, to what I have called here our basic sense of reality.

To sum up: to what extent can the metaethical position articulated in this paper be regarded as quietist? My claim, in a nutshell, is that it is quietist so long as it has the potential to exorcise the anxieties arising from thinking that an alleged Darwinian explanation of human evolution is bound to be a major obstacle to embracing a variety of moral realism that has at least the merit of making the moral subject not feel like an alien in the natural world as it has been imagined since the Scientific Revolution.