On the Application of Natural Goodness to Environmental Ethics

Enoch Yim

"*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, [a]nd that has made all the difference.*" — Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken" (1915)

Introduction

Based on their interpretation and application of Michael Thompson's theory of the representation of life and Philippa Foot's theory of natural goodness, Claudio Campagna et al. criticize (the utilitarian assumption in) the sustainable development model of environmental conservation and seek to provide an alternative ethical approach.[1] In this essay, I will raise two issues in regard to the philosophical view of Campagna et al. First, their ethical approach is challenged by a more pragmatist reading of rationality according to which humans are to exploit and treat non-human organisms as resources. If the pragmatist reading as I understand is correct, human nature seems to be intrinsically at odd with any non-utilitarian model of conservation. Second, in order to account for the possibility of the knowledge of natural goodness, the theory must presuppose isomorphism between the structure of the world and of a mind (logic), which is a strong metaphysical commitment. In § 1, I will summarize the theory of Thompson and of Foot. In § 2, I will briefly consider the ethical approach of Campagna et al. In § 3, I will raise the

[1] Claudio Campagna et al., "Sustainable development as *deus ex machina*," *Biological Conservation* 209, pp. 54-61 (2017); Claudio Campagna et al., "De-scenting Extinction: *The Promise of De-extinction May Hasten Continuing Extinctions*," *Recreating the Wild: De-extinction, Technology, and the Ethics of Conservation*, special report, *Hastings Center Report* 47, no. 4, pp. S48-S53 (2017); Claudio Campagna and Daniel Guevara, "Save the Whales Revisited," unpublished (2018).

first issue based on my reading of Wilfrid Sellars, P. F. Strawson, and Martin Heidegger. In § 4, I will raise the second issue based on my reading of Marcello Oreste Fiocco.

§ 1: The Representation of Life and Natural Goodness

The thesis of Thompson's theory is that *life* is a logical category of its own, or a form of a judgment.[2] Fregean logic as a representational system of the world (the totality of how things are *out there*) consists in forms and contents. Forms provide a structured framework for identifying, organizing, and configuring individuals. As such, the latter are the contents of the former. The most basic logical forms are categories. Thus, in order for individuals to be represented *as such*, they must be grouped together into categories first. In other words, categories are the most basic or fundamental units by which one represents, depicts, or comes to be aware of individual things in the world. Differently put, forms (specifically, categories) are universals, and individuals as their contents are particulars; the latter need the former to, so to say, give them identities. Some of the examples of logical forms include *object*, *number*, etc. These forms pick out properties common to individuals and thereby represent or group them together *as objects and numbers*. The most fundamental forms, viz., categories, are *individual*, *property*, and *relation*[3] which are symbolized by name, predicate, and connective signs. Without these forms, no observation is possible because they provide the way to recognize things in the first place.

The effect of identifying *life* as one of the categories is that, for being one, *life* is not one of the particular things in the world to be grouped together with other things in respect to their common properties, but is to be construed as one of the most basic formal units by which one is

[2] Michael Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 25-7, 49-62; Campagna, "Save the Whales Revisited," 21.
[3] Thompson, *Life and Action*, 27.

to classify individual things in the world. As such, *life* cannot be further dissected or reduced to other notions as an explanandum. Thompson finds the justification for this nomenclature from the language of natural history narration.[4] In describing, e.g., the life-cycle of an oak tree or habits of a bear, one does not tell a story of an individual oak tree or bear. For one thing, many plants and animals fail to complete their life-cycles or exercise habits. Thus, if each species or life-form was a grouping derived from statistical generalizations of individuals in observation, such a narration or story-telling would be impossible. Rather, each of these life-forms provide the irreducible logical schemes for representing and observing certain things as oak trees, bears, jellyfishes, etc. And, based on these concepts, one makes judgments about natural habitats, seasonal migrations, reproductive cycles, etc. of certain species. Thus, one does not first observe a pattern of individual materials such as atoms and molecules or genetic codes and then draws the concept of *life*. Rather, one starts with the concept of *life* (or its lesser life-forms) along other categories and classify individuals accordingly.

Based on this understanding of *life*, Foot develops the theory of natural goodness, which is the view that goodness and badness depend on the particular life-form of the agent.[5] According to Thompson, judgments made in the form of natural history narration have evaluative contents, implying norms for the individuals falling under the life-forms or categories.[6] On this view, if the individual belonging to a specific species does not conform to the natural judgments, it is seen as defective rather than as counter-evidence to the logical generalization. This is because categories expressed by natural judgments (which Thompson calls 'Aristotelian categorical'[7])—functioning

[4] Michael Thompson, "Apprehending Human Form," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements*, Vol. 54, pp. 47-74 (Cambridge University Press, 2004); Thompson, *Life and Action*, 53-82.
[5] Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), Ch. 4.
[6] Thompson, "Apprehending Human Form," 54-6.
[7] Thompson, *Life and Action*, 73.

as an *a priori* framework for observation—provide "*standards of critique* [applied] to organisms of the kind in question."[8] Foot applies this evaluative aspect of natural judgments to ethics. In short, what is good or bad for humans (including what is the *right thing to do*) depends on the specific life-form to which humans are to conform. Thus, if bipedalism, for instance, is essential to being a human (i.e., if walking upright with two lower limbs is one of the life-forms humans take), the correct way to maneuver is determined by this natural fact about the humankind. Accordingly, any condition or behavior that prevents other people from exercising bipedalism is considered *immoral*. This implies that each species has its own standard of good and bad that fits its life-form and, therefore, an appropriate way of being treated. Here, just as in the case of humankind, what is good and bad for each individual animal is determined by the natural facts about the species it belongs to, and it would be, for the lack of a better term, *immoral* to treat the organism in the way that prevents it from conforming to its form.

§ 2: Application of Natural Goodness to Environmental Ethics

According to Campagna and Daniel Guevara, Foot herself did not apply her theory of natural goodness to non-human organisms.[9] It is Campagna et al. who took the initiative to take seriously the implication of this theory on organisms other than humankind. The application of the theory by Campagna et al. is modeled on Foot's criticism of non-cognitivist approaches to ethics from emotivism and expressivism to utilitarianism. Despite their differences, these non-cognitivist approaches share in common the view that the contents of evaluative judgments are grounded in conative states and that these conative (or attitudinal) states are not factive.[10] The

[8] Thompson, "Apprehending Human Form," 55.
[9] Campagna, "Save the Whales Revisited," 13.
[10] Foot, Ch. 1.

consequence of this view is that, if there is such a thing as "doing the right thing," it would be to satisfy or maximize goods that are valued by the conative states (e.g., happiness, equality, etc.). The effect of arguing for natural goodness is that, if Foot's theory is true, the assumption about the nature of morality in the non-cognitive approaches is misleading since the *right thing to do* is determined by natural facts about humans rather than the instrumentality of the actions.

On the non-cognitive approaches, especially utilitarianism, the right way to treat non-human organisms depends on whether treating them in a certain way results in maximization of goods for humans. If so, the value of animals and plants are instrumental. Campagna et al. criticize the sustainable development model of environmental conservation for assuming this view of morality, emphasizing that this model has been failing to prevent extinctions of species by humans.[11] At the center of this (unsuccessful) model of conservation is the moral outlook that non-human organisms are natural resources for economic and industrial developments. It is not clear at least to me whether Campagna et al. believe that the ineffectiveness of the sustainable development model and the utilitarian assumption are causally related or merely correlated. Regardless, Campagna and Guevara point out that the *Save the Whales* movement is one of the most successful conservational efforts, locating the source of its effectiveness in its focus on the intrinsic (rather than instrumental) value of protecting whales.[12] These authors seek to reinforce non-utilitarian approaches to conservation such as the movement above by applying the theory of natural goodness to environmental ethics. The upshot of this application is that man is obliged to treat other organisms in the ways that enable them to conform to their life-forms rather than us to maintain sustainable economic and industrial developments. That is, the motivation behind

[11] Campagna et al., "Sustainable development as *deus ex machina*," 54-7.
[12] Campagna, "Save the Whales Revisited."

conserving species should shift from valuing animals and plants as affordances and resources to manage and exploit to valuing them for their own sake.

§ 3: The Pragmatist Challenge

It is a truism that humans have a certain life-form, and it is perhaps not too controversial to grant that what is good for humans is determined by this form. What I would like to bring forth as a point of dispute is whether this truism necessarily implies, as Campagna and Guevara argue, that humans are obliged to treat other organisms for their own sake. It seems to me that a more pragmatist reading of natural goodness is possible, and if this reading is true, then human nature (i.e., the life-form of humankind) is *intrinsically* at odd with any non-utilitarian model of conservation *even if* what is naturally good and bad for other species is determined by their own life-forms. I will motivate this reading of natural goodness based on my understanding of Sellars, Strawson, and Heidegger. (My interpretation of each of these philosophers may be controversial. But this is no place for a complete exegesis. My reading is rather inspired by these philosophers, but by no means committed to being textually faithful to what they meant.)

Humans and other animals are different in many aspects. The former are bipedal and omnivorous and have thumbs whereas the latter are quadrupedal or winged and carnivorous or herbivorous (with a few exceptions) and usually have no thumbs. But these differences in life-form do not amount to—or at least are not regarded as—what, in common sense, distinguishe humans from others. Rather, what ultimately distinguishes humans from other organisms is their possession of personhood. This is evident from the fact that most of us do not hesitate to treat as non-human agents the entities that look and behave like humans, but are seen as lacking "souls" or "minds" such as robots. (Even children and mentally ill are not given full rights that ordinary

adults enjoy, but are instead provided with welfares and protections.) On the contrary, the mere thought that some animals may be sapient is disturbing or fascinating to us and have inspired many science fictions and satirical artworks. In "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," Sellars identifies personhood as the capacity to act whereas actions are behaviors (viewed as being) done with *deliberations*. Sellars does not explicitly articulate what he means by 'deliberation.' Nevertheless, we can get a sense of what he has in mind by considering that Sellars contrasts persons with material objects: only the former kind are said to *do* things.[13] In short, on Sellars' view, persons are capable of *bringing about* changes on their own (whereas rivers and stones only *happen* to be in certain states correlated with the changes in environments around them). One way to cash out this idea is that persons are moral (and not material) agents, beings with intentions or purposes, and it is in appeal to the possession of this sort of agency, viz., personhood, do we distinguish ourselves *as humans* from other animals.

Whether humans *really* have such a kind of agency is a metaphysical question. Instead of engaging in this inquiry, Strawson gives the account of what it is to be attributed with moral agency. As well known, he identifies attributing moral agency to someone with taking *reactive* attitudes towards that individual, and this attitude is contrasted with *objective* attitudes; when one takes *objective* attitudes towards another, it is not appropriate him to treat the subject as someone to have quarrels with, but as something to be managed, trained, avoided, etc.[14] Strawson offers people with mental disorders as instantiations of the subject of objective attitudes.[15] There is no

[13] Wilfrid Sellars, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," originally published in *Frontiers of Science and Philosophy*, ed. by Robert Colodny, pp. 35-78, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962, reprinted in *Science, Perception and Reality* (1963), electronical transcription, 7.
[14] P. F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," originally published in 1962, *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed., ed. by Russ Shafer-Landau (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), III-V.
[15] Ibid., 345.

need to take this depiction literally. The exemplary subgroup of cases for the subject of objective attitudes Strawson refers to as "psychologically abnormal" can be understood as symbolizing what Jennifer Radden in *On Delusion* characterizes as "the limiting case … of reason, reasoning, rationality and shared meaning, of the perorations that take place in the 'space of reasons'" in modern philosophy.[16] In this formulation, to take objective attitudes towards another is then to perceive that entity as lacking the ability to reason or incapable of engaging in discursive activities. This interpretation implies that, in expressing or developing reactive attitudes towards someone, we conceive the individual as a rational agent. Conversely, the condition under which we attribute rationality to someone is that the individual is seen as (or, more precisely, *impresses* us as) a moral agent, as a person, i.e., as someone capable of deliberation.

The Sellarsian-Strawsonian thesis that humans are rational agents is *per se* in no conflict with the theory of natural goodness insofar as the possession of the ability to reason is a natural fact about humankind. The exercise of rationality is one of the constituents of human good. As a capacity, rationality has many functions. Among the many, however, it could be inferred from Strawson's characterizations of the two attitudes above that one of its functions is to treat non-person entities as things to manage, train, avoid, etc. This is evident from the inference that *reactive* attitudes towards others can only be taken by one towards whom *reactive* attitudes are appropriate to take because, if attribution of rationality reflects construing relationships as intra-personal, then the *attributer* himself must be someone who seeks to make sense of his relationship with the subject *as intra-personal*, thus himself being capable of (being attributed with) rationality. If so, whether something (or someone) is to be treated as a subject of *reactive*

[16] Jennifer Radden, *On Delusion* (Routledge, 2010), 13.

or *objective* attitudes is a stance taken by a rational agent. Therefore, it could be construed that treating non-person entities as *objects* is one of many functions of rationality.

Humans manage and control their surroundings via technology. (Or, more precisely, the sets of skills involved and employed in managing and controlling surroundings are called 'technology.') In "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger remarks that technology as the process of manufacturing and utilizing equipment is a complex of contrivances or, in Latin, *instrumentum*.[17] As such, technology is a form of cause: it causes things to be in a certain mode, viz., instrument.[18] In this way, as Heidegger notes, technology is "a way of revealing" things in nature.[19] In what sort of manner does technology reveal or cause things to be in the instrumental mode? Heidegger identifies the essence of technology as enframing which is "the gathering together that belongs to that setting-upon which sets upon man and puts him in position to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve."[20] In other words, technology is a way of revealing (or treating) things in an orderly fashion so that they could be stored as a reserve (or resource) for human needs. For example, the dairy industry does not bring forth the presence of milk as it is. That is, this industry does not simply leave cows alone and let them produce milk in their natural habitat according to their life-form. Rather, it feeds and raises cows in a certain way as to make them produce milk, uses nuclear energy to operate machines to alter the nutritional constitution of milk, and employs human power to distribute the stocks of milk as assets. In this process, cows and milk are systematically treated as instruments for humans.

[17] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," originally published in 1954, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2013), 4-5.
[18] Ibid., 6.
[19] Ibid., 12.
[20] Ibid., 23-4.

If the possession of rationality as a capacity is a natural fact about humans, the exercise of which requires perceiving non-human entities as things to manage and control, and if technology is a way rational agents practice *objective* attitudes, then the life-form of humans is such that the bearers of this form are to treat non-human organisms (insofar as it is inappropriate to attribute rationality to these individuals) as instruments for their needs. If so, human nature is *intrinsically* at odd with any non-utilitarian model of conservation. This does by no means imply that there *can* be such models according to which one is to treat other organisms as intrinsically valuable. And these models could be often effective in *motivating* some of us to engage in conservation efforts. What it implies is, however, that construing non-utilitarian models as self-standing *tout court* is in conflict with human nature, given the theory of natural goodness. Such models may come useful as a psychological tool to nudge people, but their usefulness rests on the fact that facilitating conservation *by any means necessary* is beneficial to humans.

One sub-issue raised by this understanding of rationality is that, if this view is true, then it seems that empirical judgments in the manner of natural history narration *per se* are impossible (or, at least, what essentially constitute natural history narration are our pragmatic concerns). In other words, as W. V. O. Quine would agree (as for him what is rational is pragmatic[21]), our knowledge of natural kinds (including species) is pragmatic through and through. That is, the concepts expressing the forms embodied by non-human entities consist in practicality. One may object this by arguing that some of our knowledge such as about blackholes and distant planets or exotic species in deep oceans or rainforests seem to have nothing to do with practicality, for it is difficult to see their practical use. However, if we take seriously the idea of the web of beliefs

[21] Willard V. O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," originally published in *Philosophical Review* 60, 1951, reprinted in W. V. O. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd ed., Harvard University Press, 1953, 1961, electronical transcription, 2000.

as Quine's metaphor for the structure of knowledge, it would be hard to dismiss the thought that the theoretical propositions about galaxies and exotic species are informative only in relation to other propositions which are eventually entangled with our practical disposition to, e.g., solve problems without disturbing the stockpile of beliefs too much. In fact, it is interesting to note that what led scientists to theorize about and discover blackholes was Albert Einstein's theory of relativity which was devised by him to solve specific problems in thought experiments.

§ 4: Isomorphism between World and Mind

If the theory of natural goodness is to rebut the pragmatist challenge above, it must give an account of how non-pragmatic empirical judgments are possible. This is an epistemological problem. If there could be at least one way we can come in contact with the world without taking *objective* attitudes, i.e., without being channeled by pragmatic concerns, the theory of natural goodness is discharged of pragmatic encroachments. I argue that the one way to account for the non-pragmatic epistemic contact with the world is by presupposing isomorphism between the structure of the world (matters of fact) and a mind (logic). The rest of this section below will be the (very brief) sketch of this account based on Fiocco's naïve realist view.

In "Structure, Intentionality and the Given," Fiocco contends that there are two ontological views on the structure of the world, each of which implies a specific characteristic of the *given*.[22] The first view is Aristotelian in that, as Fiocco puts it, "the world is structured … in virtue of primordial constraints on things" whereas "each thing is constrained in itself."[23] That is, independent of our engagement with it, the world is already structured in a certain way and has

[22] Marcello Oreste Fiocco, "Structure, Intentionality and the Given," *The Philosophy of Perception*, pp. 95-118 (2019).
[23] Ibid., 97.

its own order. The second view is Kantian in that the constraints on the world are imposed by "some privileged thing[s,]" viz., cognitive, or rational, agents.[24] On this view, (Fregean) logic frames the things in nature whereas *its* logical structure is not inherent in the world; the world has no structure *until* it is engaged by the minds. The *given* is the mental content attained at the initial contact with the world by us—or, in Fiocco's words—"the state of a mind in its primary engagement with the world."[25] For knowledge to be possible, each ontological view above requires a specific characterization of the given. The Kantian view requires that the given be structured. Since the world does not have any inherent structure, the mind needs to impose its own framework (viz., Fregean logic) to take in information about the world. On this view, mind is active and spontaneous in making judgments about natural kinds. This way of understanding the epistemic relationship between the world and a mind will eventually need to refer to the principle by which the mind operates in formulating judgments, or organizing sense impressions. Since this principle cannot appeal to the world (as it lacks structure), it has to be pragmatic, i.e., concerned with maintaining coherent beliefs, solving problems, maximizing pleasure, etc. On the other hand, the Aristotelian view allows that the mind could be passive in receiving information about the world, for it can merely read the inherent structure in nature; the mind could be in contact with the world by acquaintance. The given can then be unstructured.[26] That is, the given requires no active engagement by the mind in order to be formulated.

Fiocco thinks that the Kantian view is uncogent because the given required for this view is epistemically idle.[27] Be that as it may, this is not relevant to our discussion here. Notice that

[24] Ibid., 98.
[25] Ibid., 95.
[26] Ibid., 100-1.
[27] Ibid., 101-9.

the Kantian view necessarily leads to some form of pragmatism. To avoid this conclusion then, one must accept the Aristotelian view of the world. The challenge for this view is to explain how unstructured givens can provide justifications for empirical judgments. Traditionally, this approach has been deemed impossible because it leads to the Myth of the Given, which is the fallacy that non-conceptual, (propositionally) unstructured givens can meaningfully affect the space of reasons.[28] The dilemma is that the given is either structured or unstructured: if the given is structured in the way our judgments are structured (i.e., have propositional contents), then it cannot serve as the epistemic foundation because the given itself must be justified as any other propositionally structured content; if the given is however unstructured or is *not* structured in the way our judgments are, it cannot engage in the justificatory activities (or, at best, it is mysterious how the given can effect justification). Fiocco seeks to overcome the dilemma by suggesting that there may be judgments that are not (propositionally) structured, viz., reistic judgments.[29]

Even if, however, there are reistic judgments, it is unclear how these judgments in turn can form justificatory relations with propositional judgments without recoiling to the Myth of the Given, especially given that most of our significant empirical judgments including the judgments in the form of natural history narration are propositionally structured. The attempt to account for the possibility of knowledge for the Aristotelian view from unstructured givens thus seems to meet a dead end.[30] If so, the only alternative left for this view is to maintain that givens are

[28] Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, originally published in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 1, University of Minnesota Press, 1956, republished with an introduction by Richard Rorty and a study guide by Robert Brandom (Harvard University Press, 1997).
[29] Fiocco, 113-5.
[30] Recently, I had a chance to meet and interact with Professor Jeonggyu Lee (Sungkyunkwan University, South Korea). Professor Lee introduced me to the Millian notion of singular thought. If this notion is a coherent one, I believe there is a way to give an account of the so-called reistic judgments. However, the discussion of singular thought is beyond the scope of the current essay.

(propositionally) structured, but their structures are not imposed by the mind. Rather, the mind ought to be passively receiving the information about the world that is already structured. In other words, the structure of the world is isomorphic to the logical or propositional structure of the mind. If this is the case, there is a way in which the mind could attain information and make judgments without pragmatic principles such as coherency. The world is already structured in itself, and within this structure are found various life-forms. These life-forms are in turn isomorphic to the logical structure of propositional judgments. The mind could actively and spontaneously impose its pragmatic interests in making judgments in order to treat non-human organisms as instruments and resources. However, the mind does not always have to. Instead, it can passively take in the sense data of the life-forms of the individuals in concern.

The Aristotelian view sketched above is incomplete in the sense that one still needs to explain how non-pragmatic empirical judgments are compatible with the function of rationality to perceive non-person entities with *objective* attitudes. Perhaps, one way to resolve the tension may be by supposing that *objective* attitudes include stances other than those to manage, train, or control the subjects. However, since *objective* attitudes are conceptualized in contrast to *reactive* attitudes, the challenge is to explain how one could treat something as more than an object or resource to manage or control, but less than someone to have intra-personal relationships with. Furthermore, the supposition of the isomorphism between the world and a mind is a strong metaphysical commitment that requires a justification. If what justifies this supposition turns out to be a pragmatic interest, then the Aristotelian view recoils to the Kantian view, therefore some form of pragmatism developed in § 3. How this philosophical project would make progress I am not sure. But this seems to be the only dialectically sound route available for the theory of natural goodness so far. As a road not yet taken, it must be full of adventures and surprises.

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