



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

## Natural relativism in lieu of moral absolutism

### On the making of a philosophical anthropologist

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Comment on Daston, Lorraine. 2019. *Against nature*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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The title of Lorraine Daston's *Against nature* promises a polemic, but anyone familiar with her writings knows that she is no polemicist. The short book does mark a transformation, though, one that had been in the making for at least a decade: Daston's metamorphosis from historian of science to philosophical anthropologist. Her work has always stood out in that it examined the history of science across disciplines and periods. In her new publication, however, Daston addresses a genuinely trans-historical and transcultural question about human reason: "Why do human beings, in many different cultures and epochs, pervasively and persistently, look to nature as a source of norms for human conduct?" (p. 3). In opposition to a critical tradition in Science and Technology Studies, which really has written against nature, Daston refuses to denounce the naturalization of moral orders. If I were to provide my own reading of Daston's argument, I would—and I will—argue that she doesn't write against nature but against nature as a source of absolute moral authority.

#### **A historian puts her anthropological cards on the table**

Daston's philosophical anthropology presents *Homo sapiens* as the normative animal. She adopts a combination of the universality of human nature and the particularity

of human cultures that marked the beginnings of cultural anthropology, but shifts the focus from cultural differences to a human universal: "The cross-cultural diversity of norms that is often cited as evidence for the relativity of all norms might equally well serve as evidence for the universality of normativity" (p. 46; see also Boas 1928: xiv). This normativity tinges human life with a "wistful, counterfactual mood," a yearning for things to be as they should be, for some ideal order (p. 47).

While Daston does not engage with evolutionary anthropology, her basic conception of human nature is in line with a narrative that Michael Tomasello (2016), Joseph Henrich (2016), and others have spun in recent years. In *The secret of our success*, Henrich argues that self-domestication through social norms has enabled *Homo sapiens* to expand into a vast range of environments and become the ecologically dominant species on the planet (while remaining virtually helpless as lone individuals). Social norms enable human communities to adhere, cooperate, and survive in the face of severe hardship. In other words, humans have become normative animals not because they established normativity itself as a norm but because normativity allowed them to cooperate in large groups that could thereby colonize places as different from their African origins as the Arctic.

Such stories of hominization are water to Daston's historicist mill: evolutionary anthropology is providing



a wealth of examples of how scientists ground human moral order in the order of nature as they give naturalist answers to the question of why we should abide by social rules in the first place (in case some philosopher wondered). An ethnographic case study of Henrich's research could add the latest chapter in the history of science to a new edition of Daston and Vidal's seminal volume *The moral authority of nature* (2004). What is becoming apparent in Daston's latest work, however, is that, as philosophical anthropologist, she has to descend from her historiographic metaperspective and articulate her own assumptions about human nature.

But Daston is not concerned with how we came to be normative animals: "For my purposes, it is sufficient simply to register the empirical fact that part of what it means to be human is to acknowledge some norm or another, to understand the force of 'should,' and to feel a stab of regret at the distance between what is and what should be" (pp. 47–48). Daston's own question is why humans root so many of the norms they acknowledge in natural orders, why humans use natural orders to represent moral orders.

### **Ought can't be inferred from is, and yet . . .**

Daston construes the persistence of the naturalization of morality and the corresponding moralization of nature as a genuine anthropological puzzle. What makes the obstinate quest for values in nature so puzzling to her is this: she takes the rejection of the so-called naturalistic fallacy of inferring "ought" from "is" by David Hume, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, "and many other luminaries" as "sterling counsel," while ignoring arguments to the contrary by naturalist moral philosophers (for a sympathetic discussion of one case, see Langlitz 2012). She quotes Mill, if not approvingly then at least uncritically, who argued that it was not only logically but also morally false to assume that we should kill because nature killed. Daston (2014) has conducted too much meticulous research on the historical contingency of the naturalistic fallacy to take it as a "philosophical fact" (Kusch 1995: 26–27), and she resists decrying the justification of norms in terms of their natural foundation as a "fallacy" (p. 68). But when she notes that Hume, Kant, and Mill's philosophical efforts have failed, it is not because she considers their arguments invalid, but because they couldn't change the fact of human reason, which inclines us to search for values in nature. The philosophers' failure wouldn't be in the least surprising if they got it all wrong and nature really did tell us

how we should conduct our lives. What warrants Daston's inquiry, however, is that she agrees with these thinkers that nature does not provide moral orientation, so she now has to make sense of the empirical observation that human beings haven't stop deriving their norms from representations of nature.

Daston highlights three natural orders that have endured through European intellectual history (as a professional historian, she doesn't really make the ethnological case for cross-cultural persistence). Each order runs up against its own inconsistencies. First, belief in specific natures, in nature as the essence of a thing that distinguishes it from other things, has been challenged by philosophers and scientists alike (p. 10). Nominalists argued that universals don't exist, only particular things that do not exemplify any general category. In cultural anthropology, we're very familiar with the claim that there is no such thing as human nature, only cultures, and maybe not even cultures but only individuals (Geertz 1973; Abu-Lughod 1991). Evolutionary anthropologists have also made the case against specific natures: instead of distinct races there are only demographic continua and there is no point in the evolution of the genus *Homo* when *Homo sapiens* or any of his ancestors acquired human nature. Finally, Daston reminds us that we continue to fulminate against the inhumanity of human atrocities, "as if the evil exceeded merely human bounds," although we know all too well that members of our species engage quite regularly in such enormities (p. 41). None of this has deterred us from attributing specific natures to our own kind or to other beings.

Attempts at grounding moral orders in local natures have also run into trouble. Today, ecologists and environmental anthropologists follow a long tradition of studying the power of place. The normative dimension of orders created within certain geographical parameters come to the fore as human activity disrupts the presupposed harmony of a given ecosystem, triggering nature's revenge. "But why revenge?" asks Daston. "Why not just unintentionally caused disequilibria—negligent, perhaps, but not malevolent? Why does guilt still saturate our understanding of natural disaster, however it is channeled?" (p. 20). Daston brings out the absurdity of attributing a particular moral valence to human activity in contrast to nonhuman natural processes by asking us to imagine such a division from the standpoint of another species, for example, dividing up the universe into raccoon and nonraccoon (p. 58; see also Langlitz 2020: 309–17). Although Daston doesn't put it in such stark



terms, her argument implies that the moralization of local natures does not hold water.

Finally, Daston argues that the conception of nature as a set of universal natural laws became the foundation for the natural law tradition in moral and political philosophy (p. 31). It lives on in the US Declaration of Independence, which claims that all men are created equal, or in human rights discourse, which imagines human beings as endowed with inherent rights (simply because they were born as members of the species). These traditions grew out of a voluntarist theology that conceived of God as divine legislator who imposed laws upon nature. His cosmic plan even devised the most horrifying catastrophes (which led the optimists among early modern philosophers to bend over backwards as they were trying to explain why humans still lived in the best of all possible worlds and why a God who allowed such tragedies to happen still had to be considered good rather than evil). Today, the doctrine of a completely free divine will has waned. Few people trust God's power to suspend the natural law he once issued to effect a miracle, but human will is still imagined as a loophole through which we can escape the otherwise ironclad regularities of nature (p. 31). To make Daston's argument slightly more pointed: If we no longer give credence to wonders, why does moral freedom continue to be a truth we hold to be self-evident? And if we don't believe in the divine creation of nature, why do we continue to advocate human rights?

As philosophical anthropologist, Daston approaches the fact that, despite all these discordances, people still look to nature for moral guidance not in the spirit of criticism but of critique in the Kantian sense, examining the limits and scope of human reason: "This is a case not of simple mass irrationality but rather of a very human form of rationality—and hence the subject of philosophical anthropology" (p. 5). Although Daston doesn't like to showcase her reflexivity, she understands full well that it is as a human being that she thinks about human reason and that she cannot criticize the folly of her fellow human beings in the name of universal reason: "It is pointless to yearn for that which is in principle unattainable. Human reason in human bodies is the only kind of reason we have" (p. 69). Michel Foucault's *The order of things* captured this figure of thought very well and dubbed it "Man," that "strange empirico-transcendental doublet . . . a being such that knowledge will be attained in him of what renders all knowledge possible" (Foucault [1966] 2002: 347). Half a century after Foucault's wager that this order of knowledge would collapse under the

weight of its internal contradictions and give way to a new configuration, the old one is still with us. Explaining its persistence would make a formidable next case study for Daston's philosophical anthropology—one that would bring into focus the epistemic structure of her own enterprise.

### Many natures and no moral authority

So why do people continue to assign moral authority to nature? Because normativity presupposes some sort of order, Daston argues. In a state of complete chaos, in which the future becomes radically uncertain, it wouldn't make sense to abide by any norm (p. 49–50). Nature is not the only conceivable source of order, but, being all around us, it's the most obvious one and it provides quite graphic models (the ant state, the solar system, etc.). More importantly, the diversity of forms of life documented by evolutionary biologists surpasses the diversity documented by cultural anthropologists by many orders of magnitude, Daston points out: "The surprises of ethnography (fancy thinking that!) pale beside those of natural history (fancy *being* that!). All human dreams of order, revolutionary or reactionary, local or global, are ultimately figured, made vivid and alluring, in nature's *Wunderkammer* of possible orders" (p. 61).

This has two consequences for contemporary moral debates over naturalism. To naturalists who legitimate their pet moral order in terms of nature, Daston says that this strategy cannot reign in relativism (p. 60). In fact, cultural relativism loses luster by comparison with the relativism described by Daston because such, let's call it natural relativism, is unchecked by the limits of human behavior (even Margaret Mead's Samoan girls didn't use their genitals as freely and versatilely as our next of kin, the bonobos). To anti-naturalists who worry that naturalizing moral orders will cement the status quo, Daston holds out that their concerns are wildly exaggerated given that any party can leverage a natural order that will support its moral-political cause (if you disapprove of the hippiesque nature of bonobos, just take chimpanzee patriarchy as your model of human origins) (p. 68). In other words, although it is not by strict logical necessity that humans are disposed to find their moral orders in nature, there is nothing wrong with it either.

In *Against nature*, Daston does not reveal her own, necessarily contingent, preferences. Apart from defining humans as essentially normative creatures, her philosophical anthropology tiptoes around its own conception



of human nature and the question of whether it yields any moral authority. In passing, she notes that early modern Europeans opposed human civilization to savage nature without according greater dignity to nature. Instead they understood human labor as improving nature and likened human nature to a well-kept garden (p. 58–59). What Daston does not mention in this context is that this is precisely the side on which she came down in the nature vs. nurture debate: “If we are to cure ourselves of asking barren questions about ‘X versus Y,’ we might begin by thinking of human nature as a garden” (Daston 2010: 227).

In response, philosopher Ian Hacking (2010: 238) stated his own, equally contingent preference: “I find myself wanting more Nature than Nurture, more field and forest and tundra than garden.” In the age of a mass extinction event, the sixth in natural history but the first caused by humans, I wonder if the distinction between garden and wilderness makes any more sense than the one between racoon and nonracoon (especially if you share a garden with *Procyon lotor*, as I do). Following the lead of Henrich, it is self-domestication through social norms that turned humans into apex predators even in environments to which they were not genetically adjusted. It is as a normative animal that *Homo sapiens* turned the whole planet into the savage battleground that gardens have always been (at least from the perspective of weeds and pests).

While Daston doesn’t spell out the moral implications of her philosophical anthropology, it is hard to see how she would not come out a relativist who accepts that the specific norms we’re committed to are contingent on the usually natural and occasionally cultural or horticultural order people happened to pick.<sup>1</sup> There is no binding order of the world from which we could deduce an imperative code of conduct, no transcendental norm to select

the right set of norms. Here again Daston’s philosophical anthropology comes up against the limitations that Foucault described for modern anthropological thought, which presents the empirical facts of human existence as its own transcendental conditions. If Daston’s philosophical analysis is correct, we are normative animals who tend to derive their norms from different orders of nature. But nature not only fails to tell us which natural order and which specific set of norms to select, it doesn’t even tell us whether it should be normative to be normative in the first place (many, maybe even all other animal species got through natural history without social norms, so normativity might be an evolutionarily recent phenomenon and contemporary anti-normativists wouldn’t have to look far for orders of nature without it; see Fitzpatrick 2020; Tomasello 2016). Foucault (2002: 328) concluded: “For modern thought, no morality is possible.” Daston’s philosophical anthropology should be no exception. While she doesn’t really write against nature, her book does call into question any absolutist account of morality. Foucault entertained historicist hopes for a radically different organization of knowledge, but Daston urges us to accept that the finitude of human reason is all we’ve got. Of course, it’s not true that human reason doesn’t allow for any morality. Whether transhistorical or exclusively modern, it has made lots of moralities possible—so many that none of them can claim ultimate validity. If human nature was indeed a garden, then each would have to tend their own.

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1. Regarding their historicization of epistemic virtues like objectivity, Daston and Galison (2007: 376–77) denied that their historicism amounted to relativism (but see Kusch 2011: 489). In response to epistemologists who seek certainty and unshakable foundations, Daston (1994: 284) recommended an epistemological attitude akin to the “bleak, defiant courage” of Albert Camus’ philosophical existentialism, embracing a code of ethics while abandoning its religious roots and renouncing all hopes for an alternative transcendental justification. However, Daston’s philosophical anthropology follows a different logic than her historical epistemology in that it uses historical scholarship for nonhistoricist purposes. That needs to be discussed separately.



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