Art and Environment: Expanding the Limits of Morality

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In the book *Functionings Approach*, I have sought to show how, from the point of view of a moral aimed at respect or consideration for the various existing functional systems, we might include non-human animals as equal objects of moral consideration. At the same time, I have also advocated a functional view of the many existing entities. But, if we really accept the sheer fact that being recognizable as a functional system entitles something to our moral consideration, are we not opening the door of morality to any and all types of entities that can be functionally defined? My initial answer is that we extend morality to many such entities, but not necessarily to all. In this paper, I intend to advocate this expansion to at least two groups of entities: works of art and the environment. Along the way, I intend to clearly state the reasons why I claim that we must not *necessarily* be committed to moral consideration and the realization of any existing functional system.

The notion of functional system

To characterize something from the functional point of view is, first and foremost, an individuation process—a process that is contrary to, for example, an individuation process, which resorts to the material constitution of the object in question. To functionally individuate an entity means to identify it based on its functional role.

In this sense, we may at the same time refer to an object—e.g., a bookshelf—as if it were made of wood or as if "it were used for" or "had the function of" storing books. But that resorting to an object's physical constitution may not serve to identify it. Other than a bookshelf, several other objects are made of wood. In addition to wood, several other materials may also be used to make a bookshelf. Given this, referring to its physical constitution seems to fail (1) because it is not sufficient to distinguish or discriminate the object at hand from other objects made of wood and (2) because it does not satisfy even a necessary condition, given that many objects, from the point of view of the function they perform, may be made out of quite different materials. Some rather evident examples

of this are can openers, telephones, and levers, all being cases in which both the form and the physical constitution of any one given object may differ significantly.

Until now, we have operated on merely descriptive grounds, and many might claim that, from the point of view of strict knowledge production, this may not be the most adequate method for identifying or distinguishing entities. I defend that this method offers some explanatory advantages, at least with regard to knowledge about minds or beings to which we simultaneously attribute physical and mental predicates. I take as an "explanatory advantage" the simple fact that we can thus understand and clarify some given relationships between physical and mental aspects that populate our everyday lives.

In particular, the functionalist approach allows us to eliminate the explanatory gap between the mental and the physical, thereby allowing us to accept our intuition that many of the functions we perform are multiply performable—i.e., can be performed by physically distinct entities.

A functionalist view of the mind further allows one to incorporate a very old belief, which remains foreign to many of us, that our minds are not located in our brains nor even within the boundaries of our bodies, but rather that our mental operations are distributed between the *input* and *output* spread over the set composed by our physical bodies and the world. In certain cases, inanimate object is part of our ability to respond to the situations we experience and to produce knowledge. Consequently, such objects are now understood to be coupled systems that, in turn, may become part of that which we call "our minds." We thus arrive at the theory of extended mind—a theory that, as I intend to show, is already considerably widespread in our everyday lives.

The extended mind: descriptive characteristics and moral consequences

To illustrate this idea, let us imagine a very common situation. I have just scheduled a meeting with my graduate student, Diogo. Because my memory is not as good as it used to be and often fails me, I write down the appointment in an organizer that I always carry with me for that purpose. I then consult the organizer and, seeing my meeting's date and time arrive at my office for the meeting at the correct time. Diogo also arrives at the appointed time. When I ask him how he managed to arrive at the meeting at the exact day and time, he replies that he remembered having scheduled the meeting

the day of and one hour before his class in Logic at the Philosophy and Social Sciences Institute. Anyway, Diogo resorted to information stored in his memory and, thanks to this resource, he arrived at the correct day and time. The information contained in Diogo's memory is part of his cognitive process. In my case, I managed to arrive at the correct time and on the correct day because I could resort to the information contained in my organizer. Would it therefore not be correct to say that also this latter information is part of the cognitive process which made my arrival at the meeting possible? If we can agree that it is so, we might admit that part of our cognitive process may include elements that are found outside the boundaries of our bodies.

The example above endorses what Andy Clark (2010) advocates as the *parity principle*—i.e., the principle requiring that similar treatment be given to distinct elements that perform the same role or the same function in the knowledge production process. The information contained in Diogo's memory and the information contained in my organizer perform the same role: namely, they are integral to the cognitive process that enables us to arrive at the meeting at the correct time and on the correct day.

However, this characteristic of the functional approach, merely descriptive in itself, may have consequences from the point of view of morality. And, from this moment on, we may be able to justify why some objects, even if inanimate, should be objects of our moral consideration.

Continuing the example above, imagine that somebody steals my organizer. I would now be deprived of information that is essential for me to carry on with my work and fulfill my commitments. The harm caused by the theft would certainly be much greater than some physical damage, even one that might cause some temporary loss of consciousness.

Depending on the information contained in the organizer and the possibility of ever retrieving it through other channels, the damage might affect me at quite distinct levels. It suffices to imagine that now we are no longer talking about an organizer but a computer, one without backup, in which all my still unpublished articles and pictures recording the first years of my daughter's life are stored. I can assure that, at least in my case, I would have preferred to have part of my own body removed, rather than finding myself deprived of all this information. My articles, regardless of their objective merit, are my way of projecting my beliefs on the world. They are, in this sense, the part of me to which other people will have access when I myself, as a singular entity, am no longer

in this world. They are part of what other "I"s will have from me to share. The pictures of my daughter are mementos that I share with her and with all those who have somehow taken part and will take part in our lives. In these two cases, something fundamental to me would be lost forever. And, at least in the case of the articles, it also becomes evident that such a loss might shake my self-esteem and my feeling of personal realization.

Let us now move to less personal but quite elucidating examples. Let us imagine that *Mister X* is a blind individual who uses a stick to calculate his distance to other objects and, by doing so, ensures his physical integrity in the face of possible collisions. Were any of us to take away his stick, great harm would be caused, and part of his functioning would be compromised. The stick and *Mister X* form a unique functional system, and to break this connection means to damage the system. Other clear examples of this type can be illustrated by a student's notebook, someone's prescription glasses, or the nappy towel a baby hugs to sleep. All these objects may be so coupled to our cognitive and/or affective systems that they become part of what we are. This is even more evident when we think about our language, books, songs, and images we record from the world. Damage to any of these entities is damaging to our very form of realization.

However, can any object be a constitutive part of the mind? Evidently not. It may be that any object can be described functionally, but only under specific conditions can we say that an object is part of our cognitive system and, consequently, of our minds.

Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998), in their description of the conditions for an object to be considered a constitutive part of our cognitive system, list constancy, accessibility, and reliance or automatic endorsement by the agent of the information contained in the aggregate entity. Such conditions, therefore, already allow us to set distinguish our notebooks from the books in a library, from the point of view of their roles as part of our cognitive system. Phone numbers, dates for taking part in thesis committees and even the sequence of arguments read in a text are pieces of information that I claim to have, but my notebook is needed to access them. The Dadaist movement's history and the sequence of films directed by Jean Renoir are examples of information that I can obtain if I have access to library books or, currently, to *Google*; however, I do not dare to claim that I possess these. I may access them, but certainly not with the same constancy, agility, and security with which I access my notebook. The information contained in the library books and Google are, therefore, not part of my mind.

Incorporating works of art and the environment into morality

Some objects are, therefore, capable of integrating our cognitive processes and becoming part of our minds, but to receive the privileged *status* of entity with moral value will certainly depend on the way in which each object relates to a functional system that we value. When an object is a constitutive part of ourselves as functional systems, to morally protect, preserve, and respect such an object is a condition for our very flourishing.

As indicated by the examples that I have previously given, I would like to go further and consider not only those possible entities that integrate our cognitive system but also those that warrant our personal integrity from the emotional or affective point of view as well. There are entities—objects and living beings—without which we would not be able to imagine a full personal identity. This is, in my understanding, the case describing works of art and the environment, both of which are objects of our aesthetical contemplation without which we cannot experience our own existences as fulfilled or happy.

My personal narrative is committed to characters from Dostoievski, Proust, Balzac, and others to such a degree that I could no longer recognize a world in which I could not identify their steps. I see Rio de Janeiro through the eyes of poems by Vinícius de Moraes and songs by Tom Jobim. In Chico Buarque's lyrics, I have learned to understand the vicissitudes of the female soul. In a world where these points of reference no longer make sense, I would feel lost; or, rather, a part of me, perhaps the most important one, would no longer exist. This is just as well; how could I ever bear the idea that someday that forest, with whose splendor I have so many times colored my dreams, will be replaced by some pasture or factory? I believe there is a world that, with or without my presence, is richer because of all these things.

However, would it not be a flaw, from a moral perspective, to include an entity because of its importance or value to us? There is some conceptual confusion about this. Unless we adopt a quite peculiar ontology regarding possible worlds and existing entities[1], we should be able to admit that values are not natural entities but, instead, human

[1] Here, I am thinking of an ontology that includes, for example, the possibility of transcendent beings and immaterial entities. I do not intend to analyze this hypothesis because, although quite widespread in the lay world, it is incompatible with the philosophical perspective that I adopt, namely, a materialistic, non-dualist ontology.

attributions. To better phrase it, values are weights that we attribute to all that relates to us. Values are part of the way in which we refer to other entities. This, however, does not mean that we cannot base our value attributions on objective criteria, so that, from this moment on, the value of something becomes independent from our personal interests.

Therefore, stating that attributing value in a manner dependent on us would be a moral error is, from this perspective, a fallacious statement because all attributions of value are fruits of the human universe. The moral error would be to make attributions of value depend exclusively on our own instrumental interests in the object at hand. This, however, does not arise from the perspective I am advocating here.

My theory is that our relationship with the environment and with art is not instrumental but, rather, constitutive—constitutive of our self-realization process. There is no egotism or moral subjectivism here at all. Self-realization is, in turn, once more linked to the notion of a system that yearns for its plenitude. What I am trying to posit is that we do not experience ourselves as fully realized beings as long as this realization is not accompanied by the realization of those beings in whose values we place the value of our own lives.

Through works of art, the artist expresses feelings and a quite peculiar way of being in the world, which somehow may come to be shared by human beings over the course of years, decades, and centuries. The work of art is much more than the record or projection of a life. It can be the record of the history of all humankind. It may come to be the most sublime part of us, the part of us that we share with the other *I*s, or even more, with all of humankind. It may be because of this that, even in the bloodiest of conflicts, there is always a strong call for historical monuments and great works of art to be preserved.

Likewise, "nature," the ecosystem, the biosphere, and the environment are, to us, objects of contemplation and fascination that at the same time assign new meaning to the dimensions of our existence and amplify our feelings of belongingness.

An environmental form of ethics

In the philosophy literature, we use the term *deep ecology*, coined by Arne Naess (1973), to denote a perspective that attributes non-instrumental value to the environment. Its counterpoint would be the view according to which our environmental concerns would

all be related to the way in which environmental changes may come to favor or harm human life. In other words, this would be a merely instrumental, "shallow" interpretation of our relationship with the environment.

It took me a while to understand that someone might actually claim to be an environmentalist while supporting this view. As time passed, I realized that almost all saw themselves this way. Today, I understand that this attitude may not exactly be a superficial or shallow perception of ecology but may instead be a more complex process of self-delusion or self-deceit by its followers. Biologists and botanists dedicate their entire lives to the study of species that, from a pragmatic point of view, have little to teach us. How else could we comprehend these scientists' obstinacy if not by resorting to their search of a distinct, existential learning, the fruit of the contemplation and admiration of different functional systems, in their struggle for full realization?

However, if we assume that these are exceptions and that the layman does indeed have this merely instrumental relationship with what surrounds him or her, it leads to the following question: why do we care about the solar system if our personal lives are so ephemeral that we will never witness its changes? There may be several reasons that explain our interest in other beings, but I would like extend the hypothesis that, behind our attribution of value, there is a certain fascination not necessarily for life, as many think, but for the integrity and diversity of a system. Perhaps these may partially be our paradigms for a life well-lived.

As Naess himself notes, the foundations, reasons, or motives by which someone adheres to a deep ecology view may be the most varied. Many admit a transcendent or religious matrix in which the biosphere is interpreted holistically, endowed with an absolute, non-relational value of transcendent origin. From this perspective, the biosphere is adopted as the irreducible unit of moral reference.

Like Naess, I believe that the central core of deep ecology may be endorsed regardless of any religious matrix. The core to which I refer is a non-anthropocentric form of ethics, which encompasses the whole biosphere, or better still, the environment, without establishing any type of hierarchy. Like many followers of deep ecology, I too adopt a holistic view of the realization of and relationships among the many existing systems. However, regarding the perspective advocated here in particular, I would like to emphasize that it is not based on life as a value, nor does it privilege living entities. Its

focus is on the functional systems for whose definition, as we have seen, the attribute of being alive versus not being alive does not play an essential role.

Being alive, just as with the cases of being vulnerable to pleasure and pain and being able to make choices, is characteristic of some systems, and the realization of such systems depends on this feature. In these cases, the attention toward, care for, and respect for these characteristics is a constitutive part of our moral commitment. However, the peculiarity of the functionings approach, seen as a moral perspective, lies precisely in the expansion of our moral commitment beyond those systems capable of performing such functionings.

Attributing value to the various functional systems is something that we do as human beings. And, if we do not need to resort to transcendent entities to justify the values attributed, neither do we need to adopt some merely instrumental type of grounding for them. What grounds or justifies the value, the weight, or the importance that we attribute to certain functional systems are the characteristics intrinsic to such systems—characteristics that, in their own ways, enrich our world.

The sight of the sunset, the simple sound of a river flowing over its rocks, and the smell of wet soil can project strength, serenity, and continuity into our lives. The ability to generate such feelings and our perplexity in the face of the complexity, diversity, and integrity of the distinct functional systems that are part of nature endow the environment with a value that is independent of our personal interests, although inseparable from our concept of what a fully realized life should be.

In closing: the possibilities and limits of a moral perspective

I have sought to advocate a more inclusive perspective of morality, capable of including not only human beings and sentient animals but also the various functional systems that we value. However, if it is we—i.e., humans—who identify the systems and consequently recognize their needs and define their form of realization, do we risk anthropomorphizing all other beings?

Regardless of any judgment of value, it is we—humans—who create a moral way of life. It is we—humans—who take other beings as objects of study, objects of knowledge, and objects of moral consideration or respect. Collectively, these actions make us moral agents par excellence. Ours is the responsibility for a moral life and for

the treatment that we give to other entities. During our knowledge production process, we may be led to the mistake of projecting onto other beings those characteristics that mark our own species. From the moral point of view, we should be cautious of such offence and develop our imaginative capacities in the sense of increasing our sensitivity to previously unnoticeable demands. We should pay less attention to our intellectual arrogance and lend more voice to our own feelings. We should hear and see in a less "anthropocentric" manner. Against the offence of projecting onto others our own demands, these are the only weapons at our disposal: a continuous process of awareness and clearly listening to the other.

Morality, just as the case of human knowledge, is bound to yield to our own limits. We shall make errors and convert our errors into lessons, but we shall not avoid the moral impasses and conflicts that plague our form of being in the world together with other beings. These errors cause moral judgments to be essentially non-definitive and force us to remain alert to the revisions of such judgments and to the transformations in context and in demands that are inherent to the many forms of existence.

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