**A Very Human Form of Irrationality**

**On Lorraine Daston’s *Against Nature***

*Michael Hauskeller*

Lorraine Daston’s *Against Nature* (MIT Press, 2019) is insightful and enjoyable to read, but it is also rather disorientating. The disorientation starts with the title, which suggests that the book contains some kind of argument against nature or perhaps against certain uses of the concept of nature. However, this is not the case. The book is certainly *about* nature, or more precisely about the human tendency to seek moral guidance from nature or from what we perceive to be natural, but there is no indication that the argument presented is in any way directed *against* nature, on the contrary. The question the book ostensibly attempts to answer is why humans so pervasively and persistently, despite very convincing philosophical criticisms of that practice, “look to nature as a source of norms for human conduct” (3). It seems irrational to do so, mostly because how things *are* (naturally or otherwise) quite obviously cannot tell us anything about how things *ought to be*, and yet it appears we still cannot stop doing it. Why is that? Daston suggests that the reason for our stubborn tendency to attach moral significance to nature is our own *human* nature: we simply happen to be the kind of being that does this kind of thing. (There is a slightly more complicated answer, to which I will come shortly, but this is the long and the short of it.) More precisely, we are the kind of being that *thinks* in this way, habitually blending the natural with the moral. Daston points out that this kind of thinking is not a case of “simple mass irrationality”, but of “a very human form of rationality” (5), thereby strongly suggesting that, despite its apparent irrationality, it is perfectly fine for us to seek moral guidance in nature. Not even in this sense, then, is the book “against nature”. Rather, it amounts to a defence of the naturalistic fallacy that critics such as John Stuart Mill saw at work here.

Unfortunately, however, Daston leaves us pretty much in the dark about why we should see this kind of reasoning (i.e. ‘it is natural and therefore morally permissible or even obligatory’, or, ‘it is unnatural and therefore morally impermissible’) as a case of a specifically human *rationality* rather than of a specifically human *irrationality*. It may be true that “it matters to reason (…) what kind of species we are” (1) and that the rationality of human beings is shaped by its integration with the human body (69), which most likely makes it very different from the rationality of Martians (who, we may assume, are embodied beings just as we are, but embodied differently) or angels (who presumably are not embodied at all). However, it would be helpful to learn a little more about how exactly it is different and how this difference accounts for (and justifies?) our habit of treating nature as if it could tell us what we ought to do. Daston does not say much about this, except that our human kind of rationality supposedly cannot function without figurative representation: “for our species, with our sensorium, orders must be grasped and imagined, both literally and figuratively.” (59) “These humanly rational propensities have to do with the kind of organisms that we happen to be. We are outfitted with senses that convey the surfaces of things.” (65) “We are not content to receive appearances; we want to make them as well. To be fully real for us, a thing must appear; and this imperative holds for the very real moral orders devised by humans as well as for the artifacts they paint, build, mold, and forge” (66). Yet even if all this were true, which is doubtful (can we really not conceive of a moral order that is not also, quite literally, graspable, visible, or audible?), it remains rather unclear how the representational needs of human reason should be able to explain, let alone justify, our habit of seeking moral guidance particularly from *nature* (why not art instead?). It also remains unclear why, even if it did provide such an explanation, we should see this as rational rather than irrational behaviour.

Daston’s slightly more complicated answer to the question why we “look to nature as a source of norms for human conduct” is not entirely satisfactory either. This time it is not the representational needs of our human reason that serve as an explanation, but our deeply ingrained fear of disorder and chaos. Although, Daston concedes, too much order can also be horrifying, it is much preferable to a complete loss of order, which we fear more than anything else (45). There is already plenty of order to be found in nature: in the *specific* natures of things (that which makes a thing the kind of thing that it is, or in short their essences), which underlie the cognitively necessary practice of classification (10), in *local* natures, which are the comparatively stable “characteristic combinations of flora and fauna, climate and geology” that we are used to (15), and finally in the universal unchanging laws of nature that regulate everything that happens. These natural orders are the paradigms we turn to when creating our own orders in the social world of human interactions, as we always do and as we must because clearly the existing natural orders are insufficient to keep chaos at bay in the human world. Those additional orders that we create are based on and held together by social norms, and especially moral norms, which function as “a bulwark against chaos.” (67) This is why normativity, which “is the quality of telling us what should be, as opposed to describing how things actually are” (46), and a keen desire to bridge “the distance between what is and what should be” are universal features of human cultural existence and indeed, once again, “part of what it means to be human” (48). A culture without norms is then “as much an oxymoron as nature without regularities” (46). Norms, however, do not emerge out of the blue. They are modelled on existing orders, and even though there are equally suitable models available in other areas (e.g. art, mathematics, or technology) that could conceivably also be used for the representation of the ideal moral order that our norms aspire to create and safeguard, we do *in fact* tend to use natural orders as a means of orientation (53).

Daston offers two reasons for this preference. First, nature is “everywhere and always on display” and has a “sharp-edged solidity”, thus making natural orders “as obvious as rocks”, which (since it appeals to our specifically human form of rationality) is “one reason why for centuries, beehives and anthills have been used to model human societies” (55). The second reason is that nature is the “repository of all orders” (55), displaying “so many kinds of order that it is a beckoning resource with which to instantiate any particular one imagined by humans.” (57)

What, then, do I find unsatisfactory about this account? First of all, I take issue with Daston’s understanding of normativity, which emphasizes the *opposition* and the *distance* between what is and what should be. At least initially, there is no such distinction between what is and what should be, let alone an opposition. Our first norms are firmly rooted in the reality that we experience, which is predominantly a *social* reality. When we are born and then gradually grow into this world, we quickly learn to see the way things are as the way they should be, simply because it is the *only* way we know how to be. We receive our standards of what the right way to behave is from the way the people we observe and interact with actually behave. The norm for us is what is normal in the world we happen to grow up in. *This* is the nature we live by. There is thus no need to derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’: our first ‘ought’ and our first ‘is’ are one and the same. It is only later, in late childhood or adolescence, when we are confronted with other actual or potential realities that it becomes possible for the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’, the normal and the normative, to drift apart, and it is only then that the orders we find in nature may present themselves to us as suitable paradigms for an alternative moral order. Initially, however, we do not model our behaviour on any sort of natural order. Rather, our understanding of what is natural and what is unnatural grows out of our experience of the world as we find it. Natural, for us, is first and foremost the kind of appearance and behaviour that we are familiar with in our local environment, and what we are unfamiliar with strikes us as unnatural.

It should also be noted that when we do take our cues from nature, we rarely, unless we are philosophers, look to other species for moral guidance. We don’t usually model or seek to model our behaviour on the way non-human animals behave. Nobody in their right mind would take their moral clues from anthills or beehives. We know very well that what they do is not what we do, and that what is right for them need not be, and most likely is not, right for us, precisely because we are not them. We have a different specific nature. We may occasionally point to the way bees and ants live if we want to draw attention to a way of living aspects of which we may find desirable to emulate, but we don’t usually fool ourselves into believing it would actually be possible or even desirable for us to live like bees or ants, and that is because we are *not* bees or ants, but humans. And even if were foolish enough to try, it would be very odd if we claimed that doing so would be more *natural* than to live like humans typically do. Both what is natural and what is unnatural (or thought to be so) is always local, never universal. What is natural for bees or ants is not natural for humans, and what we think of as unnatural when a human does it, we do not consider unnatural when a bee or an ant does it.

So where does this leave us? “The human impulse to make nature meaningful”, writes Daston, “is rooted in a double insight about order: normativity demands order; and nature supplies exemplars of all conceivable orders. But natural order alone cannot dictate which specific norms to follow, if only because there are so many orders in nature.” (60) According to Daston, this is not a disadvantage: “It was just this proliferation of norms in nature that led critics like Mill to throw up their hands in exasperation: nature will never speak with one voice, so why listen? The polyphony of nature is, however, precisely the point: it is difficult – perhaps impossible – to imagine an order that is not manifestly, flamboyantly on display in nature.” (61) This strikes me as a rather odd argument. How can the fact that natural orders are so varied that we can find a concrete model for just about any moral claim that we wish to make *be the point*? The point of what exactly? If there is nothing that cannot be justified by reference to nature, then this may make it very easy for us to find a suitable example that clearly shows that things actually *are* somewhere the way we say they *should* be. Yet when people seek support from nature for the moral claims they wish to make, they can only plausibly claim such support if the natural order they reference is somehow more natural or in some other way more authoritative than other natural orders. The whole *point* of claiming that something should be, or should be done, in a certain way because it is natural to be that way, or to do it that way, is that what is natural is thought to be less contentious and more reliable than what we think is (merely) morally right. Yet if everything is natural, then nothing is, or at least not in an interesting, potentially morally relevant way. As an argumentative strategy it may work on occasion, especially in a political context, because it appears to anchor morality firmly in reality, the ‘ought’ in an ‘is’, but that doesn’t make the move any less dubious. In this sense we should all be, unlike Daston, *against* nature.