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The Extraterrestrial Environment – an Axiological Perspective

Lucian MOCREI REBREAN^{1*}

Abstract

Through human exploration the extraterrestrial space becomes more and more the subject of an anthropological debate. The purpose of this article is to connect axiological thinking with the ethics of human activities related to space exploration. In this context, when debating upon the ability of natural objects to possess value, the distinction between the source of value and the object of value or the “locus” of value is essential. If we deliberate strictly in favour of the valorising subject, the exterior nature is always in danger of losing its intrinsic value. Only to the extent that natural objects are values in themselves, regardless if any human subject is valorising them, the so-called naturalistic fallacy in locating value, the confusion between its source and object can be prevented from the start. These difficulties can be surmounted by stating that all value, human and nonhuman is ontologically located within the natural world. The existence of a plurality of irreducible values makes it possible for judgements of value to be justified independently of the appeal to human preferences. The concept of intrinsic value can be directly attributed to entities belonging to extraterrestrial nature only provided we accept that intrinsic values can be both concrete and plural. Seen through the prism of an objectivist meta-ethics, extraterrestrial space can be described as a new environment where values subsist without any reference to human valorisation/experimentation, awaiting their exploration and discovery.

Keywords: natural value, meta-ethics, intrinsic value, naturalistic fallacy, extraterrestrial environment.

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1. Introduction

The broad social relevance of the topic comes from the fact that human activities in outer space are becoming more and more a legitimate subject for ethics and anthropological studies. In particular, human activities in Earth orbital space give rise to eco-ethical questions on a global scale. The purpose of this article is to connect axiological thinking with the ethics of human activities related to space exploration. The category from which the entire debate on environmental ethics begins is that of *natural landscape*. If human presence has consequences that intentionally or unintentionally affects nature, a landscape is that part of nature which exists prior to direct human action. [1] Once human activities are carried out within a natural scene, the initial landscape becomes an environment or a habitat. In this sense, as a region that starts at the inferior border of the terrestrial ionosphere, extending to the limits of the Solar System and beyond, extraterrestrial space can be defined as an environment man has already come into direct contact with. However hostile and inaccessible it may be, exploratory, commercial and military activities are growing in amplitude and intensity with every decade. Initially perceived as a hostile vastness, homogenous and boundless, lacking any kind of identity and potential value, outer space receives both identity and value as it is humanized through knowledge and especially through action. Its direct exploration reveals it to us as *a place of ours*, as an imminently experienced ontological dimension and, *a fortiori*, it brings into discussion the ethical character of our relationship with nature in general. [2]

2. Theoretical Background

Curry has identified two major environmentalist orientations in contrast with classical virtue ethics: a deontological and a managerial approach to eco-ethics. [3] The declared objective of ecoethics is to rewrite moral speech towards the environment without granting any privilege to human beings. Examining the hypothesis that some extraterrestrial objects can have intrinsic value we arrive at interrogations of the following nature: “Does Mars as a planet have any value in and through itself? Is there less intrinsic value within a planet that is devoid of life than in one with an active biosphere? Should we access and utilize the resources available there or should we leave them as they are?”. [4] These interrogations draw attention at the fact that the axiological statute of the environment is the fertile ground of a debate that opposes the concept of intrinsic value to that of

instrumental natural value. A possible identification of non-instrumental value in the environments within our astronomical proximity that can be explored with our present technological capabilities starts from rejecting the anthropocentrism of the traditions of classical ethical schools of thought, of Kantianism, of Utilitarianism and of Virtue Ethics, as the sole possible premise in ethical reasoning with regard to the environment. [5]

3. Argument of the paper

Regarding the issue of assessing moral action within environments as hostile to life as extraterrestrial space, classical criteria such as the sensibility of nonhuman beings or the diversity of the living world, cannot be used in determining the moral relevance of extraterrestrial nonliving entities. It is then necessary to propose and assume an axiology that is satisfactory enough [6] to serve as the premise of an ethics of respect. This can help us approach the field of moral action within any particular extraterrestrial environment. Adopting a pluralistic axiological vision in which, alongside the incontestable intrinsic value of humanity, there is to be recognized the non-instrumental value of the nature that is the object of exploration, would cause extraterrestrial space to present itself as a new environment where *loci* of intrinsic non-anthropocentric value resides. [7]

4. Arguments to support the thesis

In order to evaluate the relationship between the intrinsic value of the human persona and that of the new environment it has access to, it is necessary to question the uniqueness of the human value system in ethical thought. [8] In order to account for the statute of the extraterrestrial environments presently or potentially exposed to our actions, a set of alternative moral principles becomes necessary because on the one hand space exploration inevitably engages those fundamental ethical concepts that describe universal human moral practice such as courage, justice, practical wisdom, humility or hubris, but on the other hand it constitutes a continuous challenge with regard to the manner in which we choose to valorize nature.

Between Callicott's radical non-anthropocentrism and the moderate and pragmatic one belonging to Norton [9], Rolston is trying to establish an authentically deontological position in exploring and exploiting outer space, founded on the respect towards natural value. That would necessarily imply accepting the fact that its values are not only objectively present but also

autonomous. The main trouble with Callicott's axiology is that it finally leads to rejecting the presence of intrinsic value in nature because the source of value ultimately remains the human conscience and sensibility. To reject the statement that value can exist independently of the human assessor means essentially to negate its very existence in nature. [10] Only to the extent that natural objects are values in themselves, regardless if any human subject is valorizing them, has valorized or will ever valorize them, the fallacy in locating value, the confusion between its source and object, can be prevented from the start.

In conclusion, the concept of value can be directly attributed to entities of extraterrestrial nature only if we accept that intrinsic values can be both concrete and plural and that natural values are not constituted in any way by us. Human subjects merely discover them, they do not generate them. [11] A theory of autonomous intrinsic value must be distinguished as clearly as possible from an anthropogenic one in which values are conferred to natural entities along with the act of human acknowledgement. Rolston calls the latter "extrinsic" [12] because value is not truly intrinsic to natural entities but only projected upon them by humans. Seen through the prism of an objectivist meta-ethics, extraterrestrial space can be described as a new environment where multiple natural values subsist without any reference to human valorization/experimentation.

5. Arguments to argue the thesis

A vision so radically pluralistic of value bearers has, however, its own setbacks. This kind of system cannot function efficiently as long as the mixing of incomparable and often incompatible values makes establishing an axiological hierarchy a difficult task. The acceptance of a humanity/nature [13] ethical dualism raises a problem of systemic coherence [14] in the sense that it can lead to conflict between legitimate duties with regard to the wellbeing of the environment and those, as much as legitimate, regarding the wellbeing of humans. This dilemma can be surpassed if we assume the fact that actions which are just from a moral standpoint must not necessarily have good consequences for their human authors. Hargrove claims that this solution proposed by Rolston denotes the fact that, although he professes a radical ethical non-anthropocentrism, his axiology still remains tributary to an anthropocentric vision. [15]

The anthropocentric position can be reduced to a number of basic affirmations. First: because humans are the only valorizing subjects, nonhuman beings and the lifeless environment have value only to the extent

that they satisfy our interests. Second: because humans are the only entities which have moral stature, the effects of human action on the environment are of importance from an ethical standpoint only to the extent that they affect our interests. In these conditions, not only particular nonhuman existences but also ecological communities can be attributed only instrumental value and, therefore, cannot be the subject of direct moral concern. Pushed to the limit, this line of thought leads to the conclusion that humanity (in an individual or a collective sense) is the only reality with ultimate value in the whole universe. If cosmic nature remains devoid of value in itself then the “last man” scenario becomes paradigmatic [16]: the last remaining human being would not commit any mistake if it destroyed (supposing it were capable of it) every nonhuman existence, biotic or abiotic, on a universal level.

As part of the intrinsic/instrumental classification of values, the notion of natural value implies an epistemological distinction between objective and subjective. [17] The mere acknowledgement that objects can be valued for what they represent in themselves or for their contribution to the attainment of other goals, poses the problem of the extent to which extraterrestrial natural items can be bearers of value and in what sense. Celestial objects relatively accessible to exploration and eventual exploitation such as the Moon, that possess instrumental value as natural resources because of the information content and their potential economical utility, can also have intrinsic value that exists prior to our relationship to them. Therefore, when debating on the ability of natural objects to possess value, the distinction between the notions of “source” of value and “object” of value or the *locus* of value becomes essential. If we deliberate strictly in favor of the valorizing subject, then irrational nature remains in the area of axiological relativism, always in danger of losing the intrinsic value with which it was eventually invested. In a radical interpretation, the statement that value necessarily has a subjective component in the sense that, if there is no valorizing subject then there cannot be any kind of value, lastly reduces nature to the value that it has for humans. [18]

6. Dismantling the arguments against

A subjectivist justification of the intrinsic value of nature cannot be sufficient to establish a consistent ethical position of respect towards nature because it is exclusively preoccupied with humans. An axiological theory founded on other premises becomes necessary. Thinking in an objectivist manner, we come to the conclusion that the concept of intrinsic value refers

to the quality of an object to possess value independently of human assessment. Consequently, some natural objects can possess intrinsic value in virtue of inherent qualities such as their beauty, harmony or integrity. Its existence can be demonstrated: the thought experiment proposed by Moore leads to the conclusion that natural beauty has objective value. The other classical argument of environmentalist ethics is “the argument of the last man”. It must be said that both are imaginative-intuitive methods, not discursive demonstrations, but taking into account that ethical principles must be universal and therefore applicable not only to present situations but to all situations possible, they are acceptable in a deontological debate even just as modalities of testing that alleged universality.

Even if we accept the validity of these two arguments, the field of application of the notion of intrinsic natural value remains the relationship between the valorizing subject and the environment. In this regard, the distinction introduced by Attfield between the correlative concepts of intrinsic value and inherent value [19] becomes relevant to our discussion. Regardless if natural value can be defined or not in a strictly objectivistic manner, it becomes, in relation to the human subject, inherent value, meaning the value that an object possesses through its “ability” to contribute positively to human life through its mere presence. [20] In this last sense, natural objects can be objectively in possession of value but, inexperienced, this value remains a potential one. In this case some astronomical objects such as extremely vast and complex galaxies allow us to take aesthetical pleasure by contemplating *what they are*. In Moore’s axiological outlook, alongside human personas, some concrete realities can have the capacity to be bearers of value. As opposed to Chilsom and Lemos for whom the bearers of intrinsic value are states of fact, be them events, processes or lives, Moore claims that the intrinsic value of individual objects can, in itself, be pictured as anterior to its acknowledgement through the experience of their qualities. [21] Moreover, being self-sufficient [22], immediately noticeable and not the result of any kind of reasoning, such values are in no need of justification, they must only be contextualized so that they do not remain ambiguous from a conceptual standpoint. In this regard O’Neill claims that all properties that describe an object with intrinsic value must meet a few conditions. The following is the most important one: we must be able to conceive their existence in absence of any human experience. Accordingly, there are three regulative meanings of the concept of intrinsic value in nature that can be distinguished: the non-instrumental meaning, the non-relational meaning and the objective meaning. [23]

Reunited, the three meanings illustrate the manner in which, besides the strictly human field of rationality and that of the utilitarian experience of

pleasure, value can be encountered outside any instrumental references inside the realm of extraterrestrial nature.

There is however an issue with this way of picturing the subject - object of value relationship. If intrinsic value belongs solely to those natural objects that have the ability to move us spiritually or esthetically then it remains bound to some frame of human evaluation. Astronomical objects, however interesting or beautiful they may be, are finally means for satisfying human preferences of either aesthetic or epistemological nature. As long as their valorization is solely the consequence of empirical knowledge, they cannot have *stricto sensu* intrinsic value. [24] If the nonhuman ontological domain cannot possess value in this way, then there are no transpersonal reasons for the preservation and the protection of its items. In conclusion, as Rolston states, although they are not anthropocentric, the axiological anthropogenic theories do not offer a sufficiently firm foundation for establishing the notion of intrinsic value *in* nature. [25]

To contemplate nature means to transit from an abstract, reductionist, analytic kind of knowledge to a synthetic perspective on the valorizing subject seen as fully integrated in nature. In the equation of knowledge the subjective “I” is not a polar opposite of an objective nature but begins its epistemological adventure already integrated in its environment. For example, a causal cosmological sequence leads to the appearance of a new natural value such as a lenticular galaxy or a nebula and its empirical discovery produces a particular event of value. [26] That value is humanly experienced through tertiary qualities such as symmetry or complexity. This event is possible because in the act of valorization that classical, dialectical relationship between the evaluating subject and the corresponding objective reality becomes an *ecological* one. [27] From human perspective that particular experience is part of a natural process that, in its permanent progress, includes both the human and the nonhuman. In this context, the meaning of “value bearer” is linked both to the capacity of natural items to carry their own specific values in our direction and to that of nature as a whole to bear the values that we attribute to it. Therefore the experience of value remains one of irreducible relational nature because it has ecological premises. [28]

In Rolston’s holistic ethical vision, the physical exploration of the extraterrestrial environment means at the same time the acknowledgement of its sources of value: of majesties within nebulas, of beauties of other worlds - myriads of new *loci* of value existing in absence of any human contribution.

7. Conclusions

Offering and simultaneously constricting value [29], the extraterrestrial space is not an inert or solely reactive, but a *proactive* environment. The solar system's hostile frontier is not only a new and unexplored vastness which awaits to receive value through humanization but, as it becomes more accessible, reveals itself as a realm of natural values coexisting more and more visibly with the human ones. Outer space can be considered a potentially endless plurality of intrinsic values yet to be experienced, awaiting the human subject with a certain interest in them.

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