

Book Review  
The Limits of a Phenomenological  
Approach to Metaethics

Review of *Etica naturalistica e fenomenologia*, by A. Staiti,  
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### 1. Introduction

Andrea Staiti's new book constitutes an important contribution to the contemporary debate on metaethics, not only for the substantial thesis that it offers, but also for its attempt to promote a dialogue between different approaches to fundamental common theoretical problems. Staiti believes that a phenomenological approach might fruitfully contribute «to clarify and to settle some of the most controversial topical issues in contemporary metaethics» (p. 9), such as moral perception and intuition, and the relationship between axiological and natural properties. For more than a century the phenomenological and the analytical tradition have faced these problems on parallel tracks; Staiti's merit is to get such approaches closer, paving the way for a further fruitful dialogue between them. In the first chapter, Staiti outlines an overview of the contemporary debate on naturalism and non-naturalism in metaethics; he then introduces some core aspects of Husserl's phenomenological method, preparing the ground for the main issues which he discusses in the following chapters. I will thus focus my considerations on chapter 2, 3 and 4, which constitute the original contribution of this work.

### 2. Moral perception and intuition

Chapter 2 focuses on perception and intuition, conceived as privileged mechanisms for the epistemic access to both natural and axiological

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properties. Staiti starts his discussion dealing with Robert Audi's theory. According to Audi, we do not "cartographically" internally represent moral properties as we do for natural ones, so he needs to introduce an unspecified "sense of unfittingness" to account for the specificity of moral perception (Audi 2015, p. 11). Staiti believes that the phenomenological method is able to avoid Audi's dichotomies – i.e. distinguishing the real object from the perceived one, and natural properties from moral ones – by allowing to conceive the object as one, simply manifesting itself to our conscience in different ways. Axiological properties are not simply "added" to natural ones, nor they are originally distinct from them. We always perceive axiologically qualified objects, and values take place in a world of facts: their distinction is just a further «consequence of our explicatory activity» (p. 57).

As for the notion of "intuition", Staiti acknowledges the radical difference between its classical phenomenological conception and the main accounts offered in the contemporary analytical debate. According to phenomenology, intuition is the concrete experiential "fulfillment" of something merely "intended", namely «the experience of a coincidence between the way we used to think things were, and the way they actually stand» (p. 68). An intuition might be the *direct view* of the actual realization of a value which was previously only figured: «there is a fundamental difference between reading that child labor exploitation is morally reprehensible, to imagine a situation of child labor exploitation, and to see with one's own eyes, for instance, a textile factory exploiting children» (p. 64). According to phenomenology, mere "feelings" or "seemings" about something (cf. Huemer 2005) are not intuitions: when we experience those states, it is precisely because we *lack* the actual proper intuition (p. 68).

Staiti states that we often experience a progression which starts from an empty intention, passes through imagination and ends with an intuitive fulfillment. However, such a progression is not necessary, since the «intuitive fulfillment might be simultaneous to the intention taking over» (p. 65). Nonetheless, it is not clear whether also the opposite sequence might be possible: for example, the direct *sight* of an "objective disvalue" without "intending" its wrongness. What about a person who directly sees child exploitation (or perhaps personally conducts it), without intending that it is wrong? Is this a possible scenario, or the sight of a natural fact (which objectively embodies a disvalue) automatically produces the intuitive fulfillment? Staiti does not consider this possibility, though in several passages

he seems to suggest that the mere sight of natural properties can be «sufficient to grasp the axiological property» (p. 101). However, this contrasts with the possibility of morally disagreeing even though we agree on the non-moral properties at stake. Moreover, it is not clear whether Staiti believes that other non-axiological facts, which do not directly pertain to the object of the evaluation (e.g. socio-epistemic conditions of the evaluator) might play a role in the perception/intuition of axiological properties.

A further perplexity concerns Staiti's "intuitive" justification of perception and intuitions as self-justifying processes. As he writes, «intuitions [...] *do not need further justification*» (p. 66). This is problematic, since «no belief about the world can also be the reason for thinking that that belief is true» (Brink 1989, p. 117). Unfortunately, Staiti does not consider alternative justificatory accounts in moral epistemology, such as coherentism; although he relies on perception and intuitions in the moral domain «to satisfy one of the main desiderata of naturalism, namely the idea that we access axiological properties roughly in the same manner in which we access natural non-axiological properties» (p. 24), many have claimed that coherentism fits best with how scientific knowledge proceeds (Thagard 2007; Bonjour 1986; Neurath 1983) and also with a naturalistic approach to ethics (Brink 1989; Daniels 1979).

### 3. Supervenience and covariation

In the third chapter, Staiti criticizes the excessive emphasis on the covariation of natural and axiological properties that he finds in the contemporary literature on supervenience, which he accuses to forget the very *experiential* structure of natural and axiologically qualified objects. According to Husserl, which Staiti follows, values are objective; nonetheless, they are always mind-dependent, since they reveal themselves only in front of an evaluative attitude (Husserl 1988, p. 256). From these perspective, Husserl's strategy to identify the subvenient properties on which axiological ones are "founded" – according to Staiti, a notion closer to the idea of "constitution" than to the idea of "grounding" proposed by P. Audi (2012) – consists in changing our evaluative attitude toward an object by isolating its axiological properties and considering it only in its naturalistic-descriptive terms. According to Husserl, axiological properties are such that, by abstracting from them, the "object's unity" persists; this does not happen if we abstract from an object's essential logical properties, such as, for instance, duration for a symphony or spatial

relations for a sculpture (Staiti 2020, p. 91–92). This operation legitimizes the facts-values distinction from a phenomenological perspective; however, Staiti stresses how this distinction cannot be found in our direct experience, but it only as the outcome of a second-level analytical reflection. It is only at this level that values can be considered “as objects”, rather than as axiological properties of objects (Rinofner-Kreidl 2013, p. 71), though unreal ones, since they lack causal power on the physical world (Staiti 2020, p. 94).

In order to account for a symmetrical relationship between natural-logical and axiological properties, Staiti considers Rinofner-Kreidl’s symmetrical interpretation of Husserl’s idea of “mereological foundation”. As she writes, we are always immersed in a «situative fusion of evaluative and descriptive aspects» (Rinofner-Kreidl 2013, p. 69), so that focusing on, selecting, and interpreting facts always implies an evaluation. Thus, also our experience of natural facts changes by changing our evaluative perspective (Rinofner-Kreidl 2015, 102). According to Staiti, however, this view is too extreme. Following Husserl, he believes that it is always possible to analytically isolate axiological properties from natural ones without losing the object’s unity. His strategy to save a symmetrical view, thus, consists in saying that if we vary the axiological properties (or our normative perspective), we do not vary the natural-logical properties *as such*, but rather their *significance* (p. 108–109).

Staiti’s analysis in this chapter is very dense, and many considerations can be made. Firstly, Staiti’s thesis that we can abstract from axiological properties while keeping the object’s unity counts against a symmetrical covariation. If natural properties change, axiological ones will change too, but the reverse is not true: we can even *remove* axiological properties without losing the object’s essential logical properties and relations. To defend a symmetrical view, either one argues for the identity of natural and axiological properties, or accepts Rinofner-Kreidl’s view, which Staiti openly rejects. His strategy to shift the object from the logical-ontological level of covariation to the experiential-selective level of “relevance” does not seem satisfactory.

Moreover, it seems plausible that by removing an axiological property we actually may lose an object’s unity. Consider the example offered by Rinofner-Kreidl (2013) of a handshake between a gangster and a politician, through which the former indicates the latter to a killer. Staiti believes that the pure natural fact of two hands shaking can be isolated from the axiological property of the act’s being morally blameworthy. Staiti states that «the

handshake is the basis without which we would not have [...] a betrayal, and this basis can always be isolated from the totality of the axiologically qualified experience in which it is inserted» (p. 107). However, we can at least reasonably doubt it: we might not be able to explain *that* handshake without a betrayal (see e.g. Sturgeon 1984).

Another problem is that Staiti presents evaluative acts as intrinsically and necessarily emotional (p. 85), but he never justifies this thesis. Indeed, Staiti seems to consider reflection only in its theoretical, analytical function of distinguishing, observing, objectivizing values (and/or the emotional “non-objectivizing” act which reveals them); it does not consider that reflection might also have a *practical* function, consisting in the critical evaluation of emotional evaluative attitudes and, most of all, in their endorsement or rejection (cf. Korsgaard 1996).

In this respect, according to Staiti the nature of an object – its logical structure – is not merely the “foundation” of its axiological properties, but also «the motive or the reason why we attribute to the object certain axiological properties; [...] a subject which experiences some basic properties is motivated to attribute to the object the supervenient axiological properties» (p. 100). Nonetheless, some clarifications are needed. How strong is the motivation which the “nature” of the object produces on the subject? Are these implicatures universal? If so, how can this view account for moral disagreement, errors, and moral progress? As mentioned, Staiti suggests that a careful consideration of the logical properties of the object can be sufficient to appreciate the value at stake (p. 100), while recognizing that education and habit might contribute to produce differences in motivation. However, higher motivation is mostly related to a better knowledge or ability to deal with non-moral, logical properties (p. 101).

Staiti adds that «if the basic properties change, or the overall circumstances in which basic properties are immersed change, the motivation which brings the subject to attribute to the object the supervenient axiological properties will change too» (p. 101). Do such “overall circumstances” include the socio-epistemic conditions in which the evaluator is immersed, too? If so, the subject’s motivation to attribute certain properties to the object may not depend uniquely on its objective, natural-logical constitution – as Staiti-Husserl suggest – but also on other natural facts; so that the “necessary motivational implicature” produced by the nature of the object gets very weak, i.e. not necessary. On the contrary, if the motivational implicature is so

necessary and strong, what is the role of freedom and autonomous critical reflection in this picture?

#### 4. A phenomenological interpretation of Moore's *open question argument*

In the last chapter, Staiti discusses Moore's famous "open question argument", claiming that its proponent has not been able to account for his intuition about the undefinability of "good" in terms of other properties from a merely semantic point of view. Staiti's aim is to explain why Moorean questions are "open" from a different perspective, the phenomenological one. He believes that when we pose Moorean questions which involve normative terms such as "good" – asking questions like "X is kind, polite, and trustworthy, but is she good?" – we are not asking whether X, *other than* being kind, polite, and trustworthy, is *also* "good", as if we were asking whether X possesses another property. What we are asking, according to Staiti, is whether X is *really* good, namely if our judgement about X also receives, in practice, an "intuitive fulfillment" (cf. ch. 2); namely, whether we can directly testify that X *is really so*.

Therefore, Staiti suggests that Moorean questions make sense only when we have an empty intention of something; for instance, when we only have heard or read about it, and we ask ourselves (or somebody else) if those properties are *actually* realized in X. As he writes, «a Moorean question raises when the "complex" under consideration appears deficient in terms of intuitive fulfillment of the moral-axiological properties which it contains» (p. 140). However, it is not clear why in such cases we do not simply ask: "X is kind, polite, and trustworthy, but is she *really so*?". Staiti seems to suggest that Moorean questions are raisable only when one has not had direct experience of X. But consider that X is a person that you know, and that you can testify her being kind, polite, and trustworthy. It seems perfectly reasonable to ask whether X is good or not, even though you know her directly, and you can testify the actual presence of all the aforementioned properties.

Another possible interpretation of Staiti's reading of the open question argument might rely on something that the author mentions at the very end of the book. The idea is that through a Moorean question we might not be asking whether those specific properties that we merely intend of X are actually realized in X, but rather if a whole "list", or "set" of «moral properties to which we associate a specifically axiological-moral value» are actually and fully realized in X (p. 141). So, by asking "X is kind, polite, and trustworthy,

but is she good?”, we are not asking if she embodies those three properties, but whether she realizes *all* the properties in the list. But if this is the correct interpretation of Staiti’s thesis, it is quite problematic. What is the relationship among the properties of the list? Are they sufficient or necessary for “goodness” (or virtue)? How can we decide which properties belong to the list? How do we know them? Is the list universally shared? If this list is composed of properties that we associate to goodness or virtue, then Moore’s problem arises again – exactly in the same semantic terms – when defining the list: if, when we ask “X is kind, polite, and trustworthy, but is she good?”, we mean “does she really embody what lies in the list?”, then we need a) to define the list, and b) to define the relationship between “good” and the list. Otherwise, we could always ask: “X embodies the whole content of this or that other list... but is she good?”.

Staiti’s attempt to explain Moore’s open question argument from a phenomenological perspective appears at least in need of further development and clarification. Surprisingly, Staiti does not consider the seemingly most convincing naturalistic account that overcomes the problems of a merely semantic analysis such as Moore’s, namely Cornell’s realism strategy to adopt a causal reference theory for moral language (e.g. Brink 2001). Cornell’s realism, of course, is not undisputable (cf. Horgan & Timmons 1991); perhaps, a dialogue between phenomenology and this influential strand of moral naturalism might be the object of fruitful further investigation.

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