

**What Is Reality? Meaning, Sociality,  
and Morals**

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**Abstract:** The paper focuses on the interaction between ethics and ontology, particularly with regard to social ethics and social ontology. By presenting some initial assumptions, which relate to Kant, Popper and Searle (among the others), the paper investigates the topic of reality as a human meaning activity. According to the perspective of social ontology, the paper hypothesises the existence of a set of objects, whose reality depends on a couple of criteria – interaction and sociality. Given these two criteria, the paper analyses the connection between social ontology and ethics, with the aim to show whether morals can be intended as a human production and, therefore, as a moral practice. If this is the case, then ethics has not to do with truth, but with other content: the paper tries to outline a moral criterion based on social utility, according to a specific philosophical tradition that follows Darwin's theories, going from Rée to Dewey's pragmatism. The goal of the paper is to outline the possibility of a new approach to ethics as system of standards of evaluation, passing by a new definition of reality, connecting truth to utility, and considering the role played by social agreement, which renders ethics a matter of standards.

**Key-words:** ethic, social utility, moral practice.

**Qual é a realidade? Significado,  
Socialidade e Moral**

**Resumo:** O artigo aborda a interação entre ética e ontologia, nomeadamente em matéria de ética e ontologia sociais. Ao apresentar alguns pressupostos iniciais, que se relacionam com Kant, Popper e Searle (entre outros), o trabalho investiga o tema da realidade como uma atividade de significado humano. De acordo com a perspectiva da ontologia social, o artigo tem por hipótese a existência de um conjunto de objetos, cuja realidade depende do par de critérios: interação e sociabilidade. Tendo em conta estes dois critérios, o artigo analisa a relação entre ontologia social e ética, com o objetivo de mostrar se a moral pode ser concebida como uma produção humana e, portanto, como uma prática moral. Se este for o caso, então a ética não tem a ver com a verdade, mas com outro conteúdo. O artigo procura delinear um critério moral baseada na utilidade social, de acordo com uma tradição filosófica específica que segue as teorias de Darwin, passando por Rée, até o pragmatismo de Dewey. O objetivo do texto é delinear a possibilidade de uma nova abordagem para a ética como sistema de normas de avaliação, passando por uma nova definição da realidade, conectando verdade a utilidade, e considerando o papel desempenhado pelo acordo social, o que torna a ética uma questão das normas.

**Palavras-chave:** ética, utilidade social, prática moral

### 1. 'The Meaning Instance' and 'The Social Construction'

In order to try to answer this question, it is a preliminary point the definition of humans as 'meaning beings' is a preliminary point. Humans are labellers, definers, symbolisers, interpreters, map designers and creators of worlds. In these specific terms, humans might be intended as gods. Humans describe their surrounding realities, put elements in order, attempt to control and predict their behaviour, assign tasks and functions to other humans and animals, in order to solve several issues, such as: what can I eat? Where can I find drinkable water? Can I trust that person? How can we assign duties to fortify the village? What therapy is more efficient to stop that disease? Which strategy can we adopt to surprise enemies? What school can I choose for my daughter? What bank can I open my account at?

If we want to answer these questions and other infinite demands of life, we have to attribute a meaning to those things first: what a bank and a bank account are, that is what it is possible to do with them. Thus, we get a *first assumption*: humans possess a primary instance, which I call *the meaning instance*, a sort of Kantian faculty of imagination, which is both productive and reproductive (1781, B152). The direct aim of this instance is the organization of sensible materials in constant and consistent forms beyond Kant's thesis, which had been expressed through the

example of cinnabar (1781, A100-1), since constancy is not given by the persistence of the qualities by which an object is present and caught by a sensible intuition; instead, it is caught by the social contamination of sensible and pure intuitions. This implies a *second assumption*: *reality is a social construction*.

Humans set gardens and fields where to sow and plant herbs and trees; they settle farmhouses and fences for animals, which are grouped in herds, selected and classified in tables and taxonomies, in order to distinguish and identify them; they build industries and factories, where precise and ordered production sequences are planned and applied; they measure roads, draw lines, put signals, set driving codes; they regulate communications, professional works, economic transactions; they design geographic maps and mark meridians, parallels, tropics and circles on them; they make navigation and weather charts and draw isobars, isotherms and other lines on them; they build devices that can make them see or hear what cannot be present on a map (telescopes, radars, sonars); they group languages in different categories and assign them to races and territories; they distinguish races and territories; they search for new planets, stars, and forms of life and when they can, they classify, label, measure; they create and use several units of measure, so that everything can be measurable, even poems and songs, by metrics, verses, strophes or duration; they create alphabets, languages, codes and cryptographies; they are obsessed by time measurement: they make numerous tropic, lunar, revolutionary, or Advent calendars; they define solstices and equinoxes; they count the duration of the sidereal year and the duration of the year on other planets; they refer to zodiac,



distinguish seasons, celebrate the new year's day in different dates, acclaim diverse feasts, set months, weeks and days and attribute specific meanings to some of them; they count hours, minutes, and seconds and, sometimes, they fractionate them by multiples or submultiples; they use equivalence classes so that what is measurable can be converted in other unities of measure; they set coins, bills, currencies, and conversion indexes; they invent fairy-tales, myths, and stories to explain what has not a clear meaning yet; they call 'mysteries' what has not any meaning yet; they create institutions, nations, political orders and theories on them; they create religions, philosophies, ideologies, ideas, and values.

### 1.1. The set of real objects: $\mathcal{R}$

All this implies a *first consequence* of my theses: the meaning nature is the tool by which humans make reality that we know and I call it  $\mathcal{R}$ , the *set of real things*, which are meaningful. They are the things that make sense and can be used in any kind of interaction – practical or ideal. I try to better explain what this set is: who is used to natural or country life can easily observe several instances of the making of reality. For example, magpies make their nest by using grass yarns, sticks, and mud. Other species, such as owls, tend not to make a nest, but to exploit clefts and natural shelters or artificial structures. In both case, these birds make their world on account of the material they have found in their environment. It is unlikely that a young Pygmy might want to establish a ski centre in his/her village, as it is unlikely that a young Swiss might want to thank god Kmvum for having made thunders go away.

As Rica made Usbek notice,

*il me semble, Usbek, que nous ne jugeons jamais des choses que par un retour secret que nous faisons sur nous-mêmes. Je ne suis pas surpris que les nègres peignent le diable d'une blancheur éblouissante et leurs dieux noirs comme du charbon; que la Vénus de certains peuples ait des mamelles qui lui pendent jusques aux cuisses; et qu'enfin tous les idolâtres aient représenté leurs dieux avec une figure humaine et leur aient fait part de toutes leurs inclinations. On a dit fort bien que, si les triangles faisaient un dieu, ils lui donneraient trois côtés (MONTESQUIEU, 1721: 126).*

If triangles could make that god, they would not use but the material they have: angles and sides for an amount of three, maybe scalene and bad, or isosceles and vindictive, or equilateral and omniperfect. It is unlikely to think that triangles would make a bearded god – not because of lack of imagination – but because they would also make reality from the surrounding material and nobody has never seen bearded triangles so far.

This is the common element within the whole universe: that everything cannot be but included in it. It is not possible to calculate without having to do with numbers; and it is not possible to talk about the sea without any – direct or indirect – experience of it. Even imagination cannot work but with the surrounding material: a unicorn is a synthesis, by adding a horn to a horse; Pegasus adds wings instead; and Chimaera too is a combination of real animals.

So,  $\mathcal{R}$  is the totality of the world that an individual can know. It is unlikely that a

young Bushman knows a DVD, so s/he will barely interact with it: presumably, s/he will not desire to buy a DVD player or to establish a DVD rental shop in his/her village. In this case, I say that DVDs do not belong to his/her  $\mathcal{R}$ . Nonetheless, DVDs exist for billions of humans, who interact with them in different ways: they buy or rent them, they share or sell them, they watch and discuss them, they try to copy them, some collect them, someone might want to use them as coasters to avoid glasses leave a ring on the table.

All this implies a *second consequence*: infinite  $\mathcal{R}$ s exist. Reality is not only one. Giordano Bruno's hypothesis of infinite worlds was correct, but it had to be shifted to this world, not outside. This means that it is possible to say of anything that it exists just because some people believe it exists. The issue does not necessarily concern Berkeley's idea of the falling tree that makes no noise in absence of eyewitnesses; the fact is that the mere existence of objects that do not belong to anyone's particular  $\mathcal{R}$  does not change the situation: many people happily live with no knowledge of logarithms or square roots and that black hole at several light years of distance from us does not affect our lives somehow – so far.

What makes the difference is the meaning, the sense that we can attribute to something. So, for example, Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is the typical instance of something that begins to exist after deciding the position and name of the books at a library. This has partially to do with Searle's distinction between constitutive and regulative rules. Beyond Searle, the power of beliefs, conventions, habits, and social practices has to be raised to ontological reality. Crusades, witch

hunts, stakes, and the Holocaust are tragic examples of what humans can do on account of their beliefs, which are absolutely independent from any adherence to any kind of truth, since truth is not a requisite for the efficacy of a belief. From this standpoint, we must consider metaphysics and unicorns as true as subatomic particles, Magritte's pipe, Higg's boson, soccer games, the Chinese theatre of shadows, and the Golden Fleece held in Colchis.

## 1.2. World 3 and $\mathcal{R}$ : two conditions for reality

As it is known, Popper stated that all objects belonged to three different worlds. I will not discuss here that particular set that was Popper's World 3. What is interesting to me about it concerns the possibility of interactions with the objects belonging to it; particularly, I wonder whether the reality of the objects of World 3 is given by the mere possibility to interact with them. According to Popper, this seems to be a sufficient reason: «I call it 'real' because it interacts with us and with physical things. Interaction seems to me to be a kind of not perhaps necessary, but *sufficient* criterion of reality» (POPPER, 1994: 17). So, what is *interaction*? If an interaction would suffice to guarantee the reality of an object, then even a schizophrenic person might want to claim that all his mental creations are real, since he can somehow interact with them. Therefore, besides interaction, what makes a difference is the objectivity of knowledge, that is its publicity, its sociality, i.e. the fact that it is shared among the members of a community. At this point, we get to the *necessary* condition for the reality of things: *sociality* – which matches



my second assumption, *reality is a social construction*.

Given the two conditions for the reality of all objects – interaction and sociality – it is true that not all objects have the same value or importance. As Maslow affirmed (1997), there is a pyramid or hierarchy of needs: only after having satisfied the primary (*basic*) needs – water, food, shelter – the individual will try to consolidate them and attempt to satisfy secondary (*metaneeds*) necessities – self-esteem, participation, aesthetic and intellectual potential. On account of this distinction, Ingleheart (1997; 2005) outlined an analysis on ‘material values’ and ‘post-material values’ – then changed into ‘survival values’ and ‘free expression values’.

The proper definition of ‘survival’ is a complex argument itself. We could certainly agree with Debord’s view, that “l’abondance des marchandises, c’est à dire du rapport marchand, ne peut être plus que la survie augmentée” (DEBORD, 1967: 25). The ‘augmented survival’ – which was connected to the double shift from the proletariat to the spectator and from the capital to the spectacle within the neo-Marxist views – can reveal a basic difficulty in defining primary and secondary needs. The new technological devices – computer, smartphone, or tablet – do not directly affect the possibilities of what we were used to define ‘survival’, but they certainly shape the ‘augmented survival.’ Anders wondered who could do without the so called ‘goods of obligation?’

*Diese Rede von ‚musts‘ ist aber vollkommen berechtigt: denn das Fehlen eines einzigen solchen „must“-Geräts bringt die gesamte Lebensapparatur, die durch die anderen Geräte und Produkte*

*festgelegt und gesichert wird, ins Wanken; wer sich die ‚Freiheit‘ herausnimmt, auf eines zu verzichten, der verzichtet damit auf alle und damit auf sein Leben. „Man“ könnte das? Wer ist dieses ‚man‘? (ANDERS, 2002: 2).*

After all, the agreement on what is to be considered as a primary good or need is almost impossible without a previous understanding of what ‘survival’ means. It is not necessary to further analyse the difference between biological necessities – water, food, shelter – and social needs, as Rawls well explained:

*For simplicity, assume that the chief primary goods at the disposition of society are rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth. [...] These are the social primary goods. Other primary goods such as health and vigor, intelligence and imagination, are natural goods (RAWLS, 2009: 62).*

So, at this point we have a distinction between *natural primary goods* and *social primary goods*. I explain the co-existence of them – both necessary for the human survival – through my first two assumptions, *the meaning instance* and *the social construction*. The first assumption allows us to identify what is apt for the sake of survival – drinkable water, edible food, useful or dangerous animals, convenient practices and methodologies for hunting, fighting, building, and so on – while the second one permits us to communicate and share this knowledge, in order to classify it, ameliorate it, and shape more and more complex systems.

This particular process recalls what sociologists use to call ‘socialization.’ Particularly, Annick Percheron – and also

Dubar (1997) – outlines an interesting model, which is an evolution of Piaget's and Durkheim's views:

*Toute socialisation est le résultat de deux processus différents; processus d'assimilation et d'accommodation. Par l'assimilation, le sujet chercherait à modifier son environnement pour le rendre plus conforme à ses désirs [...]; par l'accommodation, au contraire, le sujet tendrait à se modifier pour répondre aux pressions de l'environnement (PERCHERON, 1974:26).*

According to this point of view, both the meaning instance and socialization are slow and long-term processes of construction of symbolic codes, which make interaction with  $\mathcal{R}$ 's elements possible, along pathways that are always new and unpredictable. Each individual “se la compose lentement, en empruntant certaines images aux diverses représentations existantes, mais en les réinterprétant pour en faire un tout original et neuf” (PERCHERON, 1974: 26). It is important to remark that the meaning instance works in parallel with the socialization process and anticipates it, because the individual has to set meanings before sharing and comparing them.

2. Is morals truth or real?

2.1 Morals in  $\mathcal{R}$

All this I presented so far implies a *third consequence: morals is a social practice*, which depends on the above-mentioned ‘meaning instance.’ As hypothesis, we could affirm that the reality that we make is the whole of the answers we offer against the issues that we face everyday: should I offer a ride to that hitcher? What doctor should I go to for my check-up? The weather does not look very promising: should I fetch my

umbrella? Should I share the information about my friend? The combination of all our answers is our reality, our world,

*both the physical and social worlds. In matters of health, animal husbandry, horticulture, carpentry, education of the young, and a host of other practical domains, we regularly figure out what we ought to do based on the facts of the case, and our background understanding. I have a horrendous toothache? I ought to see a dentist. There is a fire on the stove? I ought to throw baking soda on it. The bear is on my path? I ought to walk quietly, humming to myself, in the orthogonal direction. [...] Humans encounter similar problems on a regular basis—in buying a car, designing a dwelling, moving to a new job, selecting whether to opt for an aggressive treatment for metastasized cancer, or hospice care. In any case, that most problem-solving is not deduction is clear. Most practical and social problems are constraint satisfaction problems, and our brains often make good decisions in figuring out some solution. [...] Not necessarily the best solution, but a suitable solution (CHURCHLAND , 2011: 7).*

In these terms, morals works as a language, which is the main tool of the meaning instance: language is the human response to the need for meaning and operates as a problem-solver. So does morals, which is a human code to attribute meaning to the surrounding world and regulate human practices. Therefore, morals belongs to  $\mathcal{R}$ , since it is a human product, just like science theories, religions, political models or art trends.

The belonging to  $\mathcal{R}$  has nothing to do with the content of truth: it just focuses on



meaning. As Dewey stated, «the best definition of truth from the logical standpoint which is known to me is that of Peirce: “The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real” (DEWEY, 1986: 343).

So, morals is certainly real just like the geocentric theory and medieval bloodletting are: all theories, including those ones that we consider unacceptable and with no followers nowadays, have responded – for a shorter or longer time – to the same need for sense and meaning and they worked for some people over time. If the context changes and new elements enter, then a theory can be modified or even discarded. This distinction between meaning and truth conveys the Kantian difference between belief and knowledge, i.e. between reason (*Vernunft*) and intellect (*Verstand*). In similar terms, Hannah Arendt has shown that truth and meaning do not overlap:

The need of reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning. *And truth and meaning are not the same. The basic fallacy, taking precedence over all specific metaphysical fallacies, is to interpret meaning on the model of truth* (ARENDDT, 1981: 15).

Arendt quotes Heidegger in order to remind that often philosophy falls into this metaphysical fallacy: “„Sinn von Sein“ und „Wahrheit des Seins“ sagen das Selbe” (HEIDEGGER, 1998: 19).

## 2.2. Moral truths and social utility

As I wrote so far, the reasons for our beliefs do have not a link to truth; they are practical, social, emotional reasons. The motives for the construction of our beliefs are the same for the construction of reality and they are grounded in a binary system: *social utility* in relation with *individual well-being*.

For the sake of biological and epistemological survival it is not important that a statement is true: what is important is its utility. What is utility? Survival; at all levels – let us remind the distinction between ‘primary needs’ and ‘metaneeds,’ for example. For survival is supported by the belonging to a group, it basically means survival of the group which an individual belongs to. In other terms, this means that utility is always intended to be social utility.

Maybe the first and best work on the relationship between morals and social utility is by Paul Rée and his *Origin of the moral sentiments*, which is a sort of tribute to Darwin’s theory. Nonetheless, the most complete and stimulating analysis on this topic is the one offered by John Dewey. According to Rée and Dewey, Darwin’s theory has produced a main effect on morals: it has brought it back to the field of material conditions and practical existence. As Dewey states,

*physics, chemistry, history, statistics, engineering science, are a part of disciplined moral knowledge so far as they enable us to understand the conditions and agencies through which man lives, and on account of which he forms and executes his plans. Moral science is not something with a separate province. It is physical, biological and historic knowledge placed in a human context where it will illuminate*

*and guide the activities of men*  
(DEWEY, 1983: 204).

And in the last chapter of his 1922 work, Dewey affirms that

*all morality is social; not because we ought to take into account the effect of our acts upon the welfare of others, but because of facts. Others do take account of what we do, and they respond accordingly to our acts. Their responses actually do affect the meaning of what we do. The significance thus contributed is as inevitable as is the effect of interaction with the physical environment. [...] Our conduct is socially conditioned whether we perceive the fact or not. [...] Morals is as much a matter of interaction of a person with his social environment as walking is an interaction of legs with a physical environment. The character of walking depends upon the strength and competency of legs. But it also depends upon whether a man is walking in a bog or on a paved street, upon whether there is a safeguarded path set aside or whether he has to walk amid dangerous vehicles. If the standard of morals is low it is because the education given by the interaction of the individual with his social environment is defective (DEWEY, 1983,:217 ff).*

For morals is dependent upon education, which is dependent on material (physical, social, political, economic) conditions, it is a scientific discipline, such as chemistry or physics, because – just like them – it is the basic tool that humans use in order to describe their world, the interactions occurring in it and to try to regulate them recurring to principles and commandments; the mistake is to take them as elements not belonging to the world they come from and put them in a hypothetical

metaphysical world where they have never been.

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