



INTERVIEW WITH PETER RAILTON

by Lise Storm Karlsen

Peter Railton is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan. Professor Railton's main research has been in ethics and the philosophy of science, with special interest in questions about the nature of norms, values, objectivity, and explanation. He has been a visiting professor at Berkeley and Princeton, and he has received fellowships from the Society for the Humanities (Cornell), the American Council of Learned Societies, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. He is also an Associate of CREA (Ecole Polytechnique), Paris. He has recently published the book *Facts, Values, and Norms: Essays toward a Morality of Consequence* (2003).

Railton visited the Center for the Study of Mind in Nature (CSMN) at the University of Oslo in May 2007. He held a workshop on "Moral realism, irrealism, or anti-realism: Where does the question stand today?" and a lecture on "From Aesthetics to Ethics ... and Back" (in cooperation with Filosofisk Seminar at IFIKK). During his stay Railton found time to do an interview with *Filosofisk Supplement*.

Why ethical realism? Is it to escape moral skepticism, or is the view more of a fundamental intuition?

It is funny, I was always – even before I developed the view philosophically – puzzled by a certain kind of moral skepticism. For example, people might say: "If God does not exist, then morality has no foundation." And I would always think: "Do you mean that if God does not exist, it does not matter to me whether my children suffer or not? Or: "If God does not exist, it does not matter to me whether I find a friend or whether someone else is treated in an unfair

way?" Why would any of that change? None of that would change depending on whether God does exist or not. So, I always thought that ethics are based on just these real facts about our lives.

Whether or not God exists, it is a perfectly good question to ask: "How can things be better or worse?" And it seems that this question is about as factual as the question: "How can we make people healthier?" Or: "How can we make our buildings sturdier?" So, it seems to me that what people often miss when thinking about ethics is that they try to think from the top down. They think: "In order for ethics to be objective, there has to be some kind of a demand that is inescapable – like the 10 Commandments." God can give us a command, and he could punish us. That would make his commandments in some ways inescapable, but it would not make them particularly *ethical* – you would simply have a very powerful boss. Among philosophers, there is a similar idea that somehow you have to show that there is something about rationality that forces us to be moral – that only such necessities could have moral standing.

But I have always thought that the right way to go is from the bottom up. And that is to say, it is not that reason tells us to care about these things – it is that we care about these things and therefore reason is useful in getting us to promote them. To think that reason tells us what to do and that this is why these things matter; is to put things in the wrong order.

In the essay "The Problem of Well-Being", you say that the starting-point for ethics is our well-being. Could you elaborate on that?

Well, the classical utilitarian picture of happiness is one in which the individual could move up progressively in terms of happiness. By gaining more and more opportunities or more and more wealth or more and more friends one would become increasingly happier. The utilitarian project is to raise the *level* of happiness over a life or over a society.

But the question is: does that really correspond to the psychology of happiness? What is puzzling about the psychology of happiness is that people's happiness fluctuates, going up and down, but tends to return to a certain level. A very good event happening to someone causes an upward movement in her happiness, but then that attenuates and she goes back down to her "set level". And similarly, a very bad thing happening, like an accident or a loss in the family, tends to drop one's level below the "set point", but it then tends to return to this set point with the passage of time.

Most of us are therefore under a certain illusion: "If only I could earn 15% more income, I will be happier." Or: "If only I could have 15% more research time I will be happier."

Now, it always seems like, I do not have enough time, and I do not have enough money. But the evidence suggests that if you were to give me 15% more research time or money, that would make me happier for a little while, but then a year later, if you came back, you will find that I again say: “I do not have enough time!” Or: “I do not have enough money! I wish I had a bit more...” The illusion is that one thinks oneself able to overcome a deficit of that kind in a permanent way.

Psychologists give various interpretations of this. One standard reading is that people *habituate* to a certain level, and therefore their expectations are refixed at that level. I myself do not find that entirely plausible as an explanation. For example, if you give someone the information that they are going to get a raise, their happiness goes up *before* they get the money. And indeed, when the money arrives, it does not necessarily change their happiness at all. So, I do not think the main thing is habituating to a way of life. Rather, I think it shows that happiness is an *information-gathering* system. It is a system that gives us a positive reward for acting in ways that satisfy our needs or interests, or meet our goals. And it gives us a kind of negative reward – a kind of sanction – if we act in ways which do not promote those goals, or which do not satisfy our needs.

Think of happiness, then, as a kind of intelligence. What is going on as you go through life and make choices is that you are constantly getting information about whether you are doing better or worse, relative to your needs or goals. And that is translated into this thing called “a sense of well-being”. If happiness is going to work like that, my thought is, it *should* return to a set-point after changes. If a 15% raise made you permanently happier, you would be getting a constant signal that you are doing better and better, whereas in fact you have stopped moving forward or backward. If instead the boost in happiness passes and you return to a set-point, then the signal you would receive would be: “Things are not perfect now – happiness lies in making positive changes.”

If happiness works like that (and there are actually some places in Aristotle, for example, where he seems to anticipate this idea), then utilitarians should not think in terms of “raising the level of social utility”, because once people have reached a moderately comfortable standard of living, their level of happiness stays pretty constant. Rather, utilitarians should focus on creating the conditions for good, transient experiences – that is the way to put more happiness in people’s lives.

The interesting question for me is: what are the conditions for good transient experiences? There is a lot of evidence, for example, that acquiring a skill is a positive experience.

And exercising that skill effectively is also a positive experience. It does not have to be a particular kind of skill. If I am trying to figure out how to repair my plumbing, and I get a manual and study it, and actually figure out how to fix my pipe, that actually is an experience that will make me very happy – even though I am not a pipe-fixer, and even though fixing my plumbing is not going to make me famous or rich. My happiness comes from the experience of learning something, gaining ability, putting it into practice, and having a success. This is a very powerful positive experience. That suggests, among other things, that learning is very important. One mistake we make as a society is that people go to school to learn, and then they go into a job – and then their education is finished in some sense. They may learn what is needed for their jobs, but there is no expectation that they will learn entirely new skills, or be introduced to a new area of inquiry. Rather than worrying about giving people who are already comfortable more income, utilitarians should think about ways society could promote the development of more and more capacities.

What I find especially intriguing is how you take this personal level and transform it to the ethical level.

Well, one of the things that seem to be true about us is that we are very deeply social. Take for example the desire for income. It seems to me that the only explanation that you can give for the fanatical pursuit for income you can observe in a country like the USA – way beyond what anyone actually spends or enjoys – is that they see money as bringing a certain *social standing*. They are doing this not for personal consumption, but to make themselves seem important or successful in life. So, even though they are doing this thing that seems selfish, people obsessed with income are always looking around to see who is getting more and asking: “How can I get ahead of them?”

True, it *is* built into us to be constantly mindful of our social standing. But now ask yourself who you really respect? Are they the ones who are making lots of money? Would your admiration for someone you respect decline if she took a job paying less money? Or would someone you do not respect become respectable by getting a big pay raise? Of course not. So, the pursuit of money is mostly misplacement! What *are* the things that we are most respectful of? If someone is generous, or helpful to others, or loyal to friends, or principled; does this person get your respect? Merely dominating people does not make anyone respect them as a human being. I would like to think the very same motives that get people driving for social position and power could be transformed into more ethical behavior – if only people realized what gains true respect.

When I first read your article on moral realism, I also read about Blackburn's quasi-realism. What makes your thoughts real, and not only "quasi-real", within a practice? I suspect that it has something to do with ethics not being "game-rules", but instead something real within us – real facts about human nature?

Yes, it is within us. It is a fact, not just about us, but about animals too. A quasi-realist is saying something like: "There are certain rules or norms that we follow *as if* they were objective claims or demands." By focusing on norms and rules, this can seem quite credible. There does not seem to be rules "written into nature", but only varying social conventions. Treating such rules objectively begins to look like a kind of pretence or projection.

And I say: okay, that might be right; but needs, unlike rules, *are* in nature. There is nothing quasi-real about pain, or sorrow, or love, or joy. It is not "as if" there were ways of making a world with greater or lesser suffering – this is how things really are. Whatever normative validity rules have comes from those considerations, with no need for pretence. Blackburn thinks of morality as a set of rules and asks: "How could a set of rules ever become factual the way the laws of nature can become factual?" The answer is, it could not be. You cannot violate the laws of nature, but you *can* violate "moral laws". But this seems to me no proof of quasi-realism. Imagine saying: "Laws of nature cannot be violated, but principles of good health can be – so, therefore there is no such thing as a principle of good health. People are not really ever healthy – just 'quasi-healthy'..." But is someone dying of AIDS just "quasi-unhealthy"? And are there no *real* cures, just pretenses of curing?

It seems to me you have much more trust in nature than a lot of other ethical thinkers. Do you really believe that our inner nature can make us ethical, rather than some kind of outside guidance? And if that is true, can it be that all the rules have made it more difficult for us to listen to that nature?

Yes, it is a capacity within us; and you are right, a lot of the *worst* things we have done to each other are the result of social norms and rules. In some religions, for example, if you violate the orthodoxy, you will be punished – even if you have acted on a perfectly normal human impulse and caused no one to suffer. The "keepers of the faith" are *required* by their rules to punish you. So if they are "morally strict", they will do so. In some cases, this has meant war against a whole civilization, just because it does not observe a particular rule of orthodoxy. The resulting conflict may cause an enormous amount of pain and destroy many lives and families, but the orthodox will think: "We *must* pay any price to protect the faith."

What is interesting about humans is how we can generate such ideals, and such demanding rules. But what is dangerous about us is that the ideals and rules can be disconnected from any fact about what will actually make mankind better off. Yet the rules will still be enforced out of a sense of moral obligation.

But is not your naturalistic realism a bit like going from rational beings "back to nature"? It is easy to see this as going "backwards", in a sense...

Yes, that would be a mistake. And it is not as if we would go backwards to nature – we already and always are *part* of nature. We are in a very fortunate situation though, compared to other organisms: to change certain behaviors, they must "wait around" for evolution to produce changes in the genes that govern the behavior. We do not have to wait in that way. We can effect large-scale changes in our behavior through our own choices and the practices we create. "Human nature" is no fixed way of being – instead it is a capacity for self-transformation. The real question is what to do with that capacity?

Then how much of a materialist are you? It seems to me that you find humans to be more than just biology with a bodily well-being/happiness-system.

It is our body and our brain that enable us to think – I am a materialist in that sense. But I do not think materialism implies that consciousness is an illusion or merely epiphenomenal, without a causal role in shaping reality. No doubt we have many misconceptions about consciousness, but it strikes me as very unlikely that it is a mere fifth wheel. A view found among some hard-nosed materialists is that there is a physical level where causation takes place and a mental level which is just a kind of passive reflection. That seems to me to be clearly wrong. I tend to think of the mental as having a functional character: to have a belief is to be in a state likely to expect certain things, infer certain things, interpret experience certain ways, etc.; to have a desire is to be motivated in certain ways, to notice certain things, to be frustrated by certain courses of events and happy with others. Beings on another planet could have just the same mental states, and as a result behave in much the same ways, even though their physical chemistry is very different from our own. The explanation of this similarity would not in the first instance be physical-chemical – it would be mentalistic. Indeed, evolution might have operated on both planets to select for beings with this sort of belief-desire psychology. That, too, is a pattern we cannot best explain by reference to the molecular level alone.

Can you tell me about your view on aesthetics and ethics, and the connections you find between the two areas?

Let us go back to this issue about understanding morality from the bottom up. To me, one of the fascinating things about normativity is how pervasive it is in our lives. There are moral norms, of course, but there are also norms of language and conversation, norms of inquiry, norms of appreciation, and so on. We are constantly operating in a normative environment.

When philosophers think about normativity, however, they often think only of a very few cases – like moral obligation or “rational requirement”. As a result they get a distorted picture of what normativity could be. Take, for example, speaking a language. In order for us to have a common language, we have to be able to share meanings. In order for us to share meanings, each of us has to be disposed to follow certain rules. A language will not exist and have coherent structures unless we follow certain grammatical rules, which lay down norms for how sentences are to be formed and how words are to be used. We will not be able to speak with each other unless we both respect certain norms of conversation, such as sincerity and relevance. Now, if you look at those norms and think to yourself: “OK, who or what force is *policing* these? What makes us *have to* follow them?” Nobody is policing them! We do not need to be forced to follow such norms. We follow them, purely voluntarily, because we seek to express ourselves and to understand one another. This self-imposition is not, so far as I can see, a “requirement” of rationality. Learning and following such rules is “second nature” to us, and we are kept within the domain of these rules by our shared interests.

We are social creatures and we want our lives to have certain meaning. We have a passion for explaining ourselves and others, telling stories, exchanging gossip, thinking aloud together. We do this thanks to our acceptance of an enormous network of norms. We learn these norms quickly – and we can negotiate within them very quickly. We are set up to do this.

To go back to the aesthetic case: aesthetics is another area full of norms, yet almost all are voluntary. I impose a certain discipline upon myself when describing a film, recommending a restaurant, or evaluating an artwork. According to this discipline, I must distinguish between what I happen to like or dislike – matters of mere personal taste – and what I think might be *generally* likeable or disagreeable, interesting or boring, appreciated or disdained – matters of aesthetic value. You impose a similar discipline upon yourself in making your recommendations and evaluations. In this way we can share aesthetic experiences and aesthetic value. It is a

normative thing, but it is not done out of coercion.

When we turn back to morality, you can now say: “Ah! Maybe what morality is partly about is making possible certain kind of lives, or giving certain meanings to our lives? And maybe what pulls us into morality is not just a sense of duty, but a sense of wanting our acts to have a certain meaning, a value others can appreciate and share, rather than merely personal significance?”

It seems to me you are doing to wants and obligations what has been done with facts and values: making them the same?

Yes, that is right, although there is a very distinct kind of want, that involves imposing a discipline upon oneself in order to realize or express this want or concern, which therefore feels like an obligation. So, when kids are learning English, they want to speak like grown-ups, and thus impose upon themselves the discipline of trying to use the words correctly. If they can do this, they can communicate back, and that gives them a new power, a connection with others. They sense they have accomplished something.

When I say “obligation” here, I am talking in the mode of Hume, for example: obligation and interest are not opposites. It is what he calls an “interested obligation”. Even Kant locates the will in what he calls “the faculty of desire according to concepts” – a distinctive kind of interest. He also recognized explicitly in several places that this interest, which draws us into morality, is like nothing so much as the interest that draws us into aesthetics. It is a respect for certain kind of value that we recognize, and cannot help but appreciate and respect. That is how you can go from aesthetics to morality.

You are talking about human development and learning, and you relate that to happiness. What is your view on virtue ethics?

That is a good question. There is a fair amount of evidence that human behavior is very “situational”. That is, whether I am going to behave generously in a given case depends very much on particular features of the situation. Suppose you go to a shopping center and perform this experiment: You have someone carrying a bundle of papers stand near a pay telephone, waiting until a person goes to the pay telephone, and then walking past dropping the bundle. It turns out that if, at the beginning of the experiment, you had put a dime in the coin return slot of the telephone, the person who went to make the phone call and found the dime will help the one who dropped the bundle in about 80% of the cases. If you do not put the dime in the phone slot, it is more like 10%.

You have to ask; “How can finding a dime make the diffe-

rence between doing this generous act of helping someone or not? Are not some people generous and some people not generous?” And the answer seems to be: no, we are all a mix. Some situations bring out the generosity in almost everyone, others bring out the selfishness. I do not believe, as many virtue theorists do, that there are features of character which are the *primary* explanation factor in why people act the way they do. Take something horrible like what happened in Nazi Germany. Was Nazism possible because the majority of Germans at that time had bad character? No, it was because circumstances were created in which perfectly ordinary people were induced into logics of military vengeance and social purification. The same regrettable pattern has been seen many times in many countries. We should think: “That could have been us. In such circumstances, we would probably do something very similar.”

So, I do not think that virtues in the classic sense can be the foundation of morality. But I do think there is something like virtue ethics that *is* of fundamental importance: more attention should be paid in ethics to the question of developing capacities. And that is partly a matter of creating situations, because the capacities are more developed if there are situations in which they are exercised. Aristotle had the view that character is like a muscle, and can be strong only if actually exercised regularly.

We can create a climate which encourages cooperation and contribution, and where these become what Aristotle might call “habits of life”. Or, we can create a climate in which the opposite happens. For example, if you go around and look at graduate programs in philosophy, you will find that there are some programs where the graduate students have their own discussion groups, read each other’s papers, share ideas, or go out after seminars to talk together. And there are other graduate programs in which students do not do this at all—they are very competitive and keep to themselves. I do not think that is because there are virtuous people in one program and non-virtuous people in the other. It is rather that a climate has been created in which the generosity we are all capable of, and the benefits we are capable of sharing with others, are brought out. I think we should pay much more attention to the climate and the habits it creates, and a lot less attention to rules alone.

I would like to ask you before we end the talk: I have a feeling that the work you are doing maybe have some higher end – that you want to contribute to society in some way – maybe contributing to changing a development that is not so good?

Yes, I would like to think that philosophy can make a difference – that one can make a difference as a writer and teacher of ideas. I have this sense that there is a great deal of knowledge which is not widely shared, and which – if it were shared – would actually help change things in a good way. I have tried over time to figure out ways of doing that.

Sometimes this means trying to affect people’s thinking with one’s writing. Sometimes it involves giving public lectures. For example, I gave a public lecture a few months ago on world poverty, and one of the things I argued was that America gives a relatively small percentage of our national income to help reduce world poverty or defeat diseases. A small fraction compared to Norway. And the reason we do not do it, is because we think that it would hurt our standard of living. But if you look at the research on well-being, that is not the case. We could have 5% fewer material goods – as we did, say, 30 years ago – and still lead lives just as satisfying. Moreover, we would feel better; because doing generous things reliably makes people feel better about themselves. We would get out of the defensive mode we now adopt of: “Do not blame me for that! It is not my fault you are poor, so you have no right to my money.” This is *not* a positive emotional state to be in. My pitch in this lecture was: We are failing to notice, because we worry so much about our well-being, how our worrying and defensiveness is obstructing us from doing something that would make us feel better – and would make an awful lot of other people feel better.

I hope that these changes can come about. The generation that is coming up is the first generation in history that really sees the very serious environmental problem we create by the way we live. Without someone pointing a gun at them, they are beginning to make changes in their lives to try to reduce these harms. No previous civilization has ever done that. And yet, I think, it is happening! They are requiring it from themselves. That gives their acts new meaning for them, and gives them a sense of the value of living, of the difference they can make. I am optimistic.

NOTES

1 <http://law.usc.edu/assets/docs/railton.pdf>