

## ■ reviews

JOURNAL OF CATALAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY,  
Issues 7&8, 2014 | Print ISSN 2014-1572 / Online ISSN 2014-1564  
P. 163-166  
<http://revistes.iec.cat/index.php/JOCIH>



scar Horta,

*La filosofía moral de Josep Ferrater Mora*

Documenta Universitària, Girona, 2008

Begoña Román Maestre

University of Barcelona  
broman@ub.edu

A great way to honor Josep Ferrater Mora's work on the centennial of his birth would be to revisit one of the lesser-known and hence less recognized areas of his thought. That's precisely what this book does. Horta's book develops a thorough analysis of Ferrater's moral philosophy, thereby furthering the knowledge and appreciation of his original contributions to the field of applied ethics. The book, then, also serves to acquaint us with some key issues of current moral philosophy.

The book not only explains Ferrater's approaches and propositions, but also places his work within the wider context of his contemporaries (Foot, Anscombe, Harsanyi, Rawls, Singer), explaining the occasional, often unorthodox peculiarities that distinguish his thinking from that of the rest. Moreover, he goes a step beyond merely explaining Ferrater's texts, speculating on the positions Ferrater might have adopted in keeping with his philosophical method (when not ending in uncertainty after an exhaustive analysis of possibilities). At times, Horta even takes issue with a few inconsistencies, inaccuracies or shortcomings in Ferrater's arguments.

The book is thorough and lucid: the author always offers a conceptual analysis of terms, such as "realism", "naturalism", "subjectivism" or "relativism", thereby ensuring that the labels attached to Ferrater's ideas are given the appropriate meaning.

Horta places greater value on philosophy committed to the present, as the essay's three parts each conclude by referring to the fact that Ferrater's philosophy was "realistic", not in the sense of "objectivism", but instead in having its "feet on the ground", in keeping with the problems of the people alive at the time. Ferrater was one of the first thinkers to devote himself to an area such as applied ethics, which was barely recognized academically on the peninsula at that time. In fact, Horta salutes Ferrater's pioneering effort,

acknowledging that it was largely through his dedication to the subject that the discipline earned prestige.

The study is based mainly on two of Ferrater's books on moral philosophy, which the author considers essential: *From Matter to Reason* and *Applied Ethics*. Its structure is divided into three sections: the first is the longest, as it provides the systematic framework that endows the rest with meaning, and deals with meta-ethics; the second is devoted to normative ethics, and the third to applied ethics, particularly the moral consideration of nonhuman animals.

Ferrater's meta-ethical argument centers on the idea that moral acts are real, but not in the Platonic sense of belonging to a separate and independent statute away from the world of facts: moral facts, according to Ferrater's four levels of monistic ontology (physical, organic, social and cultural) are cultural constructions relative to the context in which they are produced. So he proposes an Emergentist monism with moral implications: there is no fixism, no center, no place of privilege reserved for human beings, who construct cultural products as a means for adapting themselves, for satisfying their needs in the best way possible.

Ferrater bases his normative ethics on the Aristotelian theory of action, acknowledging the ends by which things are done. In classifying the ends, he considers three of them to be what he calls "super-sufficient": life, equality, and freedom. But here all resemblance with Aristotle ends, because Ferrater's basis is not metaphysical, but instead is coherent with his four levels of monistic ontology in which he considers the ends to be relative to their historical contexts, they are universally "preferable" for the majority of beings who have interest in how life occurs, but revisable from start to finish. In order to avoid confusion, it's better to refer to them as "interests" instead of "ends" or "preferences".

Horta employs such precision in order to make Ferrater more coherent and demonstrates that there are really only two "super-sufficient" ends, since the interest in equality is in fact secondary. He goes so far as to sustain that Ferrater would have been correct in stating explicitly that interest lies in having positive experiences of pleasure, and dodging the negative, painful ones: this explanation is the vehicle for understanding Ferrater's specific points about life and freedom. These "super-sufficient" interests or ends are minimal and there are a number of different ways to satisfy them. Ferrater's moral philosophy ends up being tolerant, anti-dogmatic and anti-anthropocentric, and for that reason he defends the idea of revisability, or the ongoing critical analysis of social arrangements to avoid the "crystallization of morality". Human nature does not exist; everything is historic, in flux. In the same way that equality is not merely inter-human.

However, Ferrater's normative ethics are not relativistic: duties, obligations, and justifications apply, and not everything goes. Certainly, extrinsic moral categorical imperatives do not exist in any moral epoch: everything proceeds by way of agreements reached between social groups. However, they must be justified once they're established as the most suitable pacts for life. Here, he approaches Rawls's constructivism: the principles of justice are built by contract. But unlike Rawls, they don't issue from ignorance, but from the sharpest understanding of the reality of the moment; it's not a matter of universal justice, but what is validated by a society that has so approved, and furthermore, it always proceeds from the bottom and moves upwards.

Since the group and not the individual decide the concepts of right and wrong, Ferrater's moral philosophy doesn't focus on the personal, but on social and political ethics. It rejects any extrinsic moral, metaphysical or natural objectivism, and it does so counter to any absolutism; humans are physical, organic, social and cultural, and their moral constructions are therefore also social and cultural. That's why moral motivation is rooted in sociobiology, because the phylogenetic evolution of humanity explains why certain preferences are chosen over others.

In the third and final section, Horta takes up the field of applied ethics, to which Ferrater devoted the last twelve years of his life, focusing on the moral consideration of nonhuman animals. Although Ferrater never wrote a book on the subject, it was a central element in his thinking, tied as it is to the rejection of anthropocentrism. Through Horta's pondered reading of Ferrater's two principal books under study, he demonstrates how the philosopher goes too far in linking the question of moral consideration of nonhuman animals, to environmental ethics; both issues clearly divide into separate areas in the *Dictionary*, where the very specific entries could only have come from Ferrater's thinking, given his particular philosophical interests, ("speciesism", "sentient equality", "animal liberation", or the broad concept of differential rights).

An analysis of these entries allows one to see the accuracy of Ferrater's critique of anthropocentrism, where he incorporates it into the context of racism and discusses the rights of non-human animals not as universal rights and objectives, but as being protectors of their own interests, such as the right to live free and in health, in their natural environment. These entries give the best demonstration of how Ferrater's thinking evolved: the paramount interest in living positive experiences of pleasure and avoiding negative ones took the place of a maladroit Leibnizian defense of the pluralistic ontology of biodiversity, or the notion that such biodiversity somehow enriches the human aesthetic. There is no ontological hierarchy between human and nonhuman animals, no moral hierarchy, no substantive difference, beyond merely that of status. No crucial difference exists. Although Horta does challenge and correct

Ferrater by revealing a weakness in his argument, which leans more heavily upon some of P. Cohn's approaches than Ferrater himself admits in *Applied Ethics*, especially when it incurs the logical fallacy of transferring the denial of ontological anthropocentrism to the denial of moral anthropocentrism. Following in Ferrater's footsteps, Horta advocates making a distinction between responsible moral agents (only humans, and not all of them) and individuals who have interests (and therefore rights, and worthy of moral consideration), which defines all human and nonhuman animals (a more universalizing benchmark that also holds greater moral relevance).

*Translation from Catalan by Valerie J. Miles*