

# Introduction to Calderoni's “The Philosophy of Values”

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Born in Ferrara in 1879, Mario Calderoni moved to Florence and got a degree in law from the University of Pisa in 1901 with a thesis on the topic of criminal responsibility and the challenge of scientific positivism. He came under the philosophical influence of Giovanni Vailati, with whom he established a relation of close friendship and collaboration. Between 1903 and 1907 he was, with Papini, Prezzolini and Vailati, one of the promoters of “Leonardo”, the Florentine journal that became the organ of Italian Pragmatism<sup>1</sup>. He had significant contacts with Peirce, James, Brentano, Russell, Croce and Pareto among others and wrote on an amazing variety of subjects: philosophy, psychology, morality, law, politics, and economics. He died regrettably in 1914 at the age of 35. His main writings have been collected and published some years after he passed away<sup>2</sup>, but have never been translated in a foreign language.

In 1904 and 1905 respectively Calderoni published two groundbreaking contributions in “Leonardo”, *Le varietà del Pragmatismo* and *Variazioni sul Pragmatismo*, whose importance lies on his analytical distinction between different kinds of philosophical pragmatism. Prezzolini reacted critically to the first of those contributions, and the exchange they had brought to what was later received as the two Italian pragmatisms: the “logical” and the “magical”. The former, which is usually attributed to Vailati and Calderoni, has been characterized by the quest for methodological rigor and an empiricist theory of meaning inspired by Peirce’s pragmatic maxim. The latter, which is usually credited to Papini and Prezzolini, has been characterized by the enjoyment of methodological eclecticism and an extreme version of James’ voluntarist theory of belief in particular. The differences between the two have often been

<sup>1</sup> See G. Maddalena and G. Tuzet (eds.), *I pragmatisti italiani. Tra alleati e nemici*, Albo Versorio, Milano 2007.

<sup>2</sup> M. Calderoni, *Scritti*, ed. by O. Campa with a preface by G. Papini, 2 vols., La Voce, Firenze 1924.

overstated disregarding what they had in common. Actually they shared the idea of belief as a disposition to act and, more generally speaking, they were equally and deeply interested in the continuity of perception, thought and action. In some sense, the wish to stress the links between cognitive and practical life was what in the very end made those authors pragmatists.

During and after the years of “Leonardo”, Calderoni became more interested in economic and moral issues. His most original and best known work is *Disarmonie economiche e disarmonie morali*, which dates from 1906 and presents a sort of economic genealogy of morality. Calderoni tried to give an economic explanation of (some of) our moral norms and attitudes. The basic idea was that modern economic science – in the wake of Ricardo, Marshall and Pareto among others – gives us a toolbox of analytical and descriptive devices that enable us to explain moral norms and attitudes and allow us to make predictions about human choices and behavior. Calderoni depicted our moral life as a sort of market system with demand and supply that establish the “price” (the value) of certain kinds of behavior. His view was immediately criticized as reductionist by Croce, but for sure it was a challenging and stimulating proposal with some explanatory merits at least. He also worked on the topic of values and devoted his last writing and teaching (as “libero docente” in Bologna and Florence) to the philosophy of values.

The text we present here is one of his last pieces. It was prepared for a conference he held at the Philosophical Library of Florence (on January 1, 1910). It has the virtue of being a synthesis of some of his major themes and ideas. Its general topic is the philosophy or theory of values, but the text begins with some of his classical pragmatist views. In fact Calderoni claims that the modern philosophy of values is different from the previous accounts in two respects in particular: 1) it clearly distinguishes the attitudes of *belief* and *evaluation* and 2) it is framed as a general theory of human choices and preferences. Now, in the first respect the text connects to what Calderoni had to say in the above mentioned critical exchange with Prezzolini about pragmatism. In the second respect, instead, it relates to his reflection on moral and economic issues. In the following we will comment briefly on these two aspects.

The difference between belief and evaluation basically amounts to this: belief concerns the existence or properties of an object, while evaluation concerns our emotional states related to it (like desire, repulsion, love, hate, etc.) or our dispositions to act related to the object. In Calderoni the distinction is traced back to Brentano and gets reinforced by the fact that belief is truth-apt whereas evaluation is not. Very simply put, belief is a cognitive state whereas evaluation is an emotional or practical one. For Calderoni this leads to the (Humean) view that one cannot *logically* derive any evaluation from a set of be-

liefs (or, as Humeans put it, we cannot derive an ought from an is). Any kind of reasoning that has an evaluation as its conclusion, must have some evaluation among its premises. The most observation of facts can offer to practical deliberation is knowledge of the means to achieve the selected ends. This is traced back to Vailati and his view of practical rationality as restricted to the choice of means. (Nowadays this may appear as old-fashioned and perhaps naïve, but I think it is still important and helpful in an age of renescent moral realism).

Obviously, says Calderoni, we may have beliefs about our own evaluations, as we may have beliefs about beliefs (meta-attitudes in general), but that doesn't change evaluations into beliefs. This is granted, I think, but doesn't help Calderoni to solve the problem I see in his picture here. The trouble comes from the very pragmatist conception of belief. Take Peirce's classical account of concepts (and therefore of beliefs involving concepts) in his so-called *pragmatic maxim*:

Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object<sup>3</sup>.

This view was well-known and discussed among Italian pragmatists. The analytical insight of Vailati and Calderoni couldn't neglect that the maxim is susceptible of two interpretations, let's call them *practical* and *observational*. According to the first, the effects or consequences the maxim deals with are practical ones in a strict sense, that is to say, consequences that concern our conduct. According to the second interpretation, instead, the consequences at stake are rather observational, consisting in what we expect to perceive given a certain belief and certain observational conditions<sup>4</sup>. Following the practical reading of the maxim, to have a belief is to have a disposition to act. Following the observational reading, to have a belief is to have an expectation of sensory experiences. Now it is clear not only that the two interpretations are different, but also that the first brings in some trouble for Calderoni's neat distinction of belief and evaluation. Because to act or to have a disposition to act is a practical attitude which seems barred from the purely cognitive account of belief seen above. The trouble is serious if we consider that the idea of belief as a disposition to act has always been one of the main tenets of pragmatism. Actually in the text we present here<sup>5</sup> Calderoni espouses the observational reading of the

<sup>3</sup> This is the 1878 version of the maxim, now in C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, vol. 5, ed. by C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1960: 258, § 402.

<sup>4</sup> See W.V.O. Quine, *The Pragmatists' Place in Empiricism*, in R.J. Mulvaney and P.M. Zeltner (eds.), *Pragmatism. Its Sources and Prospects*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia 1981: 21-39.

<sup>5</sup> And elsewhere: see for instance M. Calderoni, *Scritti*, cit., vol. 1: 250-251.

maxim, which maintains the difference of belief and evaluation and saves him from inconsistency, but at the price of playing down one of the main tenets of pragmatism, namely the link between belief and action.

One of the sources of the confused and confusing view that truth can solve our value disagreements, continues Calderoni, is the double meaning of the word 'law' (scientific and normative); another such source is the Utilitarian chimera of finding out the objective ends of life; and another the Rationalist indistinct hope that reason will discern not only truth from falsehood but also what is good from what is bad. In the end, for Calderoni, if there is an ultimate value *justification* it amounts to what is desirable in itself. It cannot be anything external or factual.

Coming to the second distinguishing aspect of the modern theory of values, Calderoni points out that economic science has become more and more abstract and general. In the end it coincides with a general theory of human choice. But he also notes that in the moral realm we hardly see some relations that are quite visible in the economic world. The monetary prices of goods help us see the variations of human tastes, needs and aspirations. Now, some of the economic laws about prices (not in a normative sense of 'law', of course) mirror some underlying and more general laws about human choices. Among such laws, we count the law of "comparative marginal utility". It states that evaluations are not made in the abstract but always in contexts where given quantities of certain goods are already at our disposal. This explains the well-known paradox of water and diamonds: Why is it the case that diamonds have such a greater price and such a lesser utility than water? Because their utility depends on their quantity (or, better, their marginal value depends on their marginal utility). "What determines the value of water" he wrote "is not the utility of water itself for life, but the utility of a further dose of water added to the supply of water we already have, as well as the sacrifices we would have make to obtain this further dose." Calderoni's challenging proposal, then, is to look at moral choices in the same way we look at economic ones. This follows the path of his 1906 *Disarmonie economiche e disarmonie morali*, being an economic explanation of moral norms and attitudes.

Our moral norms reflect the *comparative marginal desirability* of the acts they are about. Like a diamond, an act that we highly praise is a very scarce resource. Our praise reflects the desirability of an increase in its quantity compared to the opportunity costs (what we must renounce to perform the act). For Calderoni this explains why instinctive acts have so a modest value, although they are necessary to life as water. And it explains why altruism has a great value: it depends on the fact that men are for the most part selfish. If men were like angels, their moral norms would be very different.

In a perspective of philosophical naturalization, this view is still certainly interesting. But it may be criticized as reductionist<sup>6</sup> and might be seen in tension with the first distinguishing aspect of the modern theory of values according to Calderoni: if on the one hand evaluations do not depend neither on beliefs nor on ways the world is, it is puzzling to say on the other hand that moral norms and attitudes depend on the comparative marginal desirability of the relevant acts. Because such marginal values *do depend* on ways the world is. As far as I can see, the only way out of this conundrum is to say that the first claim is *conceptual* and the second *explanatory*. The second claim (about the second distinguishing aspect of the modern theory of values) provides an explanation of our moral norms and attitudes in particular, and does not purport to be a justification of them, nor a conceptual account. Instead, the first claim (on the first distinguishing aspect of the modern theory of values) is about the conceptual reasons that make a theory of values different from a theory of knowledge or belief.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Peirce's anti-reductionist approach as reconstructed in J. Wible, *Complexity in Peirce's Economics and Philosophy. An Exploration of His Critique of Simon Newcomb*, in D. Colander (ed.), *Complexity and the History of Economic Thought*, Routledge, London and New York 2000: 74-103.

