

Begin Where You Are: Self-Knowledge and the Objectivity of Values in Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*

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The Problem:

“To begin where you are” is to be faithful in all theorizing to the constraints of your inescapable starting point. It is to explain - rather than explain away - what is given in your experience. If Taylor’s analysis of value experience is right, value distinctions form part of our starting point for thought. He shows that our best account of self presupposes the objectivity of values.

The problem is that standard naturalist ontology makes no room for objective values. Where we are (in a space of values) and where naturalism places us on the map (in a value-neutral domain) come apart. Naturalism thus leaves a gap between *theoretical* understanding and the *existential* understanding by which we make sense of our experience.

It seems we must either pick between naturalist ontology and value-laden phenomenology...

- Picking naturalist ontology, we fail to leave a place for values in our ontology. But if there is no self without values, then naturalism, by leaving no room for values, leaves no room for selves either...
- Picking phenomenology, we lose any chance of establishing a dialogue between experience (as a domain of values) and natural science (as a value-neutral domain).

Or we had better find a way to reconcile them.

Charles Taylor diagnoses the key problem confronting our current paradigm, but offers no positive solution by way of an alternative ontological account that can ground his analysis of value experience. I draw on Donald Walhout’s “perfectionist” theory of value in order to reconstruct what that solution reconciling naturalist ontology and phenomenology might look like. Walhout’s alternative, first-person naturalist account survives Taylor’s criticism of third-person naturalism.

The solution lies in recognizing that **value** can be analyzed in terms of **function**. Function, as a simultaneously normative and descriptive concept, allows us to bridge between the first- and third-person stances, between the subjective and the objective domains.

Value Objectivism:

- Must show that values exist as properties in the world that can act as objective constraints for our moral judgments.
- Must explain how in value judgments, we are not mere *creators*, but also *discoverers* of objective constraints determining the parameters for appropriate action.

Standard Varieties of Value Objectivism:

- (Third-Person) Naturalist:** values are grounded in contingent psychological facts;
- Non-Naturalist:** values are non-natural properties (e.g. Platonic universals);
- (Nietzschean) Subjectivist:** values are grounded in the will or acts of the subject.

All of these fail to sufficiently account for the ‘discovery’ aspect of value experience, as well as for the objective constraints that we encounter in value judgments. We have an intuitive understanding that we “can get life wrong” that can only be explained if value judgments were more than a matter of subjective creation and projection of values onto a neutral world. It must rather be that we can *fail* to recognize the features of the situation that our lives transpire in.

Donald Walhout’s Proposal: A More Promising Value Objectivism:

- A Version of the “Traditional” Aristotelian View: values are grounded in being. Values are functions. This could be called *a naturalism from the first-person stance* because it characterizes being from the standpoint of experience.

Walhout points out that ethics is necessarily grounded in ontology. It presupposes an affirmative answer to the metaphysical question, “Is being good?”

And if Taylor is right in suggesting that ethics is tied to phenomenology (i.e. to our best account of self) and *vice versa*, then phenomenology also requires that we can give some metaphysical account of how it is that we can predicate value of being.

Walhout’s answer: Being is good insofar as it exhibits functional completeness.

The “Best Account” Principle and the Challenge for Moral Ontology:

Taylor’s “Best Account” (BA) principle states that the concepts without which we cannot make sense of our lives must set our priorities in determining the order of ontological explanation.

The basic *explanandum* for moral ontology is the shape of life as we live it, not some abstract generalization.

The BA principle provides a criterion for evaluating the phenomenological coherence of various proposed ontologies of self and value. (i.e. can they make sense of experience as we cannot help but live it?)

Taylor uses the principle to argue that naturalism fails to secure the value objectivism implied by our best account of self and value experience.

“Selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined.” (Taylor, 2)

Self-Knowledge Involves Value Judgments:

“To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial or secondary.” (Taylor, 28)

To be a self is to affirm a position in what Taylor calls “moral space”.

We give shape to our life stories against a background understanding of where we are, at any given point of our lives, in relation to a “constitutive good,” or some domain of the real that we register as an intrinsic locus of value. These value loci act as the stable reference points which we must reference in characterizing the shape and direction we see our lives taking.

To know who I am is to identify my characteristic orientation to those regions of being that I register as *intrinsically* valuable. I answer the question of who I am in terms of my answer to the question of my fundamental moral orientation to the world. Thus, I explain to you who I am by pointing to the good that I am motivated to pursue. That good that I recognize as binding on me is “what I am all about.” This relation to the good just is the individuating principle of selves.

The fact that identity is “defined” only within a “horizon” within which qualitative distinctions of what ought to be endorsed or opposed suggests that there is an inextricable link between the process of identity-formation and the process of moral judgment.

Because self-knowledge is a process of orientation in relation to being, it is impossible without qualitative distinctions of being. To be a functioning subject is to act on the basis of qualitative distinctions.

The Naturalist Account of the Subject Is Incoherent:

Taylor launches an argument against naturalism based on the best account of our intentional object. Naturalism presupposes that experience could have as its object a bare, neutral datum. Instead, only values can be our intentional objects.

Naturalism, by seeing the self as situated in a value-neutral world, fails to account for the qualitative distinctions that the intentional relation is based on. Because of this, naturalism violates the BA principle.

The self, as conceived by the naturalist, cannot function as a real-world human subject:

“Living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, (such) that stepping outside these limits (as naturalism asks us to do) would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood.” (Taylor, 27)

The naturalist’s notion of self as potentially a “superman of disengaged objectification,” then, is both an unrealizable fiction and incoherent.

Value as Function (Walhout’s Analysis):

Values are properties of relational situations in which two or more entities act to support the fullest functioning of all.

- A **function** is that act through which the being of a thing is most fully realized.
- Qualitative distinctions pick out functions. (Walhout’s function = Taylor’s “constitutive goods.”)
- Our basic concept of value from which all others implicitly derive their content: **value is complete being.**

- Goal of value judgment: to identify the parameters within which the realization of a function can occur in a given relational situation.

- Value judgments arise in a situation of lack: their goal is to direct us to completion. Value judgments are motivated by our deepest need: the sense of incompleteness that arises from our awareness of our finitude. This awareness of incompleteness leads to a desire for realization and completion. *Value judgments relate us to being in such a way that this need for completion is objectively met.*

- We value that which completes our being. Value judgments reveal the real as “that which completes” the self’s characteristic function in a relational situation. This is content that we cannot help but be motivated by.

- Moreover, things can only fulfill needs according to their intrinsic properties. (I’d call this the **NO IMAGINARY LUNCHES** principle of value theory)

- We can explain the objectivity of moral properties as functions: whether a function is realized is a question of fact not contingent on my subjective appraisal of the situation. Thus, I can think that I am moving towards fulfillment *and be wrong* in assessing my own condition.

- An individual being’s function can only be realized in “relational situations” that support its functioning. This refutes individualist/egoist ethics: individual fulfillment presupposes appropriately meshing with others. So in pursuing our own fulfillment, we implicitly recognize the intrinsic value of those beings that support it.

- Value theories (naturalist, subjectivist) that locate all value in subjective states implicitly presuppose this more comprehensive notion of value grounded in being. Conscious enjoyment presupposes the discrimination of a state of being that can fulfill need. Judgment of intrinsic value grounded in being is presupposed by *any* ethical theory, whether it explicitly recognizes this or not.

- A function bridges between the normative and the descriptive. By describing facts about a being’s functioning, we discover the norms by which we can evaluate its *proper* or *maximal* functioning.

- There are non-human goods. Not just humans have functions, and therefore it is not just humans that have norms that determine what it is for them to be fully realized according to their kind. Value terms appropriately apply to *all* beings, sentient or otherwise. Moreover, we cannot consider the value of human goods outside this larger context.

- Thus, “...the response of the whole self to the whole of reality is relevant to every detail and (...) ultimate fulfillment requires such a response.” (Walhout, 234)

Objective Value As the Best Explanation of the Intentional Object:

I’d argue that the beginning of an answer to the metaphysical problem of grounding the predication of value in being lies in the analysis of the intentional relation. Walhout and Taylor each provided pieces to the puzzle. Taylor provided the analysis of value experience, and Walhout showed how Taylor’s value judgments could be grounded in being.

The fundamental property of mentality is intentionality, or *aboutness*. All experiences are directed to objects. Consciousness is in its essence *a tending-to* the real. It is a relational entity.

The object of the intentional relation can never be a value-neutral datum. Our intentional object, if Taylor is right, is always a “constitutive good.” If so, our most contentful concept of the real is a value term. Naturalism ultimately fails because it is based on a false analysis of the intentional relation.

To be a self is to approach reality from the standpoint of value.



Pollination, an example of a relational value situation: both the function of the bee (feeding) and of the sunflower (reproduction) are realized through pollination. Both become more complete “in being” through this act. Photo by Elena Holmgren, 2015.

Key Points:

Third-person naturalism lacks the conceptual resources to situate selves, values, and the intentional relation in the world. We can make more progress in explaining – rather than explaining away – the value terms that form part of our starting point if we seek a naturalism that takes seriously Taylor’s “Best Account” principle, and gives some priority to the claims of the first-person stance. The first-person perspective is a locus in its own right that cannot be reduced to third-person statements of value-neutral facts. Walhout’s Aristotelian concept of function, which straddles the normative and the descriptive, as well as the subjective and the objective domains, can help us explain value non-reductively. It thereby paves the way to a first-person-friendly naturalism.

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