

Value as Optics

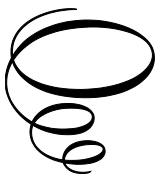
Value as Optics:

*Self, Nature, and God in
Science-Religion Debate*

By

Veenus Joseph

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Ruhhalaya College of Philosophy, Ujjain, India
March 2026

ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Charles Taylor

- SA Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.
- SS Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Works by Merleau-Ponty

- SB Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Structure of Behavior*. Translated by Alden L. Fisher. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2011.
- PP Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A. Landes. London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2012.
- VI Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968.

Works by A. N. Whitehead

- AI Whitehead, Alfred North. *Adventures of Ideas*. New York: The Free Press, 1993.
- CN Whitehead, Alfred North. *The Concept of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964.
- MT Whitehead, Alfred North. *Modes of Thought*. New York: Free Press, 1968.
- PR Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, Edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. New York: Free Press, 1978.
- RM Whitehead, Alfred North. *Religion in the Making*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- SM Whitehead, Alfred North. *Science and the Modern World*. New York: Free Press, 1967.

INTRODUCTION

The November issue of *Time Magazine* 2006 featured a debate over the following question: “We revere faith and scientific progress, hunger for miracles and for MRIs. But are the worldviews compatible?”¹ The provocative title “God vs Science” posed the question as requiring a choice of one or the other, characteristic of popular mainstream writings about science and religion. In fact, it raises a profound philosophical question that seems to lead to a paradox: Is it possible to believe in (religious) transcendence and still depend on human autonomy or rationality? If one believes in both, does this not entail a contradiction? It ultimately comes down to the *choice* of a worldview—a choice *based on value* that simultaneously is a choice of *what to value*, making it synonymous with adopting a *value outlook*. The predicament is that only one of the two options is considered truly rational and scientific, hence, valuable. Furthermore, that choice prides itself on a *value-neutral* rational scientific objectivity (except for the internal values of rationality), which is the hallmark of the modern secular world and pits science and religion against each other.

There is much controversy about the relationship between science and religion. Ian G. Barbour’s four-fold typology—the conflict model, the independence model, the dialogue model and the integration model—summarises the most common analyses of this relationship.² The conflict model highlights the irreconcilability of scientific and religious approaches to reality, and suggests that one can never be simultaneously a real scientist

¹ The debate brought together Oxford evolutionary scientist Richard Dawkins and the genome pioneer Francis Collins. The striking cover illustration for the issue represented the double DNA helix ending in the beads of a rosary, with a crucifix at the end. Cf. David Van Biema, “God Vs. Science,” *Time* November 2006. *Time* ran a similar cover story on October 22, 1965 with three huge red words: “Is God Dead?” On that occasion, the main participants were theologians, and the ‘death of God’ thesis generally failed to convince the public.

² Cf. I. G. Barbour, “Ways of Relating Science and Theology,” in *Physics, Philosophy and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding*, ed. Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger, and George V. Coyne (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, 2000), 21-48.

and a true believer.³ The independence model, of which Stephen Jay Gould is a well-known proponent, holds that there is no real overlap and no fundamental clash between science and religion: “the net, or magisterium, of science covers the empirical realm....The magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value.”⁴ Each forms a magisterium dealing with questions of an entirely different sort, and thus, they rarely or never overlap: the principle of Non-Overlapping Magisteria (NOMA). The dialogue model and the integration model then propose different solutions. As Barbour outlines, different dialogue models focus either on boundary questions or methodological parallels, whereas integration models aim at either doctrinal reformulation, often with a ‘science-first view,’ or a systematic synthesis at a metaphysical level.⁵

For at least some time, the most acceptable position was that science and religion represent opposite approaches to reality and entail opposed attitudes. Science does not deal with values in any way, understood either as the meaning or worth of reality itself or as particular formulations of that meaning; it involves a purely objective stance, whereas religion has to do with value and meaning. (In modernity, we are accustomed to calling religions ‘systems of meaning’). Similarly, modern science is based on objectification, disenchantment and disengagement, whereas religion is based on enchantment and engagement. The philosophical outlook that underpins modern science conceives of nature as pure matter, “mass”, as Newton calls it, lifeless stuff manipulated or pushed around by external forces. Nature is thus “meaningless, senseless, [and] purposeless” (SM 17).⁶ This concept of nature accords very well with much of modern philosophy, in which value is regarded as subject-dependent, as a human creation. Nature as such can be given to our understanding in purely objective terms, in ‘models’ and ‘representations’, or in ‘images’, which only show extension and specific other descriptive characteristics. Meaning, or nature as a meaningful whole, does not appear in this framework. Such ideas seem to be ‘added’ by the subject.

Philosophically, this understanding was articulated and discussed as the fact/value distinction. It received heightened attention first as a

³ See, for example, John Worrall, “Science Discredits Religion,” in *Contemporary Debates in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. Vanarragon (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 59-72.

⁴ Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (London: Vintage, 2002), 6.

⁵ Barbour, “Ways of Relating Science and Theology,” 33-45.

⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1967). Hereafter SM.

semantic problem within logical positivism and then was exalted as the default starting position of all enquiries concerning the relation between science on the one hand and ethics and religion on the other; without doubt, marking the culmination of the epistemological turn of modern philosophy from Descartes and Hume to Kant. This distinction began to wane in the 20th century as the scientific theories of relativity and quantum mechanics pointed out that “‘facts’ suffer from many of the foibles once attributed only to ‘values.’”⁷ Of course, philosophers like Hilary Putnam (1926-2016) objected to the fact/value distinction as a false dichotomy and agreed with John Dewey (1859-1952) that “there can be responsible inquiry into value questions...without being a reversion to fundamentalism or a reversion to *a priori* philosophy.”⁸ However, what necessitates this book is neither the fact/value dichotomy nor its rejection but the claim of new atheists like Sam Harris that science can determine human values on its own. It is typical of modern critics of religion that they not only attack the ‘meaning giving mechanism,’ or the moral influence of religion—‘moral’ in the most general sense – but also claim that this mechanism is part of the domain of science.⁹ The question of value is the principal focus of tension between science and religion, as well as overlap, where an objective mutual relation could be sought.

We indeed live in an age where more than one cosmology is in play: Platonic, Aristotelian, Galileo-Cartesian, and those that build on the different positive values of these traditions. Despite this, both in academia and the public sphere, “silence about God is the norm.”¹⁰ And, as Charles Taylor argues, laws or norms are inadequate unless an ethos supports them.¹¹ As William Desmond suggests, it may be true that we live in an age of ‘default atheism,’ a taken-for-granted foundation upon which all

⁷ Robert N. Proctor, *Value-Free Science? Purity and Power in Modern Knowledge* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), ix.

⁸ Phillip McReynolds, *The American Philosopher: Interviews on the Meaning of Life and Truth* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 56.

⁹ See for example Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006); J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977). We will look briefly into their arguments in the first chapter.

¹⁰ William Desmond, *God and the Between* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 1.

¹¹ Cf. Charles Taylor, “Philosophical Reflections on Caring Practices,” in *The Crisis of Care: Affirming and Restoring Caring Practices in the Helping Professions*, ed. Patricia Benner and Susan S. Phillips (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 179.

intellectual and existential positions are developed and to which they return. Beyond the simple negation of theism, this atheism is a ground upon which we are urged to undertake a wholesale reconstruction of our way of life.¹² It is often the logic of this situation that compels positions or predicaments such as that mentioned in the introductory paragraph, a predicament whose basic assumptions are not well examined.

The dialogue between science and religion is thus made almost impossible, not so much by their conflicting assertions but rather by their very background. Doubtless, modernity has “transformed the relation between the cosmos, its transcendent source, and its human interpreter.”¹³ As Charles Taylor describes it, modern secularity is “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace” (SA 3).¹⁴ This book argues that this move, one of the most dramatic in the recorded history of humanity, is chiefly anchored in the category of value, in addition to many other reasons: in the denial of value as a background frame of theoretical thinking; in its expulsion as part of scientific thinking about existence, experience, reason, knowledge, truth, and beauty; and, most notably, in its impoverished construal. In other words, the troubled place of the category of value forms the most crucial “condition of belief” (SA 3) which transforms religious belief into “an embattled option” (SA 3), and perhaps, even a non-rational one.

The contemporary moral landscape, where a schism between science and religion is advocated by militant atheism, especially by new atheist writers, forms the context against which this book is conceived. Are religion and science doomed to remain in opposition? How can the

¹² Cf. William Desmond, 2017. “The 2017 Thomas Lecture on Philosophy and Theology: The Idiocy of Being in Aquinas’ Third Way,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7sJswuzO2g&t=4s> (accessed on 26/04/2020).

¹³ Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 249.

¹⁴ Charles Taylor distinguishes three different understandings of secularity: the first understanding refers to the emptying out of different social/public spheres (economic, political, cultural, and educational) of any reference to God or religious beliefs (separation of Church and State). The second understanding refers to the decline of religious beliefs and practices. The first doesn’t necessarily lead to the second, and according to him, the third understanding of secularism, as we have stated in the text, is its most comprehensive understanding. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3. Hereafter SA. Also see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 309. Hereafter SS.

links between them be thought? Under what conditions is a dialogue possible? This book addresses these three overarching questions and starts from the hypothesis that the key to such a dialogue is the status of value in different respects: value in relation to the human self, in relation to nature, and in relation to God. Reconsidering nature as well as God is necessary for a dialogue to be possible. This does not, however, overcome all obstacles. As Charles Taylor points out, a certain ethics of disengagement is operative at the core of the attitude typical of modernity.¹⁵ In order for a dialogue between science and religion to take place, this ethics of disengagement must also be evaluated. If disengagement is the *only* valuable stance, then a dialogue with religion is suspect from the very beginning. The role of value in the dialogue between science and religion is a question of value in relation to the self as much as in relation to nature and to God. Such a comprehensive approach will open a new avenue for dialogue and integration.

The book mainly focuses on the works of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1931-), the French phenomenologist Maurice Jean Jacques Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), and the British-American mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947). It might seem odd to bring together authors from different philosophical thought and method strands. Considering these authors in relation to value, the central concept of this book, will not only help clarify this decision but also throw light on the structure of the book as a whole.

Scientism,¹⁶ Taylor holds, is the view of a self-defining subject who

“[...] would *experience none of his possible objects of awareness—not the human world or even his own body—as necessary reference points for his definition of himself or as indispensable interlocutors*, but only as the phenomena of a neutral science of nature, some of which might be of use in the furtherance of his purposes.”¹⁷

¹⁵ This is generally true despite the typically modern calls for intensifying engagement in Marxism, fascism, utilitarianism, veganism, anti-racism, etc.

¹⁶ Science refers both to a body of knowledge and a method. We are concerned with the latter, and define scientism as the belief that the method of science applies to all forms of knowledge; it is itself not a finding of science but a worldview.

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, “Peaceful Coexistence in Psychology,” in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 135. Emphasis added.

Destroying the myth of scientism, then, involves a re-examination of experience in relation to the possible objects of one's awareness: one's self, one's body, one's human world—including the idea of God, and nature as one encounters it. Taylor's whole career, from *The Explanation of Behaviour*¹⁸ to *Sources of the Self*, and beyond to *A Secular Age*, can be seen as an attempt to retrieve these *necessary reference points* of the self.

Charles Taylor is the key interlocutor for us as he has conducted a thorough diagnosis of the modern concept of the self, anchoring himself in the phenomenology of modern (Western) moral experience, taking seriously the complexities involved, without offering either a wholesale rejection or a simple-minded endorsement of this concept. It might be argued that in the conflict between science and religion one is free to hold on to either one or both based on one's personal preferences. However, this does not justify a relativist conclusion. The proper position is to refrain from an *a priori* judgement about the resolvability or irresolvability of the conflict, or even about the need for a solution, and thoroughly examine the different goods we adhere to.

It is some felt incompatibility at the deeper moral level that motivates the view that science and religion are necessarily at loggerheads: As Taylor writes, “the obstacles to belief are primarily moral and spiritual, rather than epistemic.”¹⁹ Taylor surprises both critics and defenders of modernity with his analysis of human existence through a combination of analytic and continental philosophy, and from various vantage points: science, politics, theories of language, modernity, multiculturalism, art, and religion. This book draws on and builds on Taylor's profound analysis of the *necessary reference points* mentioned above: while it is sufficient to draw on Taylor's analysis of the self, society and God, it is essential to build on or rather deepen them from the perspective of the body and nature. However, we choose an ‘inner route’ for this latter task, focusing specifically on the work of Merleau-Ponty, whom Taylor himself admits as his entry point into phenomenology.²⁰ Beyond the substantial similarity

¹⁸ Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).

¹⁹ Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?,” in *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*, ed. S. M. James L. Heft (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 25.

²⁰ Michael Rosen and Charles Taylor, “Charles Taylor: A Conversation with Michael Rosen - October 25, 2018”, Harvard University Edmond J. Safra Centre for Ethics <https://youtu.be/WadtRrja2Lo> (accessed on 23/11/2019). Although Taylor draws on and mentions Heidegger in several places, he admits that his interest in phenomenology started when he read Merleau-Ponty and spread all the way to Husserl and even to Hegel. This influence came also via the works of

in their attack of behaviourism, in Taylor's *Explanation of Behaviour* and Merleau-Ponty's *Structure of Behaviour*²¹, their projects are anchored in a common philosophical principle, best formulated by Merleau-Ponty: "we are in the world, we are *condemned to sense*."²² Nicholas H. Smith has identified this as the germinating vision behind Taylor's project: we are condemned to sense at various levels, and a philosopher's task is to distinguish these inescapable layers of meaning, starting from the rudimentary level of perception.²³ Furthermore, the study of subject-object relations, crucial to value theory, is central to phenomenology.

Our turn to Merleau-Ponty is also justified from another perspective: Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, his *magnum opus*, though little discussed within analytic philosophy, is today unrivalled among phenomenological texts of the twentieth-century in its relevance to and utilisation by modern theories of perception and mind, not to mention the renewed attention it receives from cognitive scientists. Taylor's appropriation of Merleau-Ponty deserves more in-depth analysis as he represents an intersection of these interests and approaches. In particular, this requires a profound reading of Merleau-Ponty's doctrine of perception as the primary locus of meaning, but, in general, it demands a vision of his understanding of body, and nature as a whole, in which the different layers of meaning are conjoined. In this general demand, not only ours but Merleau-Ponty's own, we encounter Whitehead. In his first course on the concept of nature at Collège de France (1956-1957), after

Hubert L. Dreyfus. Taylor also acknowledges the particular influence of Samuel Todes's work *Body and World*, which develops Merleau-Ponty's approach. Cf. Charles Taylor, "Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture," in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 46; Hubert L. Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), *passim*.

²¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans., Alden L. Fisher (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2011). Hereafter SB.

²² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans., Donald A. Landes (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), lxxxiv. Hereafter PP.

²³ Cf. Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 1-2. Smith uses Colin Smith's translation of *Phenomenology of Perception* which translates *sens* as meaning. Moreover, the use of the word 'significance' is justifiable as Taylor prefers to translate the German word *Sinn* as 'significance' rather than 'meaning' to avoid the confusion of being always related to the mental. Cf. Charles Taylor and A. J. Ayer, "Phenomenology and Linguistic Analysis," *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volumes* 33, no. 1 (1959): 93-94.

critiquing classical physics in the light of modern physics, Merleau-Ponty turns to Whitehead for a new vision of nature: “We will ask it of Whitehead,”²⁴ he writes. The idea of nature in Whitehead was the focus of the concluding session of Merleau-Ponty’s first course. Beyond this specific link, their work converges in critiquing the *lacunae* of the modern concept of nature and attempting an alternative.²⁵ Merleau-Ponty and Whitehead aim to better inhabit the world, embracing its richness beyond epistemic or physicalist reductionism. Both Merleau-Ponty and Whitehead, I believe, engage in the same struggle to retrieve “a kind of perception which has been neglected by the philosophic tradition.”²⁶ Whitehead’s conceptual framework can be used to understand better the emergence of meaning within the body schema that operates as a non-conceptual frame of reference. Such an ontological frame hints at the historical and transcendental bulwarks of belief that Taylor suggests we unravel.²⁷

Our turn to Whitehead is also necessitated from another perspective. Over and above the cultural-historical reasons, the removal of the category of value from rational scientific thinking is the result of a perversion of the otherwise well-justified Western emphasis on logos and logic: the rise of a new epistemology and a corresponding ontology that gave birth to a new axiology during the last five centuries of human existence. I have in mind the rise of the Lockean-Humean epistemology, which ousted all values from scientific or “real” knowledge discourse and relegated them to the status of mere secondary qualities. This requires a thorough analysis of scientific materialism from a scientific and philosophical perspective: Whitehead, the scientist-philosopher, is thus a perfect foil. However, as we proceed, it will become evident that a more comprehensive approach than that of Taylor and Merleau-Ponty is needed to provide a holistic theory of value.

²⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, ed. Anthony J. Steinbock, trans., Robert Vallier (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 112.

²⁵ Though a metaphysician, Whitehead clearly has a concern for the concrete and Merleau-Ponty, despite his phenomenological method, harbours an interest for the metaphysical (at least in his later thought). We will come back to this in the third chapter.

²⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 142. Hereafter PR. It is interesting that “retrieval” is a major theme in Charles Taylor’s project too. We will return to this in the second chapter on the self.

²⁷ Bulwark, for Taylor, suggests more than mere theory; it is almost a synonym for practical lived experience (SA 25-89).

The book is divided into three broad sections (Self and Value, Nature and Value, God and Value) with a prologue.

The first chapter introduces the notion of value and situates it in relation to three broad approaches to it: theism, naturalism, and (exclusive) humanism. In brief, it presents the evolutionary history of the theory of value culminating in the contemporary naturalist (new) atheist take on it.

The second chapter, resting on the shoulders of Taylor, undertakes a critical enquiry into *the modern notion of identity as devoid of any necessary reference points*. We examine the Taylorian claim that naturalism, the primary breeding ground for the antagonism between science and religion, rests not so much on the cogency of scientific or epistemic claims as on an image of disengaged moral agency. After attempting a non-debunking genealogy of modern identity, we move to Taylor's efforts at reconstruction, especially his presentation of man as self-interpreting language animal and the doctrine of strong evaluation.

The third chapter examines how the body becomes a necessary reference point for the self. Relying heavily on Merleau-Ponty, we establish that "the subject of perception is never an absolute subjectivity" (PP 249), nor is the body an absolute object explicable in a reductive mathematical rendering. By closely following Merleau-Ponty in his analysis of the body-subject, we investigate how the body becomes an interlocutor and a locus of meaning for man in his personal and social existence.

The fourth chapter examines how nature becomes a necessary interlocutor or reference point concerning value and meaning. Self and body are approached from a more inclusive whole, i.e., nature. Here, I thoroughly analyse the origin and evolution of the mechanistic concept of nature and delineate an alternative concept of nature, focusing mainly on Whitehead. Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty converge here in their search for a concept of nature outside the dualistic framework and consonant with modern science.

The discussion moves to the fifth chapter, where I present a metaphysical synthesis of value and existence. Whitehead's cosmological schema provides new categories which enable a re-thinking of subjects (consciousness) and objects (nature) in an engaged, chiasmic (dipolar), and inter-connected manner in which values, life, and mechanism, all become interpretable as structural features of one unified whole.

The sixth chapter, then, examines how God becomes a necessary reference point for the self. Based mainly on the Taylorian deconstruction of the death of God account, I present the general scenario of disbelief in transcendence that is characteristic of our age, point to the diverse routes

of its genesis, and then point out the ‘transcendental’ routes of transcendence offered by Whitehead, Merleau-Ponty, and Taylor.

The final chapter then synthesises the insights gained from our analysis of the modern self, the concept of body, nature, and the possible reasons for the eclipse of transcendence. Dissolving the myth of the disengaged view of the self, this chapter offers several helpful intersections between Taylor, Merleau-Ponty, and Whitehead that offer a theory of value, meaning and morals for a scientific age.

The book neither attempts to analyse and answer all the questions that atheism puts forward nor to settle all concrete issues regarding science and religion. It largely sets aside the many discussions about the historical reasons for the emphasis on science as value-free, such as fear of religious suppression, politicisation of science, or economic and industrial exploitation.²⁸ However, even though the surface-level applications of science get entangled with these forms of power, their deeper roots must be encouraged to develop and be free from distortion by values—especially in the sense of retaining neutrality and impartiality in research. It is not my concern here to discuss the legacy of neutrality in science or to point to ethical issues connected to the specific or general application of technologies. Moreover, since it is not intended as a work in the philosophy of science, I refer only to the most general notions of physics, biology, or psychology and refrain from details that are both unwarranted and beyond my capacities.

I believe that cross-fertilisation should not be sacrificed at the altar of overspecialisation. Therefore, this is not intended to be a study on Taylor, Merleau-Ponty, or Whitehead *per se*. These authors represent three different methodological approaches to value and meaning. Neither is it an archaeological study in the sense of trying to find places where each author has influenced the other; instead, it aims to bring together some vital elements from each to form a comprehensive position concerning value and meaning. What is common to all three is that they develop philosophical critiques of the scientific paradigm, though not based on precisely the same concerns, making bringing them together worthwhile.

²⁸ Proctor, *Value-Free Science? Purity and Power in Modern Knowledge*, ix.

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1

THE ORIGIN (AND EVOLUTION) OF VALUE SPECIES

Our first and fundamental task is to define value. It is, admittedly, a difficult task—if not impossible—due to the varied use of the notion of value across different disciplines such as sociology, economics, politics, art, philosophy, and religion. Hence, our aim here is neither a fine-grained definition of value nor an exhaustive exposition of the concept's history; instead, this chapter's scope is limited to exploring how the concept came to be a prime locus of antagonism between science and religion.

1. Value Theory: Meaning and Legacy

There is no universally valid characterisation of the concept of value, but we can provisionally define it as the “[r]elative level of worth, goodness, significance, or utility possessed by an entity, attribute or event; or an intangible quality or attribute that has intrinsic worth in itself.”¹ Etymologically, the term means the worth of something (objects, feelings, actions, etc.) or someone and, as a concept, it can be viewed as “a theoretical abstraction from daily living practice.”² Its meaning varies from ‘use value’ derived from economic relationships between men and things to more general social, political, ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual values arising from complex relations. The category of value, therefore, encompasses all questions of worth regarding existence. And, as Whitehead points out, “the notion of worth is not to be construed in a purely eulogistic sense. It is the sense of existence for its own sake, of

¹ Robert Halliday, “Value,” in *Ethics*, ed. John K. Roth (Pasadena: Salem Press, 2005), 1535.

² Deshun Li, *Value Theory: A Research into Subjectivity* (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2014), 2.

existence which is its own justification, of existence with its own character.”³

In the modern period, though the first sustained use of the term was in economics, value later received broader philosophical consideration in Rudolf Hermann Lotze and Friedrich Nietzsche. A general conception of the theory of value began to develop in the 1890s through the works of Alexius Meinong and Christian von Ehrenfels. Their primary motivation was to deal systematically with a family of questions which philosophers since Plato had addressed under headings such as the good, the end, the right, obligation, virtue, moral judgement, aesthetic judgement, the beautiful, truth, and validity. Furthermore, the notion of value gradually began to be discussed in contexts other than ethics. It slowly filtered into different disciplines, such as epistemology, philosophy of religion, science, politics, and cultural studies.⁴ Today, within philosophical ethics, value theory branches out into metaethics and normative ethics and is associated with consequentialist (most notably classical utilitarianism) and non-consequentialist moral theories alike.⁵

Though the concept of value as such is of relatively modern origin, the quest for a theory of value traces its roots to the ancients. The great masters Plato and Aristotle, for example, have often been discussed in terms of their contrasting views on value. A famous dictum from Samuel Taylor Coleridge expresses well the persistent dichotomy concerning value they inaugurated: “Every man capable of philosophy at all...is a born Platonist or a born Aristotelian.”⁶ While Plato envisaged eternal archetypes, the world of ideas, as the source of all goodness and value, Aristotle rejected any notion of a universal Good as an abstract, uniform and absolute ideal and instead regarded value as inherent in reality. Though most evident in philosophical discussions of value, this dichotomy is fundamentally anchored in distinct metaphysical theories, in the enduring tension between different worldviews.

³ Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 109. Hereafter MT.

⁴ Iwao Hirose, “Oxford Handbook of Value Theory,” (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1-4.

⁵ The discussion develops from good and evil to rightness and wrongness, from intrinsic or ultimate value to instrumental or non-ultimate extrinsic value. The famous *Euthyphro* question regarding the connection between value and desire—whether things are good because we desire them or we desire things because they are good—opens a further large domain of enquiry under the headings of axiological idealism and realism.

⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Professor Shedd, vol. v (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1971), 37.

Each age has favoured a particular way of thinking about value; the immanent revolt within man for better understanding explains and ensures shifts from one theory of value to another over time. However, the tension is ultimately not merely between Platonic and Aristotelian approaches; there are, after all, Platonic elements in Aristotle and Aristotelian elements in Plato. As Whitney J. Oates puts it, the underlying problem is how to think being and value together.⁷ How can we avoid falling prey to any form of reductionism—rationalism or empiricism—and come to terms with what is and what we experience as value and valuation?

When approached from the viewpoint of a dialogue between science and religion, the key divergent positions in the tradition of human investigation into being and value can be categorised under three broad headings: theism, naturalism, and humanism.⁸ Each represents a different approach to value theory and a conflict between science and religion can emerge in each of them. In what follows, we will outline the theories of value that arose at different periods in human history and highlight the shifts that contributed to the development of religion and science as they are today.

1.1. Theism

Theism forms the first answer to the questions about value that man raised regarding his surroundings, himself and others. All of the great religions of the world, polytheistic (pagan beliefs of ancient Greece, or in the East, Hinduism) and monotheistic (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), reflect a sustained effort at resolving the problem of being and value. In theism, everything is either good or bad, and everything has value in relation to God, the ultimate reality. Monotheistic religions, in general, and Christianity, in particular, understand value with reference to a source beyond natural and human control. Plato also invested all value in the world of ideas and claimed that everything received value in relation to this ideal realm. For him, the Good is the source of the existence of forms – source, however, did not mean originator but rather that upon which everything depended. The Good, then, in Plato, is the source of order both

⁷ Cf. Whitney J. Oates, “Being and Value,” in *Symbols and Society: Fourteenth Symposium of the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion*, ed. Lyman Bryson et al. (New York: Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life, 1955), 455-456.

⁸ Cf. Oates, “Being and Value,” 458-460. In this article Whitney uses the compound being—and—value to designate the attempt to think together being and value without separating them.

in the cosmological realm (as rational order) and in morality (as the principle that everything strives for).

A combination of Platonic and Christian conceptions of the origin of goodness and value in a transcendent realm of superior being reigned supreme for centuries. However, the concept of value varied according to different accounts of creation.⁹ Theist *ex nihilo* views of creation consider nature inherently valuable because it is the result of God's free, creative act, yet is distinct from God in its finiteness. In a dualistic worldview where creation is seen as *ex materia*, as the ordering of pre-existent and recalcitrant matter, all value is derived from God through the *Logos*, leaving the material devoid of inherent value. Pantheistic views, along Stoic and Neo-Platonic lines, see creation as an emanation *ex deo* and thereby regard all value as deriving from God and evil as an inherent necessity of finiteness.

The rise of mechanistic science suggested a radical departure from the theistic conception of being and value. Though Newton's works fully established mechanistic science, he himself understood value with reference to God. Descartes, one of the precursors of mechanistic thinking, was well aware of its intricacies and challenges to a theistic understanding of value. Mechanistic science also challenges the understanding of the human soul, freedom, God's nature, and God's relation to the world. Maintaining a substance dualism that entails qualitative dualism regarding mental and bodily attributes, Descartes linked the acquisition of value to mental activity.¹⁰ But above all, for Descartes, the ultimate value of a thing depends solely on God's concurrence.¹¹

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when theistic claims about supernatural revelation were challenged, efforts were made to

⁹ Arthur F. Holmes, *Fact, Value, and God* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 39-40.

¹⁰ The precise relation between clear and distinct ideas on the one hand and values on the other is not clear in Descartes, mainly because Descartes himself did not manage to apply his epistemology to ethical problems (even though he promised to do so in his *Discourse on Method*). He did, however, distinguish clear and distinct ideas from the 'confused and obscure' thoughts which belong in the realm of passions. It is the rational mastery of emotions that leads to moral development. Cf. Supakwadee Amatayakul, "Overcoming Emotions, Conquering Fate: Reflections on Descartes' Ethics," *Diogenes* 60, no. 1 (2013).

¹¹ Descartes speaks of God as the only substance which can be understood as not depending on any other thing for its existence and goes on to say that "all others can exist only with the aid of God's participation." Cf. René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* trans., Valentine Rodger Miller and Reese P. Miller (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1982), Part I, §51.

use reason to find a source for the value and order in the world. As a result, some notable attempts were made to integrate natural philosophy (science) and Christian supernaturalism. Notwithstanding attempts otherwise, many, including Francis Bacon, Robert Boyle, and John Locke, all naturalists to the core, expressed confidence in a single body of thought that catered to a practice of Christian virtuosity.¹² One such attempt is found in Robert Boyle's analogy of a clockwork universe created by God in his *Christian Virtuoso* (1690). Neither Francis Bacon, who came before Boyle, nor John Locke, who came after him, found it challenging to present naturalism in a theological context.¹³

Deism, one of the prominent positions in 18th-century philosophy, sought to trace the origin of values back to a supernatural reality that created everything as a perfect machine and left it to run on its own. Deists argued that knowledge based on revelation has to be rejected so that reason alone can direct us to the ultimate creative intelligence of God, setting him as the ultimate cause of the quantitative and qualitative arrangements of the world. Values pertaining to human life and action rest on the divine will. This *voluntarist* account sought to combine being and value by asserting that a Divine Creator, in his omnipotence and at his own pleasure, creates different aspects of nature—with each having a unique gradation of value—and, then, by an equally free decision, determines what is good and evil.¹⁴

David Hume famously attacks both the rational and the revelational foundations of such religious pronouncements about being and value.¹⁵ He challenges the rational grounds of such claims, attacking

¹² Cf. Victor Nuovo, *John Locke: The Philosopher as Christian Virtuoso* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹³ Bacon considered the investigation of nature as the study of the works of God. John Locke, for example, while talking about the production of the ideas of secondary qualities, writes: "It being no more impossible, to conceive, that God should annex such *Ideas* to such Motions, with which they have no similiture; than that he should annex the *Idea* of Pain to the motion of a piece of Steel dividing our Flesh, with which that *Idea* hath no resemblance." John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Harold Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), II.viii.13. However, the basic incompatibility between Democritean naturalism (or its Epicurean successor) and Christian supernaturalism remains unsettled through the centuries and serves as fertile soil for (scientific) atheism.

¹⁴ Cf. David Fate Norton, "Hume, Human Nature, and the Foundations of Morality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 152.

¹⁵ For Hume's rejection of the *a priori* arguments see his *Treatise*, the first *Enquiry* and Part 9 of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. He examines the *a*

both *a priori* arguments (ontological arguments) and *a posteriori* arguments (cosmological and design arguments), primarily by challenging the claim that the order in nature *needs* any explanation. He postulates that an intelligent agent (in this case, God) does not add anything at all to the explanation of natural phenomena. He asks: “why not stop at the material world?” Hume reasons that “[i]f the material world rests upon a similar ideal world, this ideal world must rest upon some other; and so on, without end. It were better, therefore, never to look beyond the present material world.”¹⁶ Moreover, given the fact of suffering, no inference can justify the idea of a benevolent God, no matter how much we “torture our brains”. Similarly, Hume undermines the revelatory authority of Scripture by rejecting its appeals to miracles and fulfilled prophecy on evidentialist grounds: “A wise man”, he states, “proportions his belief to the evidence.”¹⁷ Hume aims to establish two things: first, that human precepts of morality and our practical obligations to observe them are independent of religious beliefs and practices. And, second, that religion only distorts natural morality and increases human suffering.¹⁸

Hume enquires into what causes man to develop a theistic theory of value, of what exists, what matters, and what ought to be. He concludes that the origin of religion is in fear and ignorance of the inner dynamism of nature. He contends that belief in invisible and intelligent powers “springs not from an original instinct or primary impression of nature.”¹⁹ Hume’s critique of religion and religious beliefs is informed by a naturalistic empiricist epistemology that scrutinises our enquiry into the realm of being and into all that can be validly said about it. The fact that Hume’s intellectual endeavour occurred against the background of a rationalist

posteriori arguments especially in section II (Of the Origin of Ideas) of first *Enquiry* and throughout *Dialogues*. In the Section “Of Miracles” in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Hume dismantles the authority of revealed religion. For a brief account of Hume’s dealing of religion see J. C. A. Gaskin, “Hume on Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 313-344.

¹⁶ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), part 3, paragraph 161.

¹⁷ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Other Writings*, ed. Stephen Buckle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 10.I.4.

¹⁸ Cf. Gaskin, “Hume on Religion,” 333.

¹⁹ David Hume, “The Natural History of Religion,” in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 125.

failure to account for what is valuable for us, for the everyday world of common sense around us, compels our attention. Hume claims that the religious view of reality is not credible and tries to develop a system of morality independent of any theological backing. As Alasdair MacIntyre observes, by insisting on a non-theological and intelligible account of morality that is based on a specific account of human nature, Hume establishes the necessary starting point for later moral philosophy.²⁰ Thus, in the *Treatise*, he attacks Christian metaphysics—and thus the theory of value proposed by theism—and strives to construct in its place “a secular, scientific account of morality.”²¹ We should pursue this line of thought by situating it within the second broad approach to being and value, viz., naturalism.²²

1.2. Naturalism

The distinctive beginning of philosophical enquiry, at least in Greece, lay in the emergence of a rational description of the world at hand, until then attributed to the workings of the gods. The primordial gods—Tartarus (The Abyss), Gaia (The Earth), Erebus (Darkness), Nyx (Night)—were regarded as part of the natural world. These gods, conceived in anthropomorphic terms, were believed to reside on the high mountains or in giant trees. In the broadest sense, naturalism seems to be man’s initial response to his questions about reality and the value—both quantitative (a big tree or a mountain, for example) and qualitative—that every bit of it possessed. Nevertheless, with the progression of rational enquiry, the gods migrated from the mountains to the super-sensible beyond, allowing humans to enquire without prejudice into the mysteries of the natural world—something that helped the growth of science. The super-sensible, a distinct realm of value from which the sensible world gained its worth,

²⁰ Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, Introduction to *Hume’s Ethical Writings: Selections from David Hume*, by David Hume (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1970), 16.

²¹ Paul Russell, *The Riddle of Hume’s Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), viii.

²² It is true that the structure of values that religion proposed came under suspicion with the reformation, and that modern, materialist capitalism gave new definitions of “the important goods of life”. The Copernican revolution caused disorientation and undermined every unified notion of a universal or absolute good. Cf. Daniel Callahan and Jr. H. Tristram Engelhardt, eds., *The Roots of Ethics: Science, Religion, and Values* (New York: Plenum Press, 1981), vi. Since these shifts are based on more basic philosophical standpoints, we will now follow the line of development from Hume onward but will take up these themes when we deal with Charles Taylor.

replaced the natural gods. Common sense and everyday experience refused to embrace such a theory of value in the super-sensible. Aristotle's *Unmoved Mover*, in some way a replacement of the Platonic Forms,²³ clearly represents an attempt to reconcile value with nature: the unmoved mover is not the origin of value; value is rather in things insofar as they emulate the first mover. Aristotle was not the only one to express this desire to reconcile naturalism and value theory.

The Epicureans were naturalists too—materialists in the modern sense—and conceived the value of reality independently of any supernatural spiritual reality; pain and suffering were bad, and happiness and fulfilment were good.²⁴ The Stoics, too, believed that the natural world obeyed strict causal principles. Inert matter and *logos* (reason)—the how and why of matter—structured the universe into a value whole. Stoics believed in the goodness of nature, and the basic dictum of their account of value was to ‘follow Nature.’ Moreover, they anchored their theory of value on empirical observation of cosmic regularities.²⁵ Though both of these approaches developed substantive ethical precepts from their naturalistic premises—the one by pursuing a happy life and avoiding pain and suffering, the other by following the universal *logos*—their deterministic outlook eventually made it difficult to understand the pursuit of value itself. Necessitarianism, a version of determinism, casts its shadow over these forms of naturalism. However, the Stoics saw moral philosophy, natural philosophy and natural theology as inseparable and insisted that human happiness consists of living according to nature, well-ordered and co-extensive with the will of Zeus. Thus, virtue consists of exercising one's rational nature and evolves in the course of natural development, whereby we come to prefer ‘order’ and ‘concord’ over what Aristotle calls ‘external goods.’ In choosing a non-instrumental value in our exercise of practical reason, we acknowledge a realm of beauty, constancy, and order that is the final good that rests on rightness (*honestas*), over and above our own interest. There is, thus, an objective grounding of right which establishes a connection between naturalism, moralism, and eudaimonism.²⁶

²³ Cf. Stephen Menn, “Aristotle and Plato on God as Nous and as the Good,” *Review of Metaphysics* 45, no. 3 (1992): 544.

²⁴ Their conception of happiness (*eudaimonia*), or, better, of flourishing, attempted to offer a genuine theory of value.

²⁵ Cf. Oates, “Being and Value,” 473.

²⁶ Cf. T. H. Irwin, “Stoic Naturalism and Its Critics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, ed. Brad Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 346-348.

Aristotle's view of the human good as happiness (*eudaimonia*), consisting of the fulfilment of human nature, is naturalistic as "it identifies virtue and happiness in a life that fulfils the nature and capacities of rational human nature."²⁷ Aristotle gives a naturalistic basis to value enquiry without succumbing to blind fate while also anticipating some basic Stoic tenets like belief in a finite universe with the earth as its centre. Aristotle applies four types of causes: material, formal, efficient, and final in his physics, ethics and metaphysics, yet he is not a determinist. Substances and the conditions of substantiality form the centre of Aristotle's metaphysics and natural philosophy, whereas the Stoics focus on the physical constitution of bodies.²⁸ This helped Aristotle develop a naturalistic theory of value that avoids what McDowell characterises as "bald naturalism."²⁹ Scholastic naturalism developed and amplified the outline that Stoicism and Aristotle offered. Thomas Aquinas believed that the ultimate good was "composed of goods that are both ends in themselves and worth choosing for the sake of the ultimate good."³⁰ The unprejudiced rational pursuit of good reveals a realm of *honestum* (rightness), which is meritorious not just on an individual basis but also due to its ability to maintain the common good required by justice. This renders the whole process of deliberation and action virtuous.³¹

The investigation of being and value received a new form and vigour with Hume's call to rely on experience to provide answers to questions of all sorts. He rejected all types of essentialism and asked, "Why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent Being...?"³² With this, naturalism received a new form, cutting off any

²⁷ Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics: A Historical and Critical Study, Volume I: From Socrates to the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.

²⁸ Cf. Dorothea Frede, "Stoic Determinism," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, ed. Brad Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 179-205.

²⁹ Henry McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), passim. For McDowell's reading of Aristotle's ethics as 'naturalistic' see *ibid.* pp 79-86 and Henry McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). Across these works McDowell alternatively uses terms such as 'neo-Humean naturalism,' 'empiricist naturalism,' 'naturalism of the realm of law,' and 'naturalism of the disenchanting nature,' to designate 'bald naturalism.'

³⁰ Irwin, "Stoic Naturalism and Its Critics," 349.

³¹ Irwin, "Stoic Naturalism and Its Critics," 349.

³² David Hume, "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 65.