

An Objection to Railton's Full-Information Analysis of Non-Moral Value

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Abstract: This paper presents an objection to Peter Railton's full-information account of non-moral value. According to this account, if an idealized individual A who is fully rational and has full information wants the non-idealized A to desire X, then X is good for A. Those desires like X are called objective interests. Railton's analysis holds that non-moral values are constituted by natural facts that are independent of subjective opinions. I argue that it is hard for the full-information analysis to achieve all its goals. My discussion focuses on intrinsic interests—those good for an individual without reference to any other objective interests. I attempt to show that either it is hard for the full-information account to give a normative force on individuals, or the account is circular. The conclusion I reach is moderate: in its current version, the full-information analysis of non-moral value cannot explain the link between the normative and the empirical.

Keywords: Intrinsic interests; moral realism; normativity; the full-information analysis of non-moral value.

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1. Introduction

Many philosophers believe that morality is objective. Some of them claim that moral statements are essentially beliefs, and there exist moral facts that make those beliefs true or false. These philosophers are called moral realists (Finlay 2007). Among moral realists, some think that moral facts are constituted or realized by natural facts and therefore endorse ethical naturalism (Suikkanen 2016). Although there are different forms of naturalist moral realism, Peter Railton's realist account might be one of the most successful (Railton 1986a, 1986b, 2003). According to his account, moral judgments could bear truth values, and moral facts are constituted by natural facts and may be reducible to them. Holding that moral properties are objective in this sense, Railton (1986b, 164-165) thinks such a theory could establish the objectivity of morality.

Many people, especially anti-realists, however, believe that there is an intuitive gap between the empirical and the normative. It seems we cannot derive normative force from pure empirical facts.¹ To refute such a view, Railton attempts to provide a realist analysis of ethics.² His strategy is to develop the realist notion of moral rightness, and thus he begins with a realist account of non-moral value (Railton 1986b, 171-189). Many called Railton's account as a *full-information analysis* of non-moral value, because according to this account, what is good for a person is defined by reference to an idealized notion with full information (Rosati 1995a, 1995b, Sobel 1994, and Baker 2016).³ Specifically, if an idealized person A who is fully rational and has full information wants non-idealized A (i.e., the actual one) to desire X, then X is good for A. Those desires like X are called objective interests, because it seems they are not dependent on what non-idealized A

¹ This statement could be called "Hume's Law," as people usually believe that Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature* says that no ought-judgment may be correctly inferred from a set of premises expressed only in terms of "is" (Hume 2007).

² Railton gives some reasons to reject such an intuitive distinction between the empirical and the normative as well, which I believe is closely related to his positive arguments in constructing the link (Railton 1986a, 5-31; 1986b, 166-171).

³ Some such as Lin (2017, 2019), however, argue that there is no need for such an idealized analysis when conceiving welfare.

conceives. Railton thinks that non-moral values supervene on or even are reducible to natural facts, which are independent of subjective opinions. Those values could also provide a normative force on individual A. If so, the full-information analysis seems to indicate that there is a powerful link between the empirical and the normative. In this paper, I argue that it is difficult for Railton's account to achieve all his goals.

My discussion focuses on intrinsic interests, i.e., those good for an individual without reference to any other objective interests. In Section 2, I reconstruct Railton's full-information analysis. Section 3 introduces an example of intrinsic interests, in which Railton's account may be on the horns of a trilemma about how we should understand the choice of the idealized individual. If the theory implies that we as observers could not know the individual's choice, such an account may end up in a circular argument. If we as observers do know it, possible explanations may be focused on present states or idealized states. The former one may not be independent of the individual's subjective states anymore and thus could not be seen as a successful realist explanation. The latter one seems hard to produce a normative force on the individual. After that, I consider some objections and respond to them in Section 4. In the end, I hold that the full-information analysis needs more work to construct the link between the empirical and the normative.

2. Railton's Full-Information Analysis of Non-Moral Value

To argue for his realist account of non-moral value, Railton (1986b, 172-186) has at least four premises. First, he defines non-moral value as something desirable or good for someone. In this sense, Railton sees subjective interests—individuals' wants or desires—as a secondary quality. That is, they are like tastes, e.g., sweetness. They supervene upon the primary qualities of the individual, the object, and the circumstance, even though they will excite a subjective inclination or sensation. Railton calls primary qualities the *reduction basis* of the secondary qualities. Second, Railton believes that if this account of non-moral value could help explain our experience and give a normative force, then this account is plausible. Third, a realist account could succeed in explaining our experience, only if the non-moral

values postulated in it have two characteristics: independence and feedback. Independence means that those facts exist, and their features are independent of our opinions. Feedback means that we can interact with those facts, and they are able to affect our thoughts and actions. Fourth, Railton introduces norms of individual rationality as a so-called criterial explanation. An individual's rationality is primarily defined in terms of relative efficiency given the agent's beliefs and desires.⁴ In other words, we see an individual rational when he could adopt efficient means to certain ends he believes or desires. Based on this, we could evaluate someone more rational than others. Their rationality is assessed relative to their beliefs and desires.

Railton proceeds to define the non-moral value, i.e., what is good for someone, with an idealized notion of the individual. Specifically, if an idealized individual A who is fully rational and owns full information wants the non-idealized A to desire X, then X is desirable or good for A. In Railton's example, Lonnie is a person with malaise and idealized Lonnie knows clear liquids instead of milk will help him. In this case, idealized Lonnie will want the non-idealized self to desire clear liquids instead of milk. If so, clear liquids are a good thing for Lonnie. Railton calls these desires objective interests. Now that idealized Lonnie with full information about his conditions and circumstances will decide on the non-moral values, we may admit that whether X is good for someone depends on facts about his or her circumstances and constitution. In this way, such facts in the so-called *reduction basis* are independent of one's opinions. Besides, individuals could also learn and modify their interests through experience to lead to satisfactory results for themselves. According to Railton, we may utilize a wants/interests mechanism to explain such evolutions of desires. For example, in the case of Lonnie, he may happen to drink some clear liquids that help him. And because of it, he may consciously or unconsciously choose to drink clearer liquids instead of milk when having a malaise again. Gradually he develops such a desire to drink clear liquids in similar circumstances. In other words, the individual may change his desires and interests in trials to lead to his satisfaction. Therefore, Railton thinks that this account satisfies the requirements of independence and feedback.

⁴ The understanding of rationality is intuitive here. Accordingly, I do not consider disagreements on how to understand rationality properly in this paper.

Given that individual rationality can be evaluated with efficiency relative to present desires and beliefs, it could be also assessed relative to objective interests (Railton 1986b, 184-189). After all, with the wants/interests mechanism individuals need to take actions that reflect new interests. Railton seems to believe that it is a psychological fact that if one's desire is not supported by the idealized self, this will count against acting upon this desire.⁵ If so, this account seems to give a normative force to individuals. Consider the case of Lonnie again, the desire to drink milk is not supported by the idealized Lonnie, as the latter will want non-idealized Lonnie to drink clear liquids. Thus, such an action is not efficient relative to objective interests. Drinking clear liquids is more efficient and thus a more rational action. So, there is a reason for non-idealized Lonnie to drink clear liquids, even though it goes against his own motivation. To sum up, it provides a normative force on non-idealized Lonnie, which finally shows that drinking clear liquids is good for Lonnie.

So far, Railton's full-information analysis seems to explain values, display the process of feedback, and indicate the key link between the empirical facts and the normative force. Railton concludes that this full-information analysis of non-moral value not only succeeds in explaining our experience but gives a normative force as well. If so, it would provide a stable foundation for moral realism.

3. The Trilemma of the Full-Information Analysis

In this section, I discuss an example of intrinsic interests and then argue that Railton's full-information analysis is on the horns of a trilemma.

Above all, note that Railton distinguishes intrinsic goodness from other non-moral ones: X is intrinsically non-morally good for a person A if X is in A's objective interests without reference to any other objective interests of A (Railton 1986a, 17; Railton 1986b, 178). In the case of Lonnie, the desire to drink clear liquids is not intrinsically good. Instead, health would

⁵ It is perhaps seen as a form of internalism, i.e., if one ought to ϕ in a circumstance, one must be motivated to ϕ given the circumstance (Sobel 2001, Schroeder 2007, and Mason 2008).

be intrinsically good for Lonnie.⁶ When Railton claims that Lonnie has a normative reason to drink clear liquids, it is only an explanation in terms of instrumental reasons. That is, drinking clear liquids is the means to health, which is efficient and thus desirable as long as Lonnie desires health.

However, it is unclear how Railton can explain the reduction basis of intrinsic interests. To see this, consider a case of listening to music. Intuitively, listening to music is intrinsically good for someone but not good for others. Imagine that a person David also finds himself miserable in a foreign country. He becomes aware of a desire to turn on the radio, although there is only boring news. Unknown to David, there is a music festival near his apartment. Idealized David would want non-idealized David to have a desire to go out to attend the music festival. Nevertheless, are *we* able to tell what idealized David would want non-idealized David to want?

To clarify, listening to the music itself is non-morally good for David. That is, it is *intrinsically* good. So, the idealized David would want non-idealized David to have the desire to go out to attend the music festival.⁷ But it is unclear whether *we* can tell this, or how we could *explain* what idealized David wants. I argue that Railton's account is on the horns of a trilemma here: there are three possibilities to deal with this case of intrinsic interests for Railton, but no matter which explanation we give to the question of intrinsic interests, the full-information analysis will lead to an unsatisfactory answer.

3.1. *The First Aspect: If We Do Not Know*

According to Railton, the condition of full information only includes descriptive information. We want to reduce the goodness to other descriptive facts. As we have different intrinsic objective interests, however, we do not know others' interests. If so, we cannot tell what is desirable or good for David. In this case, only if we know that listening to music is intrinsically non-morally good for David can we know that the idealized David would want the non-idealized David to go out to the music festival.

⁶ For more reasons to see health as intrinsically good, see (Raibley 2013).

⁷ Some may doubt whether it is possible to compare two possible choices in one's life, which I do not consider in this paper (Baumann 2018).

Nevertheless, we have no chance to know that it is non-morally good for David, given full information and full rationality. Only the idealized David could manage it. If so, it becomes doubtful whether intrinsic non-moral values could be constructed on a reduction basis. After all, it seems the intrinsic interests here depend on some facts that cannot be described objectively or independently.

Railton may reply that the existence of intrinsic goodness is a fact, even though we do not know the content. That is, we could still define intrinsic goodness with the realist account when it is unknown to us. But the point here is that this account includes certain unexplained personal desires. In other words, what is good for person A is fundamentally based on what A *thinks* is good for A. If so, the account may end up in a circular argument and thus fails to provide a reductive account for subjective interests.⁸

If the full-information account of non-moral values is not successful in constructing intrinsic interests on a reduction basis, the realist explanation of the normative force is also implausible. As we can see, the notion of individual rationality is relative to objective interests. If intrinsic interests are fundamental, it implies that the reason to have a certain act that reflects any interests is fundamentally based on intrinsic interests. According to Railton's account, the actual individual A has reason to ϕ because the idealized individual A wants the actual A to ϕ . If an intrinsic interest has no satisfying reduction basis, however, such a reason may exist in A's own thoughts. The latter will give A the motivating reason to act, but it does not display the link between the normative and the empirical. And therefore, it is doubtful whether this realist account of non-moral values succeeds.

3.2. *The Second Aspect: If We Do Know*

To avoid such a direction leading to a circular argument, one may hold that we could know that the idealized David would want the non-idealized David to go out to the music festival. However, it is still problematic

⁸ A reductive account is supposed to reduce entities *a* to entities *b*, i.e., provide an analysis of *a* notions in certain other notions such as *b*. In a reductive account of *a*, we do not have the terms of *a* notions anymore.

whether possible naturalist explanations could provide a link between the empirical and the normative.⁹

On the one hand, some may say that the reason why we could know idealized individuals' choices is still based on the present state of the individuals. To produce a normative force, they may appeal to the present desires of the non-idealized David. Consider the case of David again. They may hold that given the whole experience and knowledge, it is reasonable to know that David is a fan of music. If David is a fan of music, then it is natural to think that David will desire to go out to the music festival once he knows there is one outside. So, in this case, we know that the idealized David will want the non-idealized David to desire to go out to the music festival. The problem is that, although most individuals who have intrinsic interests in music are fans of music, it is not necessarily so. For example, someone may have never listened to music, even if they would become fans of music after having such an experience. There are plenty of similar descriptions, in which some musicians always describe their first experience in music as amazing, while they have never known anything about music before. Furthermore, this explanation depends on the present desires of an individual. In this sense, what constitutes values is not independent of the individual's mental state. That is, only if an individual has a motivation for X beforehand, can the choice of the idealized individual have a normative force on the non-idealized one.

Another explanation may be based on the idealized states. One may say that with full information it is reasonable to know that an individual would be a fan of music in the idealized condition. Accordingly, we could know that the idealized David as a fan of music would want the non-idealized David to listen to music. Nevertheless, even if we assume that given full information we could know the outcomes of different possible experiences, becoming a fan of music is still not a sufficient indicator of having an intrinsic interest in music.¹⁰ For example, some fans of music may only enjoy

⁹ For a general objection to the explanations provided by moral reductionists including Peter Railton, see (Zhong 2012).

¹⁰ Rosati and Sobel discussed how full information is obtained by the idealized self. Rosati thinks there are some difficulties in comparing different possible outcomes and experiences for the idealized self, and Sobel argues that the full-information

the atmosphere of concerts instead of music. Furthermore, although we may know that the idealized David would be a fan of music and thus want the non-idealized David to listen to music, this fact itself still does not provide a reason for non-idealized David to have a desire to go out for the music festival. In this case, David may become a fan of music given more information about music in the idealized condition, but the interests of the idealized David seem not to provide any benefits for the non-idealized one. After all, the non-idealized David may have no feeling about music at all now.¹¹ If so, it is counter-intuitive to say that it is good for David to go out to the music festival, which he does not enjoy at all at this moment. In conclusion, it is hard to construct a stable link between the behaviors or other states of being a fan of music and having intrinsic interests in music.¹² And therefore, we cannot say it is good for David to go out for the music festival.

3.3. *The Trilemma*

In conclusion, the full-information analysis of non-moral value is on the horns of a trilemma to answer the question about intrinsic values: if we do not know what the idealized self will want the non-idealized self to desire, it seems this account may lead to a circular argument and fails to be a naturalist account; if we know the choices of the idealized self, however, we may turn to an account based on present states that would not be independent of internal psychology, or turn to an account based on idealized states that lacks a normative force—the main goal of this account. In short, it is difficult for the full-information analysis to keep its basic commitments and achieve its goal together.

account omits some important limitations in our psychological and cultural facts, which makes our well-being incommensurable as well. See (Rosati 1995b, 296-325; Sobel 1994, 784-810; Shemmer 2011). I tend to agree with them, but even if their arguments are problematic, it does not hurt my argument here.

¹¹ As one's desires are changing and unstable, the analysis of welfare based on the desires is temporal (Dorsey 2013).

¹² Bykvist (2010) argues that how you would have felt about a life had you never led it is irrelevant to the question of how good that life is for you. Tiberius (1997) also doubts whether the demand made by an idealized person is intuitive or not.

4. Possible Objections and Responses

In this section, I respond to several possible objections.

First, some may claim that we all share similar intrinsic interests, as Railton admits in his paper (Railton 1986b, 178).¹³ That is, all human beings share some basic common interests, which permits us to understand one another's interests. In this way, we could only focus on non-intrinsic interests when providing the full-information analysis of non-moral value, which avoids the trilemma. I doubt the universality of intrinsic interests. Furthermore, it cannot explain why we could know what the idealized self would want the non-idealized self to desire. Consider the case of David again, even though music is intrinsically good for many people, it does not mean that we know it applies to David. In other words, the common basis that leads to similar intrinsic interests shared by human beings could promote our understanding of the choice of idealized individuals but does not help explain how we can know the choice.

Another objection may hold that listening to music is not intrinsically good, as listening to music makes people happy. They may think happiness or pleasure is the only intrinsic interest. As we know the relationship between the means and the end, we could know that the idealized David would want the non-idealized David to go out to the music festival. But this idea takes a risk in holding happiness or pleasure as the only intrinsic non-moral value. We usually all accept the existence of other possible intrinsic values such as liberty, justice, and friendship.¹⁴ It is also intuitive to me that listening to music could be intrinsically good at least for some. A naturalist account in a hedonist version may manage to give a normative force, but it fails to explain our intuitions.

Some may hold that my argument is demanding because health as an intrinsic value could also be questioned in the same way. Consider the original case of Lonnie again, we may ask whether we could know that the idealized Lonnie will want the non-idealized Lonnie to desire to drink clear liquids. But it seems absurd, as it seems obvious that we know that. If so,

¹³ For some disagreements, see (Sobel 1999).

¹⁴ I do not want to touch on the theory of well-being or axiology in this paper. Instead, what I focus on are intuitive and ordinary ideas about values.

the arguments will be out of work. However, I do not want to deny the same trilemma applies to the case of Lonnie. That is, the full-information analysis itself does not provide a plausible method for us to know whether the idealized Lonnie would want the non-idealized Lonnie to drink clear liquids to keep healthy. It is the fact of similar interests that makes us have a successful conjecture, and it leads us to think such a full-information analysis is successful, as we already have similar interests with Lonnie. But this is an illusion. The fact of similar interests could not play a significant role in the full-information analysis, as we have seen above. The reason I choose music instead of health as the focus is that music is more obvious to be accepted as unknown intrinsic goodness, as it seems not intrinsically good for everyone.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that the full-information analysis of non-moral values fails to give a satisfactory realist account of non-moral values. According to Railton, if the idealized self A who has full information and full rationality wants the non-idealized self to desire X, X will be good for A. The problem is whether we know what the idealized self will want the non-idealized self to desire. In the case of intrinsic values, if the theory implies that we do not know what the idealized self will want the non-idealized self to desire, it seems such an account may lead to a circular argument; if we are thought to know the choices of the idealized self, however, we may turn to an account based on present states which would not be independent, or turn to an account based on idealized states which lacks a normative force—the main goal of this naturalist account. In short, either full-information analysis fails to be a serious realist account, or it cannot achieve the goal of producing a normative force on the individual.

There are some alternatives to developing the full-information analysis of non-moral value. First, there may still be other methods for us to know what the idealized self would want the non-idealized self to desire, and they can be described in natural terms. Second, there may be further explanations of how subjective judgments of an individual could be constituted by natural properties. In other words, even if we have no access to the choices of the idealized

self, the normative forces are still provided by independent natural facts about the individual. Third, there may exist other different explanations of intrinsic interests defined in objective terms and thus avoid the trilemma. However, the current version of the full-information analysis is unsuccessful.

In sum, naturalist moral realists need to provide more explanations about how the full-information analysis works, and it means they have more burden of justification. If so, moral realism based on such a realist account of non-moral value will be affected deeply as well, but that is not in the scope of this paper.

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