Creative Actualization: A Pluralist Theory of Value

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This paper presents a basically new theory of values. Potential goods such as flying machines have been creatively actualized and thus value is creative actualization. Norms, ideals, standards, and theories also require creative actualization. As actions melioristically transform the world for the better, the goals of action provide purpose and meaning, as well as the ground of change, a superior goal providing the end for which agents undertake action. The kinds of value represent irreducibly plural categories of good: beauty, knowledge, prosperity, intimacy, and so on.

1. Creative Actualization

Creative actualization is a basically new theory of value that is consistent with the theories of value of classical pragmatism taken as a whole, particularly John Dewey’s, although it differs in certain respects from each of the pragmatists. The theory evolved out of a growing conviction that, despite many subtle psychological analyses of value that had been set forth in philosophy and the literature of value, these approaches actually had little or nothing to do with value. At most the psychological factors and motives may be one, and only one condition of evaluation, and only in the human agent. Usually, however, even if or where they are a prelude to value, psychological factors contribute nothing and tell us little or nothing about value itself except, perhaps, the relentless egoism of Western philosophy and culture. Value theorists should free their subject from what Frege called “psychologizing,” just as logic was liberated about a century ago and on similar grounds. In the background of psychological theories lie metaphysical commitments, especially to the Cartesian distinction of subject and object. Values should also be examined independently of metaphysics, whether that of substance and attribute, or any other.

Let us begin with consideration of one variety of a good, a plane, a flying machine. We can examine the eidetic aspect of such a machine, distinguishing planes from other kinds. However, it also has a genetic-historical aspect, since planes did not always exist. Prior to the successes of the Wright Brothers, flying machines were simply an idea, a possibility, which the Wrights and other
visionaries made into a goal. In 1875, there were no working planes. In 1925, there were many functioning planes. Attempts to create flying machines prior to 1907 were unsuccessful. The machines were defective and would not fly: they were no good. This is indicated in the well-worn phrase “it won’t fly.” Planes were desired; it was felt that they would bring pleasure of a sort; the will was there; the interest; the correct attitudes, feelings and emotions. What was not in existence prior to Kitty Hawk was a good flying machine, a plane that functions as it should and actually flies. The goodness of a plane was not contingent or based on any of these psychological factors, but entirely independent of them. Desiring a plane or feeling it would be valuable alone could not produce a good plane. Actual flying machines were produced through practice, action, trial and error and the like. These activities were end-governed, since the goal was a flying machine, not satisfaction of desire or feeling. Desire, feeling and other psychological factors may well have been present prior to the actual creation of a working plane. However, the goodness of the latter was in no way contingent upon them. Those who failed may have had such psychological motives as much as the Wright Brothers did. What they did not have was a plane that could fly.

In general, value is connected with such a genesis or actualization of a goal at a historical point in time. This point separates actualization of a goal as an achievement from its mere potentiality. Prior to 1907 planes were a possibility; after that point in time they were an actuality. This movement from potential to actual involves the creation of a novel good, a novelty. Thus the world is at least subtly changed, since the world before the time at which the good is created did not contain such goods. We now live in a world of flight while in 1880 they did not. While time continues as before, alterations mark historical changes, since a novelty has altered the world, whether for better or worse, more or less. History is thereby differentiated as the kind and number of goods is increased. New values emerge at such a point of historical differentiation, marking the pragmatic actualization of an end which, prior to that point, had only been aimed at. The result is good, since the end is actually achieved: the result is true to the aim in some respect. The plan is achieved successfully. The good is feasible and functional: a working flying machine.

Value marks the historical point at which history is altered or changed by the emergence of the novel, which differentiates the moment from the past in greater or lesser ways. What was not now is. Planes are historical novelties, not recurrences of ontological patterns in a becoming. The change is not a coming-to-be or becoming, as planes did not exist prior to their creative actualization. They were not. There was no being or existence of planes prior to the change marked by creative actualization of planes as a good, as functioning. Value as the historical point of differentiation is the differentiation of an individual good at a distinct point in time. Temporal, as opposed to generic or specific, that is, normative differentiation is truly novel: the basis for genuine differentiation. To individuate in time is creative actualization of a good. Creation of a new good, whether completely novel or a novel individual, changes the world. Value is the