

## Observation, Character, and a Purely First-Person Point of View

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**Abstract.** In *Values and the Reflective Point of View* (2006), Robert Dunn defends a certain expressivist view about evaluative beliefs, from which some implications about self-knowledge are explicitly derived. He thus distinguishes between an observational and a deliberative attitude towards oneself, so that the latter involves a purely first-person point of view which gives rise to an especially authoritative, but wholly non-observational, kind of self-knowledge. Even though I sympathize with many aspects in Dunn's approach to evaluative beliefs and also with his stress on the practical significance of self-knowledge, I argue that his proposal seriously misinterprets the role of observation and evidence within the first-person point of view and, derivatively, in the formation of evaluative beliefs.

**Keywords.** self-knowledge, observation, character, evidence, first-person authority.

In *Values and the Reflective Point of View. On Expressivism, Self-Knowledge, and Agency* (2006), Robert Dunn defends a certain *expressivist view* about evaluative beliefs, from which some implications about self-knowledge are explicitly derived. He points out, in the latter respect, that self-knowledge may often be the result of *observation*, as happens when an agent is in pain or whenever she may examine what it is like to have a certain desire or attitude. An agent may have a privileged access to her own phenomenological experiences, but she must at least glance at such experiences in order to acquire this privileged kind of knowledge and, in this respect, her inquiry may not essentially differ from that of a third party. After all, an agent would, on such occasions, adopt a merely *observational* attitude towards herself, which a third party could also assume, although, in the latter case, a more demanding kind of attention may be required and only behavioral (linguistic or otherwise) data are to be collected. It has recently been argued that this kind of self-knowledge may not, as a result, be specifically first-personal or, at least, that there is a different kind of attitude towards oneself that is both strictly first-personal (insofar as it could not be adopted towards someone else) and still epistemically significant, even though evidence and observation are claimed to play no role within it (Moran 2001; Finkelstein 2003; Dunn 2006).

In this paper, I will focus on Dunn's attempt to distinguish, in connection with his expressivist view about value, between an *observational* and a *deliberative* attitude towards oneself, so that the latter involves a *purely first-person point of view* which gives rise to an especially *authoritative*, but *wholly non-observational*, kind of self-knowledge. Even though I sympathize with many aspects in Dunn's approach to evaluative beliefs and also with his stress on the practical significance of self-knowledge, I will argue that he seriously misinterprets the role of observation and evidence within the first-person point of view and, derivatively, in the formation of evaluative beliefs. For this purpose, I will first sketch Dunn's expressivist

view about value and, secondly, detail its alleged implications for self-knowledge and, in particular, his account of what he identifies as 'a purely first-person point of view'. And finally, I will argue that assembling evidence about oneself through a certain kind of observation plays a crucial role in such a point of view. This will certainly come as a challenge to Dunn's neat contrast between observational and deliberative self-knowledge. There are, however, a number of other respects in which his overall approach might benefit from my line of argument; for it seems to fit quite nicely with some other crucial elements in his expressivist view about value. To see this, the claim that evidence and observation must play a crucial role within a purely first-person point of view, must be disentangled from the assumption that the ability to gather evidence is to be construed in the light of the model of a pure, detached observer, that is, an observer who abstracts herself away from his desires and engagements, and looks at the world (and herself) from a perspective which is assumed to be impartial, neutral, or pure.

There is, however, no reason why Dunn should stick to this model, since many elements in his expressivist approach are at odds with it. There is, firstly, his emphasis on the distinction between object-focused vs. attitude-focused questions, which seems to imply a perspectival approach to observation, insofar as there is a variety of ways in which the figure vs. ground contraposition may be drawn. The question arises, then, as to how any such perspective is to be determined and whether they may be ultimately accessible to a pure, detached observer. There is, though, a second element in Dunn's approach that may favor a negative response. Dunn argues that, contrary to what is commonly assumed, there is no overall reason why a single psychological state could not have a dual direction of fit. In fact, he is convinced that evaluative beliefs are of that kind; this opens the door, though, for other sorts of beliefs, like perceptual beliefs, to have a dual direction of fit as well. This seems to make room for an alternative model where the observer should be eager to discern the most favorable perspective (and the corresponding contraposition between figure and ground) from which to examine a certain situation; and it would be a relevant question to ask whether her own *character* (i.e, her projects, commitments, ingrained attitudes) should play a relevant role in that task. It is easy to see, in this respect, that Dunn's challenge to Christine Korsgaard's view about practical deliberation, favors a positive answer to the latter question and, consequently, a departure from the model of a pure, detached observer.