

Kathleen Wallace

*The Network Self: Relation, Process, and Personal Identity*

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*Reviewed by Matthew Groe, 2020*

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Quote:

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In *The Network Self: Relation, Process, and Personal Identity*, Kathleen Wallace prompts us to move beyond the notion of a purely mental self to a broader conception that is synonymous with personhood. Specifically, she proposes that we understand the self (or person) and its unity along two axes: 1) synchronically, as a network of traits encompassing an inheritance from both nature and nurture (thus including physical, biological, and psychological traits, for example, alongside social and cultural traits), and 2) diachronically, as a process instead of an entity.

Wallace calls this proposal the cumulative network model (CNM). It is advanced as a metaphysical thesis within the analytic/Anglo-American debates on personal identity as an alternative to four-dimensionalist theories, which come in two varieties: temporal parts theory and stage theory. As Wallace explains them, the former conceptualizes a person as "a succession of spatio-temporal parts," which means that only *part* of a person is present at any single moment, since the *whole* person is constituted as an entire spatio-temporal spread, which is called a four-dimensional "space-time worm" (45). According to the latter

theory, a whole person is present at every moment, but at each moment, one is thought to be a different person, representing a distinct three-dimensional stage of a "four-dimensional person-career" (45-46). In contrast, CNM views the person of the moment as both "the cumulative upshot of what it has been and the leading edge of the process" (204). CNM thus presents the self (or person) as wholly present at each moment while also being numerically identical through time, a point Wallace regards as especially important forensically, when it comes to recognizing agency and responsibility in moral and legal contexts.

There is admittedly an influence here from feminism and communitarianism, for CNM accepts that the self is constituted--at least in part--by social relations (5). On this model, for example, being a mother, a spouse, a teacher, an Irish Catholic, and a feminist would all count as traits of a self, alongside traits that are genetic, muscular, neurological, and so on. This does not mean, however, that this book has much to say about our relations with others, or about identities that have a specific content, like gender. Feminists and others expecting such discussions here will be disappointed. The relations it highlights are rather those of traits in a network, which it examines without addressing the relationship between nature and nurture, and the problem of identity it pursues concerns the question of how one remains identical through time and change.

This book is also billed as a bridge with pragmatism. If one uses this term broadly to signify the entire classical era of American philosophy, its influence is clear, for the book is replete with ideas from Justus Buchler, George Herbert Mead, and Josiah Royce. In addition, the defense Wallace offers against reductionism falls in line with the tradition of pragmatic naturalism (24-25). Yet the book has objectivist metaphysical undertones that would seem incompatible with the constructivism and instrumentalism that is so often associated with pragmatism.

For a glimpse of these objectivist undertones, one need only turn to a section in which Wallace is championing pragmatism against what she regards as antirealist distortions. Consider, for example, these comments:

Most pragmatists were realists and developed substantive views about human nature, nature, science, religion, views which were not merely about "what works" for a believer or believers. (17)

The pragmatist commitment to fallibilism does not entail anti-realism, but the view that beliefs are revisable because better approximations to reality are achieved and achievable. (16)

Wallace has an especially nice line about Charles Sanders Peirce, explaining how he thinks the "brute given-ness of the world" will sustain the irritation of doubt when we get too far from the truth, forcing us, "sometimes in direct practical terms," to reconsider our approach (16-17). Such remarks might seem refreshing, especially to pragmatic realists, but they could also use additional clarification. When we go on reading, however, the statements grow a bit nebulous. We find Wallace asserting, for example, that pragmatists are committed to "a reality that is at least partly independent of us," and that, in exploring how an idea "works," we must look to how it *interprets* reality in addition to how it "*agrees*" with it (18). Without further explanation, such comments raise more questions than they answer, arousing the suspicion that Wallace may be pushing what she calls the "objectivist crux" of pragmatism too far.

For additional context, however, let us turn to Wallace's attempts to clarify CNM against other ideas. Take, for instance, Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance. Like CNM, it involves a cluster of traits, not all of which are always present. According to Wallace, however, the two are very different, for the unity of a network, she insists, is *not* the product of mere convention: "Even if there are conventional (e.g., social) elements the claim is that the self qua network, is constituted by interrelated traits that form a whole independently of our naming and classificatory practices" (27). CNM can be better understood, she

tells us, along the lines of property-cluster realism, which comes in two forms: HPC (homeostatic property clusters) and SPC (stable property clusters).

Richard Boyd, who advances HPC, explains the idea behind it this way: "I argue that there are a number of scientifically important kinds (properties, relations, etc.) whose natural definitions are very much like the property-cluster definitions postulated by ordinary-language philosophers except that the unity of the properties in the defining cluster is mainly causal rather than conceptual" (Boyd 1991, 141). What we have here, Boyd tells us, are *homeostatic causal mechanisms* underlying the unity of properties in a cluster, which he seizes upon as a worthy substitute for traditional essences. According to HPC, that is, what legitimates our designation of a cluster of properties as a natural kind for some specific domain of inquiry is the grounding that these underlying mechanisms are thought to provide. Boyd is insistent: there must be an *accommodation* between the inferential practices in which these categories are employed and the underlying reality of the world's causal structure. In his own words, "the naturalness (and the 'reality') of natural kinds consists solely in the contribution which reference to them makes to such accommodation" (Boyd 1999, 141).

In contrast, SPC, as developed by Matthew Slater, jettisons the idea that "the epistemic value of natural kinds is contingent on the existence of some concrete ground," whether that be conceived as "some essence, mechanism, or feature of the causal structure of the world" (Slater 2015, 384). SPC rather holds that we are justified in positing a category as picking out a real feature of the world merely by virtue of its overall stability within the inferential practices of a specific domain of inquiry (396). There is hence, as Slater himself admits, a dash of *pragmatism* here (375), an allowance not merely for domain-relativity, like we find in HPC (386), but for a degree of context-relativity as well (404).

After a few brief comments, in which she notes that HPC can be extended to individuals, Wallace presents CNM as an extension of the property-cluster-kind concept while declaring herself *neutral* with

respect to HPC and SPC (37). Given that HPC appeals to a metaphysical ground whereas SPC does not, this neutrality makes one wonder whether Wallace is really a pragmatist at all.

For clarification on what a pragmatic realism might entail, we need only turn to the thought of John Dewey, who would freely posit the mind-independent existence of that brute reality we encounter nakedly in the raw experience of our everyday activities. In Dewey's terminology, this is the reality of what is noncognitively *had*--of what is "treated, used, acted upon and with, enjoyed and endured" in a preconceptual manner--within what he calls primary experience (Dewey 1988-1991, 1:28, 1:15). What Dewey would not let us forget, however, and what Wallace never mentions, despite referencing Dewey several times, is that our *knowledge* of this noncognitively had reality, consisting of what Dewey calls the secondary or refined products of reflection, is derived, dependent upon the very means we employ to know this reality in the first place (1:15-17). This would include our language, our concepts, and the procedures and techniques of the history of inquiry, hence these words against the spectator theory of knowledge: "Knowing is seen to be participant in what is finally known" (4:163). The idea here, in other words, is that we might posit the mind-independent existence of the world at the *metaphysical* level while acknowledging that everything we know about it is contextually "constructed," as Dewey himself puts it, at the *epistemological* level (4:168).

Moreover, in Dewey's view, such (culturally and historically contingent) epistemological constructions should never be regarded as delineating how reality is in any ultimate, *noumenal*, or in-itself manner, *not* because "better approximations to reality are achieved and achievable," as Wallace writes (16), as if all that is lacking is more precision, but because it is not the job of knowledge to *reveal* what Dewey calls "the antecedently real" in the first place (Dewey 1988-1991, 4:14). After all, as Dewey notes, "we experience things as they really are apart from knowing" (4:79). Knowledge, in his view, is rather "intermediate and instrumental," charged with helping us *manipulate* the reality we experience noncognitively every day (4:235). Hence, although lacking an absolute grounding to fix them in eternal

certitude, our constructed knowledge-claims are not conceived as floating free, but as bound to brute reality by an instrumental tether. The influence of William James here is unmistakable. In Dewey's own words, "knowledge is a mode of experiencing things which facilitates control of objects for the purposes of non-cognitive experiences" (4:79).

In place of such constructivist, instrumentalist talk, however, Wallace prefers the language of essences and natural kinds. We even see this in her brief remarks about gender. In a section where she acknowledges that traits like gender, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation can become "culturally marked," weighed down with expectations, obstacles, and challenges, she says, "In many philosophical characterizations of selves the 'identities' that originate from or are dependent on social or cultural locations have not been regarded as essential or natural kind features of a human being, and are often regarded as a matter of convention or happenstance" (78). In contrast, Wallace explains, CNM offers a "more robust conceptualization of a self" that embraces such "identities." The implication is that CNM is functioning as a corrective to the trend just identified, to champion the idea that traits like gender are "essential or natural kind features."

Of course, one might recall that Wallace is working from George Herbert Mead, and hence from the idea that one can enact a social role only by internalizing the culturally relative norms of a group. As Wallace reminds us, this internalization is *active*, involving a response, enabling us to reshape these roles (125). Still, from this perspective, social traits would surely be a matter of convention.

Wallace, however, is emphasizing a different point that follows from her rejection of reductionism and leads her to seek inspiration from feminist and communitarian models of the self. She is asserting that, regardless of the conventions by which they are acquired, social traits, being irreducible to more elementary (say, biological) traits, form a *metaphysically real, essential* part of the unique configuration of traits that constitutes the integrity of a self. Of course, since the self is a process, we must conceive this

integrity as continually evolving, but we can easily do this, she thinks, on the model of another structured process: a game of chess (47-51).

To catch another objectivist undertone, however, we need only pay attention to what Wallace says about this integrity: "The integrity that maps from one stage to the next is a structural feature of the self, not a merely epistemic tool" (50). Such words would seem to repudiate the constructivism and instrumentalism of the pragmatic version of realism sketched above. Similar remarks throughout the book suggest that Wallace views CNM as offering us a glimpse, perhaps to be clarified with more precision by others in the future, of how an antecedent reality--in this case, the self--really is *in-itself*.

It might hence be best to regard Wallace as a "pragmatist" only in the more general sense that she herself associates with Christine Korsgaard (3, 16). This would simply denote a refusal to develop philosophical theories in isolation from practical issues like agency and responsibility.

These are the topics toward which the entire book builds. In response to the problem of how a self remains identical through time and change--a problem whose practical significance is continually posed in the form of the courtroom question, "Is this person in the courtroom *the* one, the person, who committed the crime?"--Wallace champions the notion of numerical unity over any considerations of sameness, origin, persistence, or continuity (66-68). After discussing a variety of fusion and fission thought experiments on such topics as brain transplants, teleportation, and swampman, Wallace emphasizes how CNM permits a degree of self-detachment in reflexive self-communication. Since we possess multiple traits, she explains, we each contain a community within, so we might take up different "I-positions" (such as "I-as-spouse, I-as-philosopher, I-as-desirer-of-x, I-as-passionate-about-y") to enable some aspects of the self to take perspectives on other aspects (119). She then argues that this capacity for partial self-detachment creates space for the critical self-examination needed for autonomy, permitting us to 1) formulate norms to guide our behavior, 2) implement these norms in our conduct, and 3) evaluate

our norms and our conduct (147). Wallace then ends the book by bringing all these threads together within a discussion of how CNM allows for ascriptions of responsibility.

For those working within personal identity theory, *The Network Self* presents much to think about. For feminists, it will have somewhat less to offer, and for those working from continental sources or from pragmatism, its metaphysics may prove unpalatable. At least, however, Wallace is up front about the motivations that underlie it. In an age that has rejected the substantial Cartesian subject, Wallace wants to understand, in metaphysical terms, how there can be persons we can hold accountable.

## References

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