

VALUES: LINGUISTIC CONJECTURE, CONSTRUCTIVE VENTURE

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In this paper, first comes an analytic conjecture, second, a constructive effort to offer a useful philosophical invention. The first part, stems from the claim that all talk about teaching “values” and about people “having values” is an obstacle to clear educational thought and useful action, a kind of discourse that only serves the purpose of evasion and hence ought to be avoided. Defending this claim is the first, possibly “destructive,” part of these remarks. Still, talk about “having values” is everywhere. There are, no doubt, deep human interests, dreams, and attachments voiced in such talk. The problem then is to figure out how to express those human interests and yet avoid the evasive language of “having values.” That is the constructive part of what follows.

ANALYSIS

We would do well to purge from our language all talk that rests, however remotely, upon the claim that people “have” values. Oddly, enough, this is a notion with virtually no history. It appears nowhere in the classical literature on ethics, nor is it a biblical idea, nor does it, *or any conceptual equivalent of it*, appear in the Renaissance, the Reformation, or the Enlightenment. Probably, until sometime in this century — maybe around 1935 — nobody “had” values.

Instead of this vague, abstract talk about “having values,” we used to speak of a host of quite distinct, but specific, things, such as having virtues, beliefs, convictions, commitments, loyalties, hopes, and sometimes even a bit of happiness or good fortune. These are all things that human beings may have. But virtues, beliefs, and loyalties are very different things. They are learned in different ways, expressed in different ways, established in different ways, and they require different things of the world that we inhabit. To submerge these differences in the language of “having values,” as though to describe something different from or in addition to having such things as loyalties, virtues, and beliefs, would have made no sense at all until quite recently in the philosophical tradition. This claim, however, may seem so outrageous that its serious advancement requires some explanation.

But it is true. *The Oxford English Dictionary* records no usage of such an expression. A search of Eric Partridge’s *Origins* will yield similar results. There one finds an extended family of terms etymologically related to “value” (n.), ranging from valence, valetudinarian, validation, validity, etc., but nowhere even a trace of the notion that people have values. We get no closer to this modern idea when we consult Partridge on the origins of “worth,” and we get the same result when we consult the article on “Value and Evaluation” in the 1967 *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. William Frankena wrote,

The terms ‘value’ and ‘valuation’ and their cognates and compounds are used in a confused and confusing but widespread way in our contemporary culture, not only in economics and philosophy but also and especially in other social sciences and humanities. Their meaning was once relatively clear and their use limited. ‘Value’ meant the worth of a thing, and ‘valuation’ meant an estimate of its worth.

That some things have value and that persons value some things more than they value other things — these ideas of value and valuing have a long history. But in the idea that *things* or states of affairs have worth, value appears as a property, and in the idea that people *value* things, it appears as a verb.

So we have “value” and its cognates used as a predicate to refer to properties of things, as a noun (usually singular) to name that property, and as a verb to refer to the human activities of valuing and evaluating. But in this new, evasive, and vacuous language in which we speak of persons “having values,” we use cognates of the term “value” neither as predicate nor as verb. Instead, “value” now appears as a noun apparently to refer to something that persons have as a kind of possession. This is new.

There is a new-speak! So what, you ask? Well, so this! The transformation I have been describing in our vocabulary of value is not simply a different way of talking. It is a different world. This change may, in fact, constitute the most fundamental cultural transformation of the past one hundred years. No longer do we speak of the value that *things* have, i.e., their worth. Instead, we speak only of the values that people have, not of what is desirable, but of what is desired, not of what things have worth, but only of what people prefer, only of their values.

The very oddity of this “newspeak” needs to be noted. But we also need to consider what may be its roots. I believe they can be found in nineteenth century movements of thought, especially in economics. To the classical economists, price and value were conceptually distinct. Value was viewed as a property of some good. But whatever we mean by “exchange value” is not what we mean by “market price.” Yet it is a widespread conviction that price should be related in some way to the value of a commodity in exchange. This moral conviction is what produced the medieval problem of “just price,” a problem still with us in all cases where price inelasticity produces pressures for price control. The relation between price and value was studied, squeezed, and wrung dry without notable advancement from the medieval philosophers to Adam Smith and on down to Karl Marx. But with the neoclassical economists, especially Jevons and Marshall, a revolutionary advance was made. Marshall, in fact, spoke of this discovery as though it was an epiphany, of sorts, a revelation of the deep structure of the world.

The problem was met, as it were, by changing the subject. Instead of talking about the *value* of some good, we could speak of its utility on the margin. Price became related to marginal utility rather than to value. Price became the *measure* of marginal utility. Keep in mind that “marginal utility” is defined always as utility *to some individual*. There is no such thing as the marginal utility of some good or commodity *simpliciter*, only the marginal utility of something *to* someone. The focus of interest thus shifted from a concern with value as a property of goods to a concern with the utility curves or consumer behavior of individuals. We got a powerful view of consumer behavior by giving up the view that things *have* value. Instead of things having value, we came to speak of *people having values*. This conceptual move, I believe, is one source of the modern concept of “having values.” Similar intellectual moves have occurred in other fields of thought, and in each case, the shift of thought has been away from claims that “X is valuable” to claims about the values of individuals and groups.

Such a view extended to the whole of life can be described quite literally as the “evacuation of value” from the world. Thus, we arrive at a distinctly twentieth-century world in which people *have* values but without any corresponding assumption that worth is actually present in the world or presented *to* us in experience. It used to be possible to frame the central questions of moral, civic, and aesthetic education by asking how we can educate persons so that they come to value those things that have worth. But in a world in which things no longer have worth, we cannot frame the educational questions in that way.

Add to this direction of thought two further facts, and we can begin to see, I think, how this language of “values” functions in educational discourse. If we speak seriously about different perspectives on what things have worth, then we shall be speaking sometimes of whole different ways of life. We shall be speaking not simply of distributing loaves and fishes, but of tyrannies and liberty, of risks and security, of fairness and prejudice, different views of our destiny. And these are controversial matters. The great achievement of liberal political theory has been to elaborate the claim that differences on matters of ultimate belief need never impair one’s capacities as a citizen.

This tolerance of different ways of life requires a public vocabulary that is essentially neutral, formal, vacuous, and noncommittal in respect to all competing claims of what has worth, especially when such competing claims are about ultimate matters. The creation of an arena of relative neutrality as between such ultimate claims is a major achievement, one congenial, moreover, to the vacuous vocabulary on “the values people have.”

We live in a pluralistic world, one in which whole different ways of life must coexist. The modern vocabulary of values allows us to avoid their clash. It helps preserve civil peace by framing a public vocabulary suited to escape the controversy. Indeed, to facilitate this evasion, I suggest, is precisely the function of such language. To controversial questions of religious difference, economic interest and cultural perspectives, we can shrug our shoulders and with palm extended outward say, “Well, we have our values and they have theirs” and promptly retreat into the cozy limits of our own community, our own little womb with a view.

The victory of this kind of language in educational discourse encourages us to ignore the fact that some social goods, like liberty and justice, depend less upon any psychological condition of individuals than upon the creation of social institutions within which liberty can flourish. Such social goods that we prize depend for their future, in other words, not upon what “values persons have” (whatever that may mean), but upon the constitution of the moral world they inhabit. These are not “values people have” (or fail to have). They are the gifts that persons enjoy provided their social world has a shape that can contain such goods.

So, in addition to the mindlessness we create by collapsing the differences between teaching beliefs, forming virtues, vindicating hope, and the like into the obscure language of “having values,” we must now add the dangerous collapse of political principles into the same shapeless discourse. Were we to strike all such language of “having values” from our vocabulary of value and worth, we would be forced to make distinctions where distinctions exist. Such radical surgery practiced upon our educational discourse, might also restore to currency some discussions (never mind agreement) about what things have worth, and foremost among those new questions might be the question as to what things have educational worth.

THE VENTURE

My central claim is that no clear sense can be attached either to the notion that people have values or that values change. The view I want to explore is (1) that such human goods as security, health, friendship, community, justice, liberty, privacy and a host of others that we often call “values” are present or absent quite objectively in the structure of our social lives, and that the nature of such goods does not change, although (2) their distribution, rank order, standards and mode of appearance clearly do change. The first of these claims is a thesis about the stability of values, how they don’t change, the second about the indicators of values or how they do change.

The Stability Thesis. I propose that values are social structures, the forms that our relations assume in social life. Friendship is a value, for example. To describe friendship, we must describe a certain relationship, one of equality, mutuality, and strong emotional attachments. The relationship we think of as friendship will be the same even when the friends are different persons. That is the point in describing the value, friendship, as a social structure or as the form that our relations assume in social life. The structure remains though the persons change.

We sometimes speak of privacy as a value. What does the value consist in? I suggest that it consists of two structural characteristics of the world, escape from surveillance, and secure anonymity. Anonymity doesn’t matter if surveillance is defeated, and surveillance doesn’t matter where there is anonymity. Privacy, as a value, just is a social structure affording either escape from surveillance or easy anonymity. Privacy is where these are; and is threatened whenever they are. Thus, when we speak of the value, privacy, we are speaking of something that is present or absent quite objectively in the structure of our social lives.

If we understand values in this way, then we can quickly understand what it means to say that certain institutions are ill-suited to contain or advance certain values. It means simply that the structure of social roles characteristic of the institution will not support the social structure required by certain values. Justice and freedom are values. Freedom, viewed generically, includes freedom of inquiry. But just what is that? Like privacy, it also has its structure. It includes access to information which, in turn, means a great many things about the ways that libraries are organized, about how publication is carried out, and how the media of communication are regulated. A society that does not contain freedom of inquiry might well afford limited access to library shelves and card catalogs. It may have no phone books. It may have complex procedures for access to presses, radios, and institutions for distributing printed materials. In short, the presence or absence of freedom of inquiry just is the presence or absence of such structural arrangements in the institutions of that society. Under certain circumstances, we would say that social institutions can contain freedom of inquiry and under others we would say that they cannot. But that is a consequence of the fact that freedom of inquiry as a value just is a certain set of arrangements. It is a social structure, a certain shape or form objectively present or absent in our social lives.

Justice requires a justification whenever similar treatment is given to different persons or different treatment to similar persons. Justice also demands that when *significant* or *relevant* differences exist, they should be taken into account. Thus, justice requires arrangements making it possible to take account of relevant differences among persons. If many differences are relevant, then many sources of information on individuals are needed. Hence, justice invades privacy. If we think it just that we distribute educational aid first to those who need it most, then we must be able to determine who those persons are, and not simply by identifying large groups whose members as a general rule tend to be needy. We must be able to determine need for individuals. Thus, information otherwise irrelevant to justice becomes highly relevant. What may have been private and unrecorded, e.g., family income, must now become disclosed because it is required by the structure of justice.

If we understand values to be social structures, then we can understand how conflicts among values occur. They will occur wherever the social structure of one value is incompatible with or inimical to the social structure of another. This is a point highly relevant to our understanding of how values enter into public policy. Public policy typically arises only when there are conflicts of public goods in precisely the way that I have described. Were there no conflicts of values (or as I should prefer to say, goods), there would be no need for public policy. Conflicts of values, in the sense just described, are precisely what policy is about and what policy deliberation seeks to resolve. Even in a “rightly ordered society” we shall never reach a state in which such conflicts of value do not exist, because the conflict arises from the structure of values and not simply from conflicting preferences, interests or beliefs of individuals. To rid the world of value conflict would be to rid the world of certain values altogether.

Sometimes, what appears to be a change in values may be only the result of an adjustment of some structural conflict between two or more values. Consider, for example, the emergence of what has been called an “ecological ethic.” What we see here is not a new set of values, but simply new adjustments in the face of conflicts among values already present. What was involved in the abandonment of the SST project, for example, and has subsequently become clearer with respect to all natural resources, is our discovery that some goods we thought were unlimited, like air, are in fact finite, and therefore we have policy questions where we thought we had none. Goods do not conflict if some among them are regarded as inexhaustible. With the discovery of finitude come conflicts between public goods, and consequently new policy questions. But it does not follow that there is any crisis of values here or that we need new values in order to confront such problems. Much less does it follow that we need new ways of thinking about human goods. What we have rather is simply a different combination of variables to take into account. In short, given any two values, say A and B, if they are found to be in conflict where before they were not, then we will be faced with public decisions concerning their joint development. This is one reason why we must be

able to give a clear account of values and how they conflict. Failing that, we cannot give an account of how values enter into policy.

The Change Thesis. Any perspective on values must also incorporate what we want to say about changes in values. I have already suggested that what sometimes appears as a change in values may not be that at all. But there is an even more difficult problem. It is that, within the perspective outlined here, it would make no sense to talk about values changing at all. That is something that cannot be said within the view that values are social structures. Yet if it is impossible to speak of values changing, then, we are inclined to think, it must be impossible to speak of social change.

Such a conclusion, however, would be too hasty. The values of justice, privacy and freedom do not change at all in the sense that privacy always and everywhere consists of social structures affording escape from surveillance and maintenance of anonymity, and that justice and freedom are always continuous and everywhere the same in the social structures that they demand. Still, those values, even within the perspective outlined here, can be construed to have certain indicators. Each can be understood to have (1) domain, (2) range, (3) context, (4) standards, and finally, (5) some position in a changeable rank order. Although values do not change, these indices do. And there is nothing we need to say about changing values that these indicators do not allow. Each deserves some comment.

Domain. Given the view that values are the shape of our social relations, it follows that the same values may be found in different institutions. For example, privacy viewed as a social structure may be found both in the family and in the institutions of government. In a bureaucracy, anonymity is fairly easily attained, even jealously protected, although escape from surveillance may remain difficult. On the other hand, in the family, typically, anonymity is practically impossible to achieve, although periods and places are often provided for escape from surveillance. Thus, certain aspects of privacy are discoverable in both kinds of institutions. Similarly, the structure of competition is more likely to be found in the school than in the family. Sometimes, it may happen, in fact, that relations of cooperation encouraged in the family will be viewed as collusion in the institution of the school.

When we think of values as social structures, then, we can see that the same values may appear in different guises in different institutions. *This characteristic of values is what I mean to refer to as their domain.* To ask about the domain of a certain value is to ask where that value appears among the institutions of society.

Range. By the range of any value, I mean to refer to its distribution not among the institutions of society but among persons who have experience with the social relations demanded by it. Thus, the range and domain of values should be distinguished. The domain of a value may be very restricted. It may appear only in a few institutions. Yet those institutions may be so basic to the character of the society that everybody has intense and intimate experience with the social relations of that value. In that case the value would have a restricted domain and a very large range. Such is the case with many values found either in the family or the school. Thus, the range of a value is different from its domain.

Context. The Parable of the Good Samaritan was offered to illustrate our duties to neighbor, and those duties remain clear enough even in the modern age. But when the road is a subway, our neighbors number in the millions, and the robbed and beaten are evident everywhere, then we may ponder not whether our duties to neighbors have changed, but how we are to carry them out. Their enactment can be greatly altered by numbers, by proximity to need, by the visibility or invisibility of need, and by the changed techniques for meeting those needs or for evading them. In short, the context may influence not the values that exist but the manner and clarity of their execution, their expression, the ways we make them visible, and how they are experienced.

Standards. Think of the search for purer air and water. Success may come either — by the elimination of pollutants or by simply settling on a new acceptable level of pollution. It can turn out that reaching any ideal level of air pollution will be so costly to attain that we shall change our

notions of what is acceptable. And so it is with levels of crime, inequality, competition, efficiency, quality of goods and a thousand other things related to our experience of the things we value. In short, here again, though it may be argued that values do not change, it must nonetheless be admitted that we apply different standards to what is an acceptable level in securing any given value.

Standards are important to the idea of policy. We are practically never in a position to maximize values. The problem is usually how to secure less of certain values than we could were we to consider them separately in order to secure as much as we can of several different values when considered together. Formulating questions of policy in this way will inevitably lead to questions of standards.

Rank Order. Why was *sophrosyne* so highly valued among the ancient Greeks? It cannot have been a consequence of their moderation. On the contrary, *sophrosyne* must have been so important because it was so severe a problem. The thought suggests two points. The first is that in addition to domain, range, context, and standards, values may also appear in some rank order of worth. Some may be regarded as worth more than others. So the rank order of values may be a scale of worth. We can say, in short, that we attach value to values. Freedom may be worth more to us than justice, community more than competition, and privacy more than equality.

That is one version of rank-order. It is a different point, however, that the rank order of values may reflect not their relative worth but their relative position in some kind of public agenda. In short, the rank order of values may reflect priorities for action. It is still the case in rural America that although anonymity is difficult to secure, escape from surveillance is not. Privacy is found at the end of a short walk over the next hill. Privacy is unlikely to appear high on the agenda for persons living under those conditions. But if we lived in a world where anonymity could be secured only by disguise, and privacy of conversation only by standing next to an operating jet engine, then securing and maintaining the conditions of privacy might become a matter of first importance to us. In such a social situation, the value “privacy” has a small range and domain. If that seems threatening to people, then concerns with privacy may rise among priorities. That will *look* like a change in values. Still, the value remains the same. It does not follow that privacy is regarded as of more worth than it used to be or even of more use than, say, community. It follows simply that it is viewed as more of a problem. And being more of a problem, it is likely to receive more attention. And its receiving more attention is likely to be *seen* by people as a change in values.

The Stability and Change of Values Summarized. Values are social structures. That is the point I have been arguing. From that perspective, it simply makes no sense to suggest that values change. The world changes, however, and so there is change in what values it contains. Values, according to such a perspective, can be said to have some domain, some range, some context, standards, and some position in a rank order of the public agenda. Given these indices of values, we can express a great deal of what people ordinarily have in mind by referring to changes in values. To say that the domain of a certain value has enlarged is to say that the social structures of that value have been extended to institutions where they had not been found. To say that the distribution of certain values has changed is to say that the structure of those values is within the experience of more or fewer people. If the context of certain values is altered, then we speak of changes in the ways they are expressed in action. To say that the standards of certain values are changed is to say that the acceptable level of experiencing that value has changed. And when we claim that the rank order of values has changed, we are claiming that certain values receive more or less attention than before.

None of these dimensions of change require the ambiguous and vague conception that people have values or that values change. The virtue of such a perspective is that it shows — in admittedly rudimentary form — how one might think about changes in values without lapsing into the slovenly educational discourse that overlooks distinctions between beliefs, virtues, hopes, aspirations, and public goods and allows us to subsume all these things under some common and vacuous notion of “teaching values” or dangerous ideas of shaping the “values that people have.”

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