

Philosophy and Value

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Philosophy and Value

Abstract Philosophers ask fundamental questions about values and valuing. Some of the philosophical debates about these fundamental questions have repercussions for the value theories of other disciplines. This chapter focuses on crucial conceptual distinctions and philosophical positions about value. For instance, the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic value. The chapter also reviews important metaphysical positions concerning the nature of value, like objectivism and subjectivism. It also touches upon the issue of pluralism and monism, whether there are many values or just one. Finally, the chapter addresses the issue of value change, emphasizing the pragmatist account of value (Dewey).

Keywords Philosophy • Pragmatism • Value • Metaphysics

5.1 Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophers ask fundamental questions about values and valuing. Some of the philosophical debates about these fundamental questions have repercussions for the value theories of other disciplines. For instance, every discipline makes unexamined philosophical assumptions, and philosophy

can help some critical light on these assumptions. Furthermore, philosophy can help other fields to achieve conceptual clarity in thinking about value.

The philosophical literature on value is extensive. One reason for the vast amount of literature is that values play a role in many domains of human practice that philosophers are interested in, including the moral, aesthetic, economic, and social domains. Due to the multitude of value domains, the philosophical investigation of value comprises ethics, meta-ethics, and aesthetics. Furthermore, because philosophers are often interested in metaphysical questions, like whether value is objective and whether there is only one value or many, the philosophical investigation of value also includes metaphysics.¹

Because of this complexity, a complete overview of what philosophers say about value would significantly inflate this chapter. Therefore, the focus will be on fundamental issues, conceptual distinctions, and philosophical positions relevant to the debates and conceptual problems concerning value in psychology, anthropology, and sociology.

5.2 Descriptive Claims, Evaluative Claims

One way to philosophically approach value is to examine people's claims about the world. For example, take the following two sentences: (1) "This picture has a wooden frame"; (2) "The wooden frame of the picture looks good". The first sentence makes a descriptive claim and merely states the case without making a value judgment. The second sentence makes an evaluative claim because it involves a normative concept. Examples of normative concepts are 'good', 'ought', and 'right'. Philosophers commonly distinguish two kinds of normative concepts. There are evaluative concepts, like 'good', and so-called deontic concepts, like 'ought'. Evaluative concepts are used in claims about quality, merit, or worth, like

¹A terminological remark: The terms 'value' and 'values' are less commonly used than terms like 'the good' and 'the right.' However, the notion of value needs to be kept separate from notions of right and wrong, which concern what we owe to one another (Scanlon, 1998, p. 78f.). For instance, considerations about the value of artworks or nature are independent of the consideration of right and wrong.

saying that the wooden frame looks good. This example also shows that not all evaluative claims are moral because they can be evaluative in a non-moral way. For instance, making an aesthetic claim about the beauty of something is a non-moral normative claim.

In contrast to evaluative concepts, deontic concepts are used in action-guiding claims. These claims are about what one is supposed to do (or not to do). Correspondingly, deontic claims express that something *ought* to be the case. Like evaluative claims, deontic claims can be non-moral. For instance, the sentence “If you want to tighten this screw, you should use this screwdriver”, is a deontic claim, but it has no moral significance. Moral deontic claims, then, are a sub-group of normative claims. For instance, the sentence “You should not kill” expresses a moral deontic claim, and the ‘should’ in the sentence should be interpreted as a moral ‘should’.²

Normative and evaluative claims are important, and people always make them without considering them too much. Philosophers want to achieve clarity in thinking, which is why they like to complicate things by bringing out underlying assumptions in our thinking. For instance, Judith Jarvis Thomson (2008) has made critical observations regarding normativity and how the word ‘good’ is used. She argues that ‘good’ is always an attributive adjective that modifies a noun, which means nothing is just *good, period*. Put differently, something is always good or bad as a *something*, like being a good knife or a bad painting. Furthermore, whether something is good or bad depends on the comparison class. A computer from the year 2000 may be a good computer when compared to computers from the 1990s but not when compared to computers from 2019.³

Thomson also notes that to say something is good means to praise it but to praise it does not necessarily mean to desire it. So, for instance, one can say that something is a good medicine without having the desire to take the medicine. Furthermore, recall that there are moral and non-moral evaluative claims, which may include the word ‘good’. Thomson contends that the word ‘good’ means the same in moral and non-moral contexts. The difference in sentences like “This act is morally good” and

² Although the examples here seem clear-cut, what makes a claim a moral claim can be hard to say. Even philosophers sometimes struggle with the distinction between moral and non-moral.

³ The same thing holds for the word ‘better’. Something is better than another thing concerning a particular aspect. Nothing is better in the sense of ‘better, period’.

“This is a good knife” is not a difference in the meaning of the word ‘good’ but a difference in what the compounds ‘morally good’ and ‘good knife’ mean. The upshot of Thomson’s argument is that it is worthwhile to inquire into the standards that make an act morally good or an artifact of a particular kind a good artifact of that kind.

Anthropology, sociology, and psychology deal with value judgments and what people think is good or should be done. The philosophical investigation of value judgments and the importance of keeping normative, descriptive, and deontic concepts apart could help researchers in these disciplines sharpen their conceptual tools. We will come back to this in the last chapter.

5.3 Kinds of Values—Taxonomy of Value

Philosophers like to make many distinctions, and the topic of value is no exception. For instance, it is common in philosophy to distinguish between different kinds of value, like extrinsic and intrinsic, and here we will review some of the most important distinctions philosophers have introduced.

Let us start with the difference between *final value* and *non-final value*. Philosophers often say that something has a final value if it is valuable for its own sake. However, as Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen point out (Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen, 2015), terms like ‘final’ and ‘for its own sake’ are tricky because they are ambiguous. They suggest that ‘final’ and ‘for its own sake’ should be taken to mean that something has value independent of whether it contributes to, or is necessary for, something else that has value. Human life can be said to be a final value in this sense.

In contrast, when something has non-final value, it is valuable because it contributes to or is necessary for something else that is valuable. For instance, a tool like a hammer may not have final value but merely instrumental value because it is useful for repairing something else that has value. Something has instrumental value when it is valuable for the sake of something else and not for its own sake. Having instrumental value does not exclude the possibility of having final value. Something can have value for its own sake and have instrumental value in some situations.

Philosophers also commonly differentiate between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* value. When something has extrinsic value, it has this value because of its external properties, its relationship to other things. For example, the instrumental value of a tool, like a hammer, is extrinsic because the value derives from the value of the item we want to repair.

Extrinsic value is often contrasted with intrinsic value, which is often described as a value that something has ‘in itself’ or ‘for its own sake’. For instance, many virtue ethicists consider human flourishing intrinsically valuable, and most people would probably say that friendship and love have intrinsic value. G.E. Moore (1993) provided an influential characterization of intrinsic value. He proposed that something is intrinsically valuable when the value is grounded in intrinsic features of the object, which are necessary properties that something has independent of any of its relations to other things of the world. Besides making distinctions, philosophers also like to disagree, and some are skeptical about whether intrinsic value hinges on necessary properties. These philosophers think that intrinsic value can depend on features that are not necessary. Shelly Kagan (1998), for instance, argued that at least in some cases, like the pen Lincoln used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation, the intrinsic value depends on relational properties or even the instrumental value of the object.

The distinctions of value can be confusing and even for philosophers, keeping the different notions of value apart can be challenging. Rae Langton (2007, p. 161) proposed a handy way of thinking about all the distinctions. The intrinsic/extrinsic distinction is about the way things can have value. A thing has value in itself, or its value derives from another thing. In addition to the ways that items can have value, there are also the ways we value things. For instance, we can value something as an end, for its own sake (final value). Or we can value something instrumentally, as a means, for the sake of something else.

By drawing distinctions between values and providing a systematic account of the kinds of values, philosophers can provide some clarity and helpful precision for debates on value in other disciplines.

5.4 Value Monism, Value Pluralism, Commensurability

Is there only one intrinsic value, or are there multiple intrinsic values? Philosophers have provided two answers: value monism and value pluralism. Value monism is the standpoint that there is only one fundamental intrinsic value and that other things are valuable only because they contribute to this ‘super value’. A famous value monist is Jeremy Bentham, one of the founding fathers of Utilitarianism. He believed that pleasure is the only fundamental intrinsic value and that other things are valuable as they provide pleasure or contribute to it.

In contrast to value monists, the value pluralist holds that there is more than one fundamental intrinsic value. One proponent of value pluralism is Judith Jarvis Thomson, who we already encountered in the section above on evaluative statements. Recall that Thompson makes the point that if something is good, it is good in some way, which means there are multiple ways of being good. There is not one property of goodness to which all other forms of goodness can be reduced.⁴

What makes value pluralism appealing is that it fits our experience. Particularly our experience with choices that are difficult for us because they affect multiple values we endorse. These choices are not merely a matter of assessing how much each option realizes the one fundamental value and then picking the option that most realizes this value.⁵

Value monism has its appeal too. Consider the issue of how values can be measured and compared. Two values are incommensurable when measuring them with a cardinal unit is impossible. For instance, values of justice and beauty cannot be measured with a cardinal unit, like money. Commensurability is no problem for value monists because they believe there is only one fundamental intrinsic value. We can compare options in terms of how much they contribute to it. Conversely, pluralists must devise a solution for how different fundamental intrinsic values can be

⁴ For more on value pluralism and value monism, see (Mason, 2013).

⁵ For more details and arguments in favor of pluralism and possible responses by monists, see (Mason, 2013).

compared. The pluralist's answer to the problem of commensurability cannot refer to some super-value that trumps the other values because this would be to endorse monism.

Because thinking about solutions to intricate conceptual problems is philosophers' bread and butter, pluralists have developed a couple of responses to the challenge of commensurability. For instance, James Griffin (1988, p. 90ff.) has argued for the commensurability of a plurality of values based on the idea of a super value scale (although, this does not mean admitting the existence of a super value). Furthermore, both Michael Stocker (1992, p. 72) and Ruth Chang (2004) have proposed ideas about how value pluralists can account for commensurability. Plural values can be compared by using a higher-level synthesizing category (Stocker) or a covering value that subsumes the values that we want to commensurate (Chang). Some readers may have noticed that these proposals endorse monism. Indeed, it has been pointed out that the pluralist solutions to the problem of commensurability are sometimes mysterious and if pressed, they all seem to collapse into value monism (e.g., see Moen, 2016).

The philosophical debate about whether there is a plurality of values or just one value may seem too abstract to be important for the value theories of other disciplines. However, disciplines can learn from one another, and the anthropologist Joel Robbins (2013) has argued that the pluralist-monist debate could benefit from a closer exchange between philosophy and anthropology. We will come back to the dialogue between disciplines in the last chapter.

5.5 Objective, Subjective, Real?—The Philosophical Debate about Value

What is the nature of value, and is what is valuable independent of what people think or feel? This section will briefly outline the philosophical discussion about whether evaluative properties and evaluative facts are mind-independent.

A good entry point into the philosophical discussion about the nature of value is to focus on the division between objectivists and subjectivists. Proponents of both camps agree on what makes objects valuable: something is valuable because of non-evaluative features. For instance, some authors propose that to say something is valuable is to say that it has non-evaluative properties that give us reasons to favor it (Scanlon, 1998). Using philosophical jargon, philosophers sometimes say that the non-evaluative features ground or constitute value.⁶ One influential account in this regard is the so-called fitting attitude account of value. The fitting attitude account proposes that something is valuable when it has properties that make it a *fitting* object of a pro-attitude or pro-behavior.⁷ That something is valuable means we should take a specific stance or response to it (Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen, 2004). Pro-attitudes include favoring, and pro-behaviors include pursuing, promoting, and maintaining something. Conversely, that something has disvalue means that it has properties that make it a fitting object of contra-attitudes, like hate.

Despite the agreement mentioned above between subjectivism and objectivism that value is grounded in non-evaluative properties, the two camps make different claims about the nature of value. Subjectivists believe that the value of something is conferred on it by the subject's attitude toward it. Without the attitude towards the object, so the subjectivist, the object has no value. Attitude here needs to be understood broadly and includes a variety of mental states, like desires, preferences, and passions. Some of these attitudes are favoring, and others are disfavoring. For example, loving something, or someone, is a favoring attitude, and being disgusted would be a disfavoring attitude. In contrast to

⁶Sometimes, philosophers say that value *supervenes* on non-value properties. Supervenience means that something is grounded by something else on which it supervenes. Value comes above or is grounded by other non-value properties, which means there could be no difference in value without a difference in non-value properties.

⁷Brentano can be credited as one of the first philosophers to develop a fitting-attitude account of value (more on fitting-attitudes below). According to Brentano's fitting-attitude account, things that are good are worthy of love and things that are bad are worthy of hate. He uses love and hate in a broad sense and they are catch-all terms for a range of pro- and con-attitudes (Kriegel, 2017). What is good is that towards which it would be fitting to have a pro-attitude, and what is bad is that towards which it would be fitting to have a con-attitude.

subjectivists, objectivists believe there are value facts independent of someone's attitudes. That is, an object has value regardless of someone's attitude toward it.

Because of their different standpoints about the nature of values, objectivists and subjectivists make different claims about the kind of facts expressed in evaluative statements. For instance, subjectivists hold that statements expressing evaluative judgments declare specific facts about the world but that these facts are facts about the subjective states of the individual (and not facts about something 'external' to the subject). Objectivists, conversely, think that evaluative statements report facts about the object itself.

As the distinction between subjectivists and objectivists illustrates, philosophers are puzzled by whether there are mind-independent values. Realists believe there are, whereas anti-realists think there is no such thing as mind-independent values.

For so-called 'robust' value realists, values are independent of people's minds. That means, values are ontologically separate from individuals' attitudes and preferences (Oddie, 2009). Furthermore, a value realist thinks that claims about value can be true or false. For example, the claim 'The painting Mona Lisa is a beautiful painting' can be true or false. A moral realist believes that moral reality is 'stance independent', which means there are moral truths that do not depend on anyone's perspective (Shafer-Landau, 2005). Accordingly, moral judgments, like 'Torturing people is morally wrong', are not just an expression of preferences or tastes. When people make a moral claim like this, they mean to report moral facts.⁸

In contrast to realists, a value anti-realist claims that there are no objective mind-independent values. An anti-realist will either deny that value properties exist or concede that they exist but that they are mind-dependent.

After this outline of the crucial philosophical debates about the nature of value, let us turn to what philosophers have to say about value change.

⁸ Many realists subscribe to naturalism, which identifies value properties with natural properties. For example, being valuable is being pleasant or being the object of preference. Being pleasant or being the object of a preference are non-problematic and presumably natural properties.

5.6 Value Change and Other Changes

The last chapters focused on how psychology, sociology, and anthropology address value change. Given that value change is an essential aspect of life and that value is a crucial focus of philosophy, one would expect that philosophers have something to say about value change. Unfortunately, so far, philosophers have yet to consider value change seriously. The only exception is John Dewey, who proposed an account of value that takes values to be dynamic. We will later consider in more detail Dewey's ideas about value change.

One possible diagnosis for philosophers lack of attention to value change is that value in the sense of *valuing*, the issue of value change may not be intriguing and to philosophers. That attitudes of valuing are in flux seems trivial and uncontroversial. For instance, someone may appreciate chocolate ice cream now but no longer loves it when they are on a diet.

Furthermore, philosophers may have ignored value change because value change can seem like merely adding and subtracting value items. For instance, if beautiful pictures have aesthetic value, then making more beautiful pictures multiplies the valuable items in the world. Conversely, destroying valuable items reduces the number of valuable items in the world. Value change, then, boils down to keeping a score of the value items of the world, which goes up or down depending on our actions.

Although philosophers have yet to provide a complete account of value change, it is possible to discern the outlines of possible positions. For instance, recall that value realism is the idea that value properties are grounded in mind-independent properties. A realist account of value change would propose that changing the mind-independent properties that constitute the value would affect the object's value. Now, consider the issue of objectivism and intrinsic properties. Objective value is a value due to intrinsic properties, and something has objective value regardless of whether anyone values it. For instance, G.E. Moore (1993) claimed that being intrinsically valuable implies being objectively valuable.⁹ If one

⁹Some philosophers have raised objections against the claim that intrinsic implies objective. See (Langton, 2007).

subscribes to this view of objectivity, an account of value change needs to be fleshed out in terms of a change of the properties on which intrinsic value hinges.

Compared to objectivists, subjectivists have a straightforward way of accounting for value change. For a subjectivist, value is grounded in attitudes. For example, consider Valerie Tiberius' (2020) account of value. According to Tiberius, we should think of value in terms of robust and complex psychological states. Tiberius proposes that to value something is "... to have a relatively stable pattern of emotions and desires concerning it and to take these attitudes to give you reasons for actions..." (p. 35). Something is valuable to you if it is the object or target of these complex psychological states. This account is subjective because it ties values to valuing, that is, the attitudes of individuals. If value is cashed out in terms of stable complex patterns of psychological states, an account of value change will concentrate on the transformation of these patterns of psychological states.

Although philosophers have yet to propose an account of value change, they have focused on other changes in the vicinity of value, like moral change and norm change. For example, in a recent book Cecilie Eriksen (2020) investigates the dynamics and structure of moral change, including changes in moral norms, changes in moral concepts, and changes in moral capacities.¹⁰ In her analysis of moral change, Eriksen does not focus on value, although she acknowledges that moral change can be a change in what is valued (p. 16), it remains unclear what the relation is between values and other morally relevant factors like institutions and norms. Consequently, it remains to be seen what the relationship is between value change and different kinds of moral change, like changes in moral norms.

Let us turn to norm change. Philosophers have always shown a keen interest in norms. For instance, Jon Elster has explored the nature of social and moral norms and the relationship between emotions, rationality, and social norms (Elster, 1989, 1994). Others have extended Elster's work. Christina Bicchieri, for example, has developed one of the most detailed accounts of the nature of social norms, including how they come

¹⁰Moral progress, as a kind of moral change, has recently received a lot of attention from philosophers. For more on moral progress see (Egonsson, 2018).

about and change (Bicchieri, 2005, 2007). In a nutshell, a social norm is a behavioral rule that a sufficiently large number of individuals prefer to follow. This preference is based on two beliefs: the belief that others also follow the rule, and the belief that they expect the individual to do the same and will possibly sanction norm violations.¹¹ In contrast to Bicchieri, who focuses on *social* norms, Geoffrey Brennan and his collaborators (Brennan et al., 2013) have recently provided a general account of the concept of norms. Like Bicchieri, Brennan and his co-authors address how norms are created, why they continue to exist, and how they change.

Although Bicchieri and Brennan and his collaborators provide a detailed account of norms and norm change, the relationship between values and norms remains to be determined. This is a pity because other disciplines would benefit from a philosophical account of the relationship between values and norms. To construct such an account, it seems worthwhile for philosophers to consider insights from sociology, psychology, and anthropology. For instance, one could build on existing proposals of the relation between values and norms, like Talcott Parsons' suggestion that norms regulate actions to conform to values (Parsons, 1935). In the last chapter, we will focus in more detail on what the disciplines can learn from one another.

So far, philosophers have yet to pay much attention to value change. The notable exception is pragmatism, specifically the account of pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. Thus, in the next section, we will briefly consider pragmatist ideas about the malleability of values.

5.7 Pragmatism and Values

Before we delve deeper into Dewey's proposal, it is noteworthy that he is not the first philosopher to propose that values are dynamic. For instance, in the nineteenth century, the early pioneer of scientific psychology, Herman Lotze, proposed that value is "something which is essentially dynamic and developing" (Pierson, 1988, p. 121). However, what sets Dewey apart is that he explains how values change.

¹¹ For a full detailed account see (Bicchieri, 2005, p. 11ff).

Pragmatists stress that humans actively relate to their environment and that the environment affects them. This relational character of human existence is a crucial premise of Dewey's account of value, as we will see shortly. In his theory of value, Dewey distinguishes between value, valuing, and valuation. For Dewey, *value* is a quality of an entity. Objects, activities, and feelings can all have value. Values, Dewey argues, are relational in two ways. First, they are linked to the environment, and second, they are connected to other values and beliefs. Because values are embedded in a network of other values and beliefs, these other values and beliefs can affect and reinforce them.

Dewey distinguishes values from *valuing*. For Dewey, valuing is an activity, like prizing and appraising (Dewey, 1939, p. 5). Further examples of valuing are caring and honoring. Generally speaking, valuing refers to all acts of ratings and value judgments. In its most basic form, says Dewey, valuing is the tendency to be attracted or repelled by something. It is important to note that Dewey does not claim that valuing something means that it is valuable. He clearly distinguishes between the desired and the desirable, and the admired and the admirable (Dewey, 2008, p. 212.).

For Dewey, value is not primarily something that is there but something we do, so we should think about value in terms of value activity. Valuing is one of many value activities, according to Dewey. People also engage in so-called *valuation*, which is the process of questioning and investigating what we want. It is important to clarify that for Dewey, valuation goes beyond the critical investigation of ends and includes evaluating the means to achieve them.

What is essential from a pragmatist perspective is that values are not fixed but are subject to revision. Value activities are intimately bound to our practices and habits, but our experience of the world can transform them. New information about the world and the breakdown of our practices and habits prompts us to revisit and, if necessary, revise our value judgments. This can happen when the situation is indeterminate or because our habitual ways of doing things cannot respond to new problems. When such problematic situations occur, we must engage in *value inquiry* to develop new value practices that can handle these challenging situations. Value inquiry is a reflective process in which value judgments

are tested to evaluate whether acting according to these value judgments successfully solves the problem. Value judgments are like scientific claims that have to be constantly revisited, which means that for pragmatists, the process of value inquiry never ends.

Because pragmatists think human activity is an ongoing process and value judgments are subject to revision, they reject the dualism of means and ends.¹² In the constant flow of our engagement with the world, our ends are often turned into means for other ends. Because of the possible revision of means and ends, there are neither final ends nor ends in themselves. There are only what Dewey calls ends-in-view (Dewey, 1939).

These ends-in-view are objectives or anticipated results that link value judgments to desires and interests and that guide our actions. One way to think about ends-in-view is that they are like plans for building a house. The plans guide the activity, but they are not the house itself. The end of an action is the plan to bring about some change in the world. Importantly, ends-in-view are always provisional, which means they can become means to another end-in-view.

Furthermore, ends-in-view and means are tightly linked. We cannot understand one in isolation from the other. Ends only fully come into view when we grasp what is necessary to realize a goal or achieve an end.

5.8 Summary

This chapter focused on crucial conceptual distinctions and philosophical positions about value. For instance, the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic value. The chapter also reviewed important metaphysical positions concerning the nature of value, like objectivism and subjectivism. It also touched upon distinction between pluralism and monism, which is about whether there are many values or just one. Finally, the chapter addressed the issue of value change and related topics, like moral change and norm change.

¹² Most pragmatists also reject the dualisms of fact and value, and extrinsic and intrinsic. However, it is important to keep in mind, as Hilary Putnam (Putnam, 2002, p. 9) has stressed, that rejecting the dualism does not mean rejecting the distinction of fact and value. Drawing this distinction can be helpful for some purposes, like making an argument.

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