

## Common Values

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Presented at The World in Perspective, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 25-26

September 1998.

The project of a theory of value as it was pursued by John Dewey and Lewis Hahn among others in Value: A Cooperative Inquiry<sup>1</sup> has been largely abandoned in recent years in favor of a theory of valuational consistency. The trends that I am pointing to here embrace such areas as game theory, decision theory, and the logic of preference. Little is said about what it means to value something, and how doing so relates to the claim that something "has value," but much concerning what a rational set of interests and aims is relative to a given, variable set of basal valuations. What results is a consideration of the formal conditions of consistent valuation, as opposed to a consideration of what constitutes valuation itself, its conditions and consequences; what in a stronger sense may be called rational valuation.

There might be many reasons cited for this shift from constitutive to formal issues, but I think one main reason for the shift is a problem that has dogged questions of value for centuries--viz., without any clear ontological basis by which we can make the claim that values are in some sense "in the world," there appears to be no basis upon which to speak of "common values" in the full-blooded sense at all,<sup>2</sup> although we may save some scientific respectability for value inquiry by noting that people do have interests, goals, aims, etc., as a matter of psychological fact, and exploring the criteria of internal consistency within a given set of such valuings. This is reinforced by views that partly stem from philosophical trends, and partly from themes in the general culture. Among the former is the view, especially popular in continental political

thought, that accepted values are a function of certain historical and cultural interests, and since history is (or was) a contingent matter (things might have gone differently), so are the supervening values. The well-known work of Michel Foucault developed along these lines. A broader, cultural attitude that contributes to the rejection of constitutive issues is the suspicion that to assert the existence of common or universal values is inconsistent with a recognition of and tolerance for the plurality of values inter- and intra-culturally.

The upshot of these philosophical and cultural currents of thought is the view that trying to find answers to questions concerning the conditions of valuation and the criteria of rational values is a fruitless affair born of muddleheaded thinking all of which can be cleared up simply by abandoning the project and taking constitutive values as either the cultural or psychological preconditions of the application, but not the content, of cogent value inquiry, much as true propositions constitute the precondition of the application of formal logical theory.<sup>3</sup> I wish to argue here that the pessimism expressed in these views is, in fact, unwarranted--that not only do people accept many of the same values, but that they could hardly do otherwise, in which case constitutive questions of value are meaningful and important.

I will pursue the issue by offering a line of argument that aims at the conclusion that the notion of radically different and incommensurable systems of value is incoherent, which would mean that the presumption of some significant common ground of valuation is rationally required in value inquiry.

There is little doubt that the notion of value is bound with the notion of intentional action. When we say that someone values something, we offer an account of a stable practical

commitment that is central to anticipatory predictions and retrospective explanations of that person's behavior. If we are told that someone values intellectual discussion, we then can readily explain why it is that he or she in the past has organized discussion groups, attended conferences on cerebral topics, sought out people who have interesting things to say, etc., and we will readily predict that the person will continue to do these things in the future.

Another sign of the close relationship between valuing and pragmatic intention, I think, is that the strength of claims that various animals have interests beyond those that devolve to matters of pure biology correlates with how sensible or natural it is to attribute intentional action to these animals. It seems quite natural to say that dogs like meaty bones, dogs being of a level of behavioral sophistication such that it also seems quite natural to say that a dog digging in the dirt is trying to retrieve the bone she buried yesterday. Similar claims make sense with respect to most mammals generally.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, although phototropisms can be observed in very simple organisms, it seems to make little sense to say that such organisms intend to pursue light, and just as little sense to say that they like light, or have an interest in light.

Now, in view of this, what I wish to argue is that our understanding of intentional actions is dependent on the attribution of interests and values to agents, such that if we have no way of making such attributions, we likewise have no basis upon which to make the claim that a given behavior is intentional at all. If this is so, then the attribution of wholly different interests to an agent whose actions we interpret to be intentional is incoherent, and some common core must be presumed.

It has been a staple of action theory of the past forty years or so that intentions can be understood in terms of beliefs and desires, or, more broadly, "pro-attitudes." When we attribute

an intention to someone, we attribute a belief and desire to that person that conjointly are understood as causes or reasons of the action in question. Thus if Mary drives to the store for a loaf of bread to have with her soup for dinner, the claim "Mary intends to buy a loaf of bread" can be understood as entailing the conjoint claims "Mary desires to buy a loaf of bread" and "Mary believes that bread can be purchased at the store." Significant revision in one of these claims will require revision in the other as its ascription is relevant to explaining intention. So if Mary, as she is pulling up to the store, tells us that in fact she has no desire for bread, her belief that bread can be purchased at the store, if she has it, can no longer explain her intention, and the ascription of other beliefs relevant to other desires must be considered. Likewise, if she tells us that she had no idea that bread could be purchased at the store, her desire for bread, if she has such, is no longer relevant to explaining her intentions.

Now in such instances, what determines which beliefs and desires provide the most plausible interpretation of intentions? The answer, it seems to me, is those beliefs and desires that are most reasonable from our own standpoint in light of the agent's overall behavior. Donald Davidson has argued that the interpretation of another's assertions requires a tradeoff between reasonable attributions of meanings and beliefs to a speaker, a tradeoff which starts with the assumption of a significant overlap of common beliefs.<sup>5</sup> I suggest a similar commonality must hold with respect to standing motivations when interpreting the intentions of agents. By "standing motivations" I mean stable interests and goals that regularly enter into our intentions as felt desires.

Consider again Mary's case. If we know she was preparing soup for dinner, and see her leave the soup simmering, go to the store, and purchase a loaf of bread, the reasonable

interpretation based on the presumption of a general congruence of beliefs and desires would be that she intends to eat bread with dinner. Even if we wouldn't eat bread with our soup, other more broadly defined desires, such as a varied diet for the purposes of nutrition, or the pleasures of eating foods in a meal of complementary flavors and textures, can lead to an accurate explanation. If subsequent behavior falsifies the interpretation, the search can be renewed on the basis of the presumption of general congruence.

Now, the central question is this: What could we conclude without the presumption of a general congruence of desires and beliefs? Since behavioral evidence underdetermines interpretations of intentions, nothing at all could be inferred--with no alternative heuristic criterion, there is no basis for assessing the relative probabilities of the possible explanations, and the possible explanations are endless. Would it help if we were to presume overall congruence of beliefs, but not desires? This would of course rule out beliefs that we take as false. But the beliefs by which we interpret others' actions are in most cases standing beliefs which we attribute to agents as active beliefs. The issue here is one of relevance: Which of our standing beliefs is relevant to this action in this set of circumstances? Our usual clue here is reasonable desire. Without the presumption of congruence, this is not available, and possible explanations proliferate. Considering Mary again, Mary might want an organic sponge, to which her belief that bread is organic and spongelike is relevant; or she might want a table ornament of a beige color (to complement a certain room's color scheme), to which her belief concerning the color of bread is relevant; or she might want something that is roughly five inches square to plug up the five-inch-square hole in her septic pipe, to which her belief concerning the dimensions of a typical loaf is relevant, and so on.

General congruence, of course, doesn't mean complete congruence--we recognize that people have different motivations, both in terms of long-term, standing interests, and felt desires in particular situations. But it is in the context of shared interests that motivational variance is recognized. I might not have any wish to free-climb a mountain, because of the danger involved, but I do understand the desire for an exciting pastime that provides diversion from humdrum routine, and with an imaginative adjustment of my fear threshold, the point of the free-climbing becomes clear.

The strategy of interpretation in this and other cases of motivational variance seems to go roughly something like this. There are certain broad domains of motivation in which interests and desires are arranged hierarchically, from quite general and long-range goals and interests to ones that are more specifically defined and sought in more narrowly circumscribed contexts. Interests of lower generality are instances of the more general interests, which allows a route to be traced from the particular to the general. The interest in free-climbing is an instance of an interest in pleasant vigorous activity, which is in turn an instance of an interest in diversionary pleasures, etc. When someone's behavior is puzzling, we are able to interpret the behavior by finding a common interest of higher generality, and then using contextual clues and imaginative psychological adjustments to follow the path to more specific interests and desires. A political leader who orders an attack on a neighboring country may be acting from ambition or self-protection, generally shared motivations that identify relevant behavioral and contextual tests of our interpretations. Evidence of the depletion of crucial natural resources in the leader's country, and abundant resources in the neighboring country, would suggest more particularly economic

ambition, and aggressive behavior in the past would provide evidence of dispositions which are consistent with this interpretation.

What this line of argument suggests, I think, is that the presumption that intentional action takes place within a broad motivational context that is interpersonally congruent in general character is not eliminable from the strategies of pragmatic interpretation. Without this presumption, interpretations of intention fail, and the best we can do is cite behavioral regularities that fall far short of an account of intention.

But more than this, it is hard to understand without this presumption in place how we could interpret an action as intentional at all. Consider an example of perplexing behavior. A psychologist observes her patient backing a wheelchair into the corner of a room, while issuing nautical orders in a commanding voice: "2/3rds astern!" "Belay the breast rope smartly mister!" etc. What is the psychologist to think?<sup>6</sup> If the patient, in a more lucid moment when his behavior is appropriate to circumstances, tells her of his experience during the curious episode (e.g., "I thought I was docking the Queen Mary"), she has evidence of delusional belief and an avenue to align her standing motivations to the delusional context in a "what if" manner, much as we would enter into a child's imaginary play.<sup>7</sup> Interpretation in this case becomes possible. Without this avenue, however, there is no more reason to take the behavior as acting within a delusion than as an unconscious pantomime of intentional behavior, such as we commonly understand sleepwalking.

I'll offer two conclusions from these considerations. First, there is a web of common standing motivations and beliefs that provide the basis of behavioral interpretation. This web may be more or less attenuated on the basis of variation in cultural and environmental

circumstances, but it cannot break altogether within the boundaries of recognizable intentional agency. Judgments of reasonable valuation are assessed within this motivational web.

Secondly, a common motivational framework provides the basis upon which discrepant valuations are coordinated and understood. As we can understand the rock-climber's motivation by an imaginative shift in fear threshold, and Mary's interest in bread by placing ourselves within her motivational context, so generally discrepancies in valuation can be reconciled by an imaginative shift upward in a given motivational domain coupled with such adjustments in psychology dispositions and practical context as is suggested on an empirical basis. Such strategies are a staple of our sympathetic understanding of the whys and wherefores of others. This does not, of course, rule out the possibility of irreconcilable differences, but it does mean that discordant valuations do have a common motivational ground.

I have offered nothing here by way of suggesting what values are, or how valuations should be assessed. But if, as I have argued, we must presume a common core of motivation among all intentional agents, there is, no doubt, some considerable territory that can be philosophically explored. Any concern of radical incommensurability of values can be safely put aside since it is seriously entertained only on pain of incoherence, and further inquiry into the psychological and contextual grounds of valuation, and the content of rational values, can proceed on an empirical basis. In short, constitutive investigation concerning values and valuation is an endeavor that was not well abandoned, and is well worth a second look.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ed. Ray Lepley (New York: Columbia University, 1949).

<sup>2</sup> As Lewis Hahn noted in "A Contextualist Looks at Values" (Lepley, op. cit., 112-114) metaphysical views do seem to play a role in the stances that value theorists take to the status of value. If this is true, then the flight from metaphysics in twentieth century thought might offer an additional explanation of the flight from constitutive issues in value inquiry. A return to these issues, I think, may well require taking a metaphysics of value seriously. In this paper, however, I will try to initiate a return not by explaining what value is, but arguing the more fundamental claim that common values must be recognized.

<sup>3</sup> The method is well represented in the following passage by James G. March and Herbert A. Simon: "When we first encounter the rational man of economics and statistical decision theory in the decision-making situation he already has laid out before him the whole set of alternatives from which he will choose his action. This set of alternatives is simply 'given'; the theory does not tell how it is obtained . . ." [Organizations (New York: Wiley, 1958), p. 137.

<sup>4</sup> It might be thought that the key to this correlation is not intentional action, but consciousness. Animals that are conscious, to the degree they are conscious, can be said to have interests or to value things. But an animal that has quite acute conscious sensations of pain, warmth, light, etc., and yet lacks any interests seems perfectly conceivable. I suspect that the attribution of intentional action does presume consciousness, but the attribution of levels of consciousness do not appear to imply the presence of interests.

<sup>5</sup> See "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 195-97.

<sup>6</sup> This example was suggested to me some years ago by Matthew Kelly, although he drew somewhat different conclusions from it.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. an episode reported by Oliver Sacks, where a peculiar form of behavior was explained by one of his patients: "As I was writing notes at my desk, I perceived through the open door Seymour L. careering down the corridor; he had been walking pretty normally, and then, suddenly, accelerated, festinant, precipitated. . . . He recovered, however, and was able to proceed without further incident to the nursing station near my desk. He was obviously in a rage, and a panic, and bewildered: 'Why the hell do they leave the passage like that? . . . It's got a bloody great hole in it. . . .' 'Mr. L.,' the nurse replied. 'You're not making sense. I assure you the passage is perfectly normal.' At this point I got up . . . and suggested to Mr. L. and the nurse that we walk back together, to find out about the 'excavation'. Seymour walked between us, unconsciously attuning his pace to ours, and we walked the length of the passage together without any incident--and without any hint of festination or precipitation. This absence of incident left Seymour confounded. 'I'll be damned,' he said. 'You're perfectly right. . . . But'--he turned to me, and spoke with an emphasis and a conviction I have never forgotten--'I could have sworn it suddenly dipped, just as I said. It was because it dipped that I was forced into a run. You'd do the same if you felt the ground falling away, in a steep slope under your feet! I ran as anyone would run, with such a feeling. What you call 'festination' is no more than a normal reaction to an abnormal perception.'" [Awakenings (New York: Dutton, 1983), pp. 298f.]