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What Mary didn't know about values (The hard problem of value 3)

Abstract: This article answers some criticisms raised against *How hard is it to create values?* and offers a further formulation of the hard problem of value. Section 1 addresses the objection that Nietzsche's criterion of life is too vague to serve as a useful value standard. Section 2 expands on the important idea of appreciating the difference among value perspectives. Sections 3 and 4 present the "hard problem of value" as a challenge for Nietzschean value agonism and value nihilism respectively. Section 5 offers a further formulation of the "hard problem of value": a thought experiment about Mary, an expert, anti-realist value creator, whose values may or may not lack some qualities, analogous to Mary, the colour scientist of the "knowledge argument".

Keywords: life-affirmation, value agonism, nihilism, "hard problem of value", knowledge argument.

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag nimmt Stellung zur Kritik an *How hard is it to create values?* und bietet eine weitere Formulierung des harten Werteproblems. Abschnitt 1 behandelt den Einwand, dass Nietzsches Kriterium ‚Leben‘ zu vage und als Wertmaßstab untauglich sei. Abschnitt 2 vertieft den Gedanken der Wertschätzung des Unterschieds zwischen Wertperspektiven. In den Abschnitten 3 und 4 wird das harte Werteproblem als Herausforderung respektive für Werte-Agonismus und Nihilismus präsentiert. Abschnitt 5 strebt eine weitere Formulierung des ‚harten Werteproblems‘ an: ein Gedankenexperiment über Mary, anti-realistische Expertin im Werteschaffen, deren Werten, analog zur Farbwahrnehmungsexpertin des ‚Wissensarguments‘, etwas zu fehlen scheint.

Schlagwörter: Lebensbejahung, Werteagonismus, Nihilismus, ‚hartes Werteproblem‘, Wissensargument.

Nietzsche cannot be slotted neatly into one of the many contemporary metaethical positions. I myself acknowledged that it is "ultimately impossible to attribute to Nietzsche one particular metaethical stance" (1.3, p. 34).¹ I suggested in my first contribution to read Nietzsche's proposal for value creation (VC) – paradigmatically I chose Nachlass 1882/83, 5[1]234, KSA 10.214 – as a hypothetical argument for anti-realism. VC, I noted, is motivated by what Nietzsche saw as "the impending threat

¹ Pace 2.8 [Andreas Hetzel].

of nihilism” (1.3, p. 37n11). I then asked if Nietzsche might have been wrong – or too optimistic – that most or all people would eventually come to conceive of values as created, and that he might be blind – and perhaps blind us – to a hard problem of value.

In this article I first address the objection that Nietzsche’s criterion of life is too vague to serve as a useful value standard. In section 2 I expand on the important idea of appreciating the difference among value perspectives. In sections 3 and 4 I present the hard problem of value as a challenge to Nietzschean value agonism and value nihilism respectively. In section 5 I offer a further formulation of the “hard problem of value”: a thought experiment about Value-Mary, an expert value creator, whose values may or may not lack some qualities – analogous to Mary, the colour scientist of the “knowledge argument”.²

1 The vagueness of “Life”?

In 2.2 [Martin Saar] is rightly concerned that Nietzsche’s conception of life remains vague, and may sanction too many, if not all, acts of will. Since I already proposed in 2.3 the distinction between basic life-affirmation and what I see as Nietzsche’s more complex life-affirmation *par excellence*, I will not say much more about it here. It also strikes me as a misunderstanding to reject the criterion of success that Nietzsche suggests, i.e. life-affirmation, because it may fail to provide a “recipe”.³ As I and other contributors have argued, his project seems essentially opposed to providing any set of instructions that aim at a specific outcome – if this is what 2.2 means by a “recipe” or “prescription”. I would like to emphasize again that only if we accept Nietzsche’s challenge to set up *interdisciplinary research programmes* – that examine our own and others’ value practices, their real, embodied history, as he proposes in the GM I 17 ‘Remark’ – can we see that this philosophical and empirical programme has both critical and constructive potential. Just as we study and monitor GDP, why not study GDW (*Gross Domestic Wellbeing*)?⁴ For this it might well be necessary to investigate (philosophically, historically, empirically) what we actually mean by “well-being” or “flourishing”. And we might well arrive at the conclusion that “national happiness” is the wrong indicator to measure, and that individual and cultural flourishing require us to abandon many of our preconceptions about flourishing. If Nietzsche’s conception of life or flourishing is too abstract to be useful – it almost certainly is – it is on us

² I would like to thank Alex Barber for suggesting this analogy.

³ “Der Verweis auf ‘das Leben’ gibt vielleicht die grobe Richtung für das Wie-Werte-Schaffen an, ein Rezept bietet es nicht” (2.2 [Martin Saar], p. 109).

⁴ The country of Bhutan, for example, has measured its Gross National Happiness (GNH) since the 1970s.

to “put legs on it”. That there is no *one* “recipe”, no *determinate* “normative prescription” is, at least from Nietzsche’s point of view, a strength. We can use his view on one of the highest values that used to be prevalent, Truth with a capital, to say something more general about his view of values. Just as Nietzsche is opposed to absolute Truth, truth with a capital, but is perfectly happy with – and positively endorses – a great number of conceptual, scientific, and historical truths; he is opposed to only one kind of flourishing based on one set of ultimate values. The latter he regards as nihilistic for the same reason as Truth is nihilistic: both would be nihilistic qua self-undermining. Analogously he positively endorses the need for new, higher values.⁵

2 Valuing difference?

A conception of flourishing that results from such a non-reductively naturalistic research project into the value of specific values for particular valuers may indeed, as 2.5 [Iris Därmann] emphasizes, reveal and justify the need for accepting what 2.5 calls the “otherness of others”, the taking joy in the difference between one’s own and other value perspectives (Nachlass 1880, 3[98], KSA 9.73; Nachlass 1880, 6[158], KSA 9.237). Note that here Nietzsche goes – like in the published passage on love in MA II, VM 75 – beyond any model that merely tolerates differences. Instead he seems to require us to appreciate a complex logic of what “*living apart together*” may entail⁶ for those (according to Nietzsche, most of us) who cannot but live under the conditions of “who we are”. In order to value rather than merely tolerate differences, it is crucial to recognize perspectives as *both* enabling and limiting conditions. As Nietzsche suggests in JGB 231 – 2.6 [James Porter] draws attention to this important passage – our evolutionary success actually depended largely on our “simpleminded-ness” (*Dummheit*). Such recognition of our simplemindedness may introduce merely a minimal distancing from many of our – recalcitrant and perhaps even incorrigible – perspectival evaluations.⁷ And yet, even minimal distancing from “who one is” may actually be sufficient to enable individual and cultural value creation to harness that which has been built into us by evolution and socialization, and thereby actually contribute to our evolu-

⁵ Nietzsche clearly approves of the natural sciences in the ‘Remark’ in GM. And though he is aware that science has the potential to be a threat to flourishing, he praises the latter in many passages (cf. GS 12). Nietzsche uses ‘Schmerzbringer’ affirmatively only twice. For the natural sciences in GS 12, and for “the heroic human beings, the great bestowers of suffering: those few and rare, who require the same apology, as suffering itself [...]” (GS 318).

⁶ On the complex logic of Nietzsche’s conception of values, and structural features of old and new values, see Manuel Dries, On the Logic of Values, in: *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 39 (2010), pp. 30–50.

⁷ On Nietzsche’s conception of the self as a hierarchy of drives, affects and higher-order values, see 1.3, p. 30n1.

tion. We begin to understand that some of our greatest strengths as individuals and as cultures,⁸ which enabled us to get to where we are today (e.g. rule-based, habituated choice), can also lead to self-undermining rigidities and self-deceptions.⁹ Nietzsche's philosophy calls on us to "walk the tightrope" (cf. Z) between the humility of accepting who one is, and the ambition to change by setting new goals.

3 Value agonism and its limits?

The argument of my paper 1.3 should also not be misunderstood as attributing to Nietzsche a position opposed to the *agonistic value practices* he clearly favors. A first, rough definition of Nietzschean agonism could be something like this: a living practice of value competition that improves our values and value practices in view of flourishing. But much more is needed. We would have to develop nuanced proposals of what such value agonism could look like in the 21st century. Here is what I see as a real challenge for value agonism: the difficulty for value agonism is to find a conception that allows the non-realist and the realist, the secular who believes in value creation and the believer in absolute or ultimate values, to coexist. The "hard problem" is how any nuanced agonistic value practice can get off the ground if realist and antirealist convictions undermine the very exchange that an antagonistic-pluralist ethics based on at least minimal mutual recognition, challenge, and minimal respect requires. Nietzsche's philosophy offers, I believe, some important resources for such an ethics.¹⁰ But, and this is my main concern, Nietzsche's own bias in favor of value creation may not assist us if our goal is an ethics that includes those who think of real values as other than values that are created or constructed. Before I return to the "hard problem of value" one more time, I wish to discuss briefly what I already indicated is an important background condition for Nietzsche's interest in the question of value creation: what I called in 1.3 the "threat of nihilism" (p. 37n12).

4 Which nihilism?

Nihilism has only been mentioned in passing during this controversy and, despite the massive literature that exists on it, it still remains a poorly understood notion.

⁸ I see not enough evidence for 2.7 [Vanessa Lemm]'s suggestion that Nietzsche's philosophy of value has been interpreted predominantly as cultural by the continental tradition and as individualistic by the analytic tradition.

⁹ See Dries, *On the Logic of Values*, and George Ainslie, *Breakdown of the Will*, Cambridge 2001.

¹⁰ I have hinted at such resources in Nietzsche in Dries, *On the Logic of Values*.

This is partly due to commentators often conflating the many different conceptions of nihilism Nietzsche develops, mainly in his notebooks. To name just a few of these different conceptions: Nietzsche speaks, for example, of a “first nihilism”, a “theoretical and practical nihilism”, “active” and “passive” nihilism, and even “most extreme” forms of “nihilism.” Some of these types of nihilism he at times endorses, usually those that he sees as rejecting traditional higher values. Other forms of nihilism he rejects and wishes to overcome, usually those forms that issue in passive despair (e.g. of those still beholden to traditional nihilistic values), disorientation (absence of new higher values and goals), or re-orientations that are still beholden to either the same old values in disguised form, or to new values that function structurally like the old, nihilism-prone values. What I should have made more explicit in 1.3, some form of nihilism seems to remain a constitutive aspect even of his positive proposal to create “living” values. Recall, Nietzsche writes, “The evaluations’ ability to live [Lebenkönnen], requires their ability to be annihilated. The creator [Schöpfer] must always be an annihilator [Vernichter].” (Nachlass 1882/83, 5[1]234, KSA 10.214)¹¹ Pace 2.9 [Maudemarie Clark], it may be misleading to see Nietzsche’s rejection of value realism, on the one hand, and nihilism, on the other, as two different “grounds” or “reasons” for value creation. The creation of new higher values is needed, Nietzsche thinks, precisely because the traditionally realist, ultimate values *are* nihilistic. Nihilistic in the sense that they are values of the kind that, Nietzsche assumes, “devalue themselves” (Nachlass 1887, 9[35](27), KSA 12.350). 2.9 expresses the hope for new values to be created through our jointly “navigating the space of reasons”. As much as I am sympathetic to such reason-centred proposals, I am concerned that they underestimate the hard problem of value. For values and reasons to be action guiding, for Nietzsche, they have to be embodied and affectively embedded. Culture plays a significant role in the latter. Such embedding is what Nietzsche means by incorporation (*Einverleibung*).¹² But what if to the realist, religious or secular, such new “values”, jointly created in the space of reasons, simply do not count and feel like proper values? What if to the realist they simply lack what it takes for values to motivate action, to fuel the realist’s will? – I will now try to offer another formula-

¹¹ This idea is not confined to the notebooks. It is instrumental in Z II, On Self-Overcoming, which Nietzsche then quotes in EH, Destiny 2; cf also GM III 27.

¹² As John Richardson, Nietzsche’s Problem of the Past, in: Manuel Dries (ed.), Nietzsche on Time and History, Berlin / New York 2008, pp. 87–111, p. 109, puts it: “My existing values are built into my drives and socialized habits, and I don’t annul them just by saying that I do. I need to push genealogical insights down to the very points at which these drives and habits operate. I must build into my everyday responses those countering diagnoses supplied by genealogy, so that I see *why* I will, *while* I will. Willing only really takes up theory into its own projective stance when it takes practical regard of it in its concrete and everyday moments of willing.” But Richardson, too, acknowledges that for Nietzsche there are limits to such cognitive “incorporation,” as it may not be possible to “scratch deeply enough to destroy the imprinted script of many millennia” (MA I 41).

tion of the hard problem through an adaptation of Frank Jackson's famous thought experiment.¹³

5 The hard problem of value: what Value-Mary didn't know

Let me test the analogy, for many surely too tenuous, with the famous and widely debated knowledge argument in the philosophy of mind. Recall, Mary, the colour expert who studied vision in a black and white laboratory, knows all there is to know about colour vision. If physicalism is true, then she will not gain any knowledge when she leaves her black and white room for the first time. But, if Mary does in fact learn something, namely what-it-is-like to see a colour such as red, then qualia, the name for subjective experiential properties are real, and physicalism is false.

Now, consider Mary's analogue. Let's call her Value-Mary. Value-Mary is a brilliant scientist of value who, being non-realist about values, specializes in the evolutionary and social histories, embodied neurophysiology and psychology of valuing. She possesses all the information there is to obtain about values and valuers. If non-realist value creation (VC) is true, then Value-Mary, who has created a set of higher values, will leave her value creation lab with, if not the most, then at least an excellent set of values all things considered. But, let's assume that upon leaving the VC lab, Value-Mary realizes that her values do not seem to function properly. Many potential valuers to whom she offers her created values show only fleeting interest, most ignore them altogether as they do not regard them as proper candidates for higher values. And perhaps Value-Mary herself, now on the outside, constantly feels tempted to go back to the lab and adapt or change her set of values rather than simply adopt them herself. Would Value-Mary's values lack some quality or qualities, at least for some? What is it about her values that makes their adoption fail? Will Value-Mary *learn* anything about values? Or is it merely a question of time for valuers to appreciate Value-Mary's creations?

¹³ See Frank Jackson, Epiphenomenal Qualia, in: *Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1982), pp. 127–136, in particular p. 130; and also Frank Jackson, What Mary Didn't Know, in: *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986), pp. 291–295.