

What is Value?

Blithering Genius

2023 May 22

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1 Introduction

Although value permeates our existence, most people have never thought about what value is: what makes something good or bad, and what it means to say that something is good or bad.

In this essay, I will describe four types, or layers, of value: biological, psychological, social and philosophical.

2 Biological Value

Biological value is what is good or bad for an organism.

Organisms are reproducing machines. The form of an organism was selected to reproduce. So, organisms have a natural purpose: to reproduce. Biological value is defined relative to that purpose. What is instrumental to an organism's reproduction is good for that organism. Conversely, what is detrimental to an organism's reproduction is bad for that organism.

For example, it is biologically good for an oak tree to have water and sunshine, and it is biologically bad for an oak tree to be cut down.

When we make a statement about what is biologically good or bad, it is always relative to an organism (or more generally, a reproducing entity). Cutting down the oak tree is bad for the oak tree, but it might be good for a maple sapling that is growing beneath the oak tree.

Biological value is objective in the sense that it is an objective property of events. The oak tree's objective purpose is to reproduce. Cutting down the oak tree is objectively bad for it. Biological value is objective, but organism-relative.

Biological value is not cosmic. There is no telos to life as a whole. Life is not instrumental to some higher purpose. Evolution creates entities with purposes, and each individual organism has its own purpose: to reproduce.

Biological value emerged from causality via the loop of reproduction. The form of an organism has been selected to reproduce, and every part of an organism has a function that is instrumental to reproduction.

3 Psychological Value

Psychological value is a subjective judgment of what is good or bad for the subject.

Some organisms have a brain that uses mental models to generate action. Mental models represent more than just reality. They also represent hypothetical events, potential actions and *value*. Mental models have value-implications: judgments of what is good or bad from the subject's perspective.

Value judgments define the subject's value-orientation toward existing or hypothetical objects and events. They are the desires of the organism. Psychological value does not exist objectively. It is projected onto objects and events by a subject, through mental models. An object (real or hypothetical) can have value to a subject because of its properties, but the value is not a property of the object. It is the subject's orientation toward the object.

Value judgments are used to generate action. You act toward what you positively value, and away from what you negatively value.

Imagine a cheetah chasing a gazelle. The cheetah positively values catching the gazelle, and is acting to make that outcome real. The gazelle negatively values being caught, and is acting to prevent that outcome. Each brain projects a different value onto the hypothetical outcome of the cheetah catching the gazelle. One subject acts toward that outcome. The other acts to prevent it.

Psychological value is derived from motivation. Motivation is generated by the emotions, which are heuristic problem-recognizers. Hunger is the emotion that motivates us to eat. Fear is the emotion that motivates us to avoid injury and death. We have many different emotions, but they all generate the same thing: motivation. We experience pain when motivation increases, and pleasure when motivation decreases.

We acquire value-knowledge from experience, in essentially the same way that we acquire truth-knowledge. We learn what is good or bad from the experiences of pain and pleasure. We learn to positively value what causes pleasure, and negatively value what causes pain.

Value-knowledge is part of conceptual knowledge. We learn concepts from experience by induction. We apply concepts to experience by pattern-recognition. When a concept is applied, both truth and value judgments are generated.

For example, suppose that you see a \$20 bill lying on the sidewalk. You will recognize the object as money, based on pattern-recognition. You have learned from experience that money is good. So, your brain will generate the action of picking up the money and putting it in your pocket. In

that situation, recognizing a concept generates a value judgment, which then generates a choice of action. You are constantly making such judgments and acting on them.

Psychological value is not cosmic. Our individual value judgments do not reflect a cosmic standard of value.

Psychological value heuristically reflects biological value, but does not directly reduce to it. Emotions evolved to motivate adaptive behavior, but they do not work ideally in every situation. Emotions are heuristic, ad hoc and stimulus-dependent. In modern civilization, human emotions can generate very maladaptive desires and behaviors.

See Reproduction | Masturbation, Alienation and Art, and Motivation.

4 Social Value

Social value is intersubjective. It emerges from individual psychological value in a social context. Social value defines good and bad for a collective, rather than a single individual. Social value judgments are agreements between multiple minds.

Many other things are intersubjective. Language is one example. “Dog” means dog because we all use the word in the same way. The meaning of words is just an agreement between minds. Laws, money and property are other examples. Each exists as an agreement between minds.

Social values arise by implicit or explicit agreement between the members of a society. They can emerge as cultural norms, or they can be defined explicitly, as laws or principles.

For example, the norm “murder is bad” naturally emerges from people living together. Each member of the group is willing to give up the freedom to kill others in exchange for protection from being killed by others. It is not that killing others is bad from an individual perspective. Each individual could benefit by killing others. But each individual could also benefit from a collective prohibition on violence. So, the people agree, implicitly or explicitly, to not kill each other. This agreement creates the social value “murder is bad”. The group then imposes that social value on its members by killing those who violate the norm.

Although people have conflicting interests, they also have shared interests, and they can often benefit by cooperating. People naturally generate social values that reflect their shared interests.

See Game Theory and Society.

Just as psychological value is tied to the perspective of an individual, social value is tied to the perspective of a group. Members of a group might agree not to kill each other, but also agree to kill the members of another group, and have no problem killing and eating animals. This double-standard reflects the shared interests of the group. Just as individuals are selfish, groups are selfish.

Social value is often called “morality”. Many people have the false belief that their social values are cosmic values, which emanate from a cosmic source, such as God. This delusion is not necessary for social values to exist.

See What is Morality?.

Social value is not cosmic. Social value arises from psychological value. It derives its normativity from psychological value, and ultimately from biological value.

5 Philosophical Value

Philosophical value is defined by an explicit philosophical theory of value.

For example, hedonism is a philosophical theory of value. It defines positive value as pleasure and negative value as pain. Only pain and pleasure have intrinsic value, according to hedonism. Other things can have instrumental value as causes of pain or pleasure.

Hedonism is not a scientific theory. It does not describe reality. It is a normative theory. It defines what is good or bad from an individual perspective. It is used to make explicit value claims in a philosophical context.

There is no uniquely rational way to define value philosophically. “What is the right theory of value?” is a normative question: a question of value. To answer that question, we need a theory of value. This infinite regress demonstrates that there is no foundation for value in philosophy. At most, we can define a theory of value and use it to justify itself.

We can also select a theory of value based on its alignment with biological or psychological value, but there is no prior basis for doing so. It would be the naturalistic fallacy (leaping across the is | ought gap) to assume that biological or psychological value is philosophical value. To have a rational theory of value, we must understand that it has no prior basis, and that we choose it.

However, it does not follow that we are free to choose any philosophical theory of value and live by it. Consider the value theory “green bottlism”, in which making green bottles is intrinsically good, and nothing else has intrinsic value. You could propose this theory as a joke or a thought experiment, but you could not live by it, because it does not fit your nature. A philosophical theory that conflicts with human nature could never be adopted.

A philosophical theory of value does not replace intuition. In ordinary life, we have to make judgments quickly and automatically. But a philosophical theory of value can make a difference in areas where intuitions are unclear or conflicted. It can also give a larger purpose to life, one that goes beyond the judgments generated by intuition.

6 Summary

In summary, here are the different types of value and their relationships:

- Biological value arises from causality by the loop of reproduction.
- Psychological value is used by the brain to generate action. It is a biological adaptation that evolved. It derives its normativity from biological value.
- Social value arises from psychological value in multiple interacting minds. It derives its normativity from psychological value, and thus from biological value.
- Philosophical value arises from our ability to think about ourselves, and ask the question “What is value?”. There is no uniquely rational answer to that question.