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Theories and Concepts of Value in Philosophy

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The study of values has a long tradition within western philosophy. Beginning particularly with the Greeks who examined such values as the good, the beautiful, or the virtuous. The use of value concepts in various disciplines has revealed a wide range of contexts in which value is investigated. Now it enjoys a permanent position today in ethical theorizing. The theoretical foundations for all value research can be found in philosophy, in normative as well as in meta-normative work. Generally, axiology as a branch of philosophy is concerned with the system of values. In other words it is that branch of philosophy that deals with the ultimate questions of philosophy. The term axiology is not generally used outside the philosophy. It is not much popular as epistemology and metaphysics. But as far as its sub-divisions, namely, logic, ethics and aesthetics are concerned which develop independently, it becomes very important discipline in the world of philosophy.

Introduction

Value has been a fundamental issue in philosophy from the time of Plato, although the common usage of the term "value" in philosophy extends only back to the nineteenth century. Before that time, value were discussed in terms of the good, the right, beauty, virtue, truth, obligation, moral judgement, aesthetic judgement etc. The recognition that all these separate concepts are based on the same underlying structure led to the development of "value theory" through the works of such eminent philosophers as Lotze, Meinong, von Ehrenfels, and later Scheler, Nicolai Hartman, Perry, Dewey and Pepper. The common ground of concepts such as the good, the beautiful, the right is that they deal essentially with what *ought to be*, rather than with what *is*. This distinction between value (what ought to be) and fact (what is) pervades all of the social sciences and humanities and is the subject of considerable debate, most recently in the area of policy analysis.

The term value or values is used in a great variety of contexts and has many meanings in everyday language. Value can mean standards, beliefs, principles, moral obligations and social norms, but also desires, wants, needs or interests. Furthermore, value can also mean the worth, importance or significance of a thing or object of interest. This abundance of different meanings is not only found in ordinary speech, it is also evident in the usage of "value" in the social sciences and humanities.

As far as philosophy is concerned the term "value theory" is used in different ways. Firstly, it is used to encompass all the other fields of philosophy, like social, political, feminist and also the philosophy of religion — whatever areas of philosophy are deemed to encompass some "evaluative" aspect. Secondly "value theory" is roughly synonymous with "axiology". Axiology can be thought of as primarily concerned with classifying what things are good, and how good they are. For instance, a traditional question of axiology concerns whether the objects of value are subjective psychological states, or objective states of the world. Thirdly, or in a more useful way, "value theory" designates the area of moral philosophy that is concerned with theoretical questions about value and goodness of all varieties. The theory of value, so construed,

encompasses axiology, but also includes many other questions about the nature of value and its relation with other discipline and applications.

The development of concepts and measures of value in philosophy, the social and behavioral sciences and in economics is based on theories of value. In order to scrutinize in detail and provide a foundation for the discussion of value, and to clarify the assumptions underlying different conceptions of value, this section presents a brief discussion of theories of value

A primary distinction can be drawn between normative and meta-normative theories of value:

(a) *normative* theories of value make judgements about what *ought to be* in the realm of values; for example, they make claims about what constitutes "just", "good", or "moral" behaviour for an individual as well as for society;

(b) *meta-normative* theories analyse value and valuation; they define what "goodness" and value are, what it means to say that something is "good" or has value, and which criteria can be employed to evaluate normative theories. Thus, meta-normative theories provide the foundation for normative and descriptive theories of value.

Normative theories of value:

Normative theories of value make judgements about what constitutes "just", "good", or "moral" behaviour for an individual as well as for a society. On the basis of the criteria by which moral actions are evaluated, normative theories can be classified into four major types: *deontological*, *teleological*, *axiological*, and *practical* (or "good reason") theories of value.

Deontological normative theories:

Deontological theories evaluate actions according to their inherent "rightness" which requires no further justification (*material* deontological theories), or on the basis of some formal principle (*formal* deontological theories). For example, John Rawls (1971) argues in his famous *Theory of justice* that a just society uses the maxi-min criterion as a social decision rule (maxi-min = society maximises the welfare of those who are worst off); however, it is not claimed that maxi-min is inherently "right" or "just", but that a group of people deciding on a social contract without knowing what their social or economic position in that society would be choose the maxi-min criterion as a social decision rule~ Thus, the normative criterion (maxi-min) is justified by a formal, universal principle (choice under a "veil of ignorance").

Teleological normative theories:

Teleological theories evaluate actions according to the "goodness" of their outcomes. Probably the best known teleological theory is utilitarianism, originated by Bentham and J.S. Mill. Utilitarianism holds that a "good" action is one that promotes the greatest good for the greatest number of people; thus, the normative criterion is the "goodness" or "value" of the consequences of actions, as opposed to the inherent "rightness" of the action, or its conformity to some formal principle as in deontological theories. Teleological theories, and in particular the various forms of utilitarianism, are very important in a natural resource management context, as they provide the philosophical foundation of mainstream welfare economics.

Axiological normative theories:

Axiological theories are closely related to teleological theories; both rely on "goodness" or value as normative criterion. However, axiological theories evaluate actions on the basis of their *inherent* goodness, as opposed to the (teleological) goodness of the *outcomes*.

The distinction between deontological and axiological theories is that deontologists claim that some actions are inherently right or obligatory (Greek: *deontos*, "of the obligatory"), whereas axiologists base their claims on inherent goodness or value (Greek: *axios*, "worthy" or "valuable").

Practical normative theories:

Practical or "good reason" normative theories emphasize reasoned discourse as criterion for a normative evaluation of actions. Actions are claimed to be "good" or "right" if they conform to some rules, or result in outcomes, that have been developed through reasoned discourse among those who develop moral rules, and those who are affected by them. These comparatively recent ethical theories, Baier, 1965; Habermas, 1970; Taylor, 1961; Toulmin, 1950, form the basis of some contemporary work in policy analysis dealing with the role of values and ethics in public policy and in environmental ethics.

Meta-normative theories of value:

Meta-normative theories provide the philosophical foundation for normative as well as descriptive theories of value. Meta-normative theory addresses questions like: "is there ethical knowledge, and if so, of what kind is this knowledge?"; "can the truth of normative claims be determined?", or "what is the nature of the *value*?".

Meta-normative theories can be divided into two major classes: *cognitivist* and *non-cognitivist* theories. The fundamental difference between these is their answer to the question: "do moral judgments constitute a kind of knowledge?" i.e. they differ in their assessment of the epistemological status of normative theories. *Cognitivism* holds that normative theories *do* constitute some kind of knowledge, and that normative claims can be true or false; *non-cognitivism* denies this. Both cognitivism and non-cognitivism can be further divided into several schools of thought that differ substantially in their assumptions about the nature of value.

Non-naturalistic cognitivism:

There are two main schools of thought within cognitivism: *naturalism*, and *non-naturalism*. While both schools maintain that normative ethics do constitute some kind of knowledge, they differ in their assessment of the nature of this knowledge; naturalism maintains that ethical knowledge is not fundamentally different from empirical knowledge, and thus can be established by the same methods as those used in the natural and social sciences. In contrast, non-naturalism claims that ethical knowledge is quite distinct from other knowledge and cannot be revealed by scientific methods; moral terms such as "good" refer to non-natural properties of objects that cannot be defined. Thus, non-naturalism is essentially an objectivist doctrine. Because non-naturalists maintain that values are intuited through emotions, rather than revealed by scientific methods, they are frequently called "*intuitionists*". Most prominent among them are Plato, G.E. Moore, Scheler, and Nicolai Hartman; Moore's *Principia ethica* is a particularly well known example of non-naturalistic cognitivism.

Naturalistic cognitivism:

According to the naturalists, ethical knowledge can in principle be revealed and tested using scientific methods and empirical observation. However, some further distinctions within this school of thought can be made on the basis of their stance towards (a) the source of ethical knowledge, and (b) the procedures by which this knowledge is established.

Objectivist naturalism maintains that value, the "good", and the "right" are inherent properties of objects that do not depend on an outside observer. In contrast, subjectivist naturalism sees the source of value in the interaction between observer and the observed; it is thus meaningless to speak of "value" without a valuing subject.

Finally, opinions differ among subjectivists over the procedures by which (relational) ethical knowledge is revealed: epistemic subjectivism relies on reflective evaluation of interests, desires, and preferences, while non-epistemic subjectivism relies on the mere expression of interests, desires, and preferences. Naturalists like the philosophers Dewey (1939) (epistemic subjectivism) and Perry (1954) (non-epistemic subjectivism) have had a strong influence on the developments in the social and behavioural sciences.

Non-cognitivism:

As mentioned above, non-cognitivism maintains that normative theories do not constitute knowledge, and are thus not subject to verification or falsification. The question then arises about the meaning of a normative claim if it does not constitute some kind of knowledge. Several possible meanings are suggested by the non-cognitivists, the most important of which are emotive, prescriptive and commendatory.

Emotivism states that normative claims merely express the feelings of whoever makes the claim, and they thus have no cognitive meaning whatsoever. Prescriptivism maintains that ethical claims are not merely expressions of feelings but commands that tell people what to do. Commendatory non-cognitivism suggests that normative claims simply commend some behaviour or object to somebody else.

It is self-evident that non-cognitivism, in denying that normative claims represent knowledge that is inter-subjectively verifiable, subscribes to a subjectivist interpretation of value. Major exponents of non-cognitivism are Ayer, Carnap, Stevenson, Hare, and Bertrand Russell.

This separation of the "value experience" raises two fundamental questions that are central to any axiological theory, one is subjectivism and another is objectivism. Subjectivism maintains that value arises from the relation between the valuing subject and the value object. It has had a profound influence on the development of philosophy in this century, as well as on the emerging social and behavioural sciences. Subjectivism is epitomised by Perry's view that "... a thing - anything - has value, or is valuable, in the original and generic sense when it is the object of an interest - any interest. Or, whatever is object of interest is ipso facto valuable".

The contrasting view is known as objectivism. It holds that value belongs to objects independent of whether they are desired, enjoyed or valued by people. The objectivist school of thought contends that value is revealed through the process of intuition, either emotive or intellectual. The most prominent exponents of objectivism are Plato, Scheler, Nicolai Hartman, .G .E. Moore, and, in his later years, Meinong, who came to adopt a position quite contrary to his earlier subjectivism.

Now, we need to make some assumptions in order to arrive at an explanation of value. Naturalism and non-naturalism about value are to some extent articles of faith. The only thing that can convince some-one to make the requisite assumptions is to demonstrate the explanatory force of the resulting theory. Naturalism, we believe, does bear the burden of evidence, but it also holds a privileged position in that it, if successful, erases the annoying explanatory gap between fact and value. If naturalism fails miserably, non-naturalism, error theory or some non-cognitivist theory seem to be the alternatives. But if naturalism fails only in part, we must ask ourselves if the residue is something that we really need to explain directly.

Conclusion

Concepts of value are used in a wide variety of contexts and meanings in philosophy. Philosophers differ substantially in their meta-normative assumptions, as well as in the normative theories developed on the basis of these assumptions. A very important distinction among meta-normative theories is the choice of an objectivist or a subjectivist interpretation of "value"; this distinction pervades *all* meta-normative theories regardless of their other assumptions. Many classifications of values contain the class of "intrinsic value"; however, there are significant differences between the respective contents of that class, although they generally refer to some kind of *end* value.

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