

Universal Values

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Everyone acknowledges that we humans have preferences -- that we make judgments of worth or value about our experience of life. Whatever we may actually say or think about our value judgments, it is our actions that reflect them most faithfully. I may say I don't like chocolate, but if I regularly eat large quantities of it, without any external duress, you would be most reasonable to conclude that I do like chocolate in truth of fact.

More generally, the sign of a positive value judgment is our attempt to repeat the valued experience, consistent avoidance behavior being the corresponding sign of a negative judgment. It is sometimes held that there is no ultimate, common basis for such judgments -- that they are potentially arbitrary or gratuitous in the extreme. On this view, a given individual may, depending on his life circumstances and his particular reaction to them, come to prefer (value positively) anything: pain, cruelty, suffering, death, the ugly or the hideous. Those who support this view usually do so by citing cases of individuals who indeed seem to have exhibited such preferences (e.g., sadomasochists).

But there is a fundamental flaw in this kind of argument. There is of course no doubt that individual differences in preference -- even extreme individual differences in preference -- may be shown to exist in certain matters. But such differences do not in themselves refute the idea that there may be a more fundamental, underlying, universal basis for most preferences, and that deviations from them take place only within certain limits and under extreme circumstances.

Similarities and Differences

We live in a world that is rich with difference and multiplicity. Any two entities in existence may be compared according to their similarities or according to their differences. On one hand, some degree of similarity holds between any two existents -- if nothing else, the fact that they both exist. On the other hand, any two existents must also differ in some respect -- if nothing else by the very fact of being two (distinct existents) instead of only one.

Moreover, if it is we humans who are making the comparison, there is a question not only of the objective similarities and differences between two existents but also of our subjective perception. Superficial similarities may mask deep differences while superficial differences may blind us to more fundamental similarities. Finally, there is the question of the relative importance (value) we assign to differences vs. similarities in any given case. It is the last question that will concern us most particularly in this paper.

Let us consider a newborn human infant, who has just been expelled from the mother's womb into this world. The infant is not just a *tabula rasa* on which experience writes. From the beginning, the infant brings something of what he is to every encounter with reality. For example, if we place a bit of quinine on the infant's tongue or lips, he will immediately recoil in obvious avoidance, perhaps cry in distress. If, instead, we place a drop of honey, he will smack his lips in evident satisfaction. These are value responses to reality. They indicate innate preferences, because the infant has not yet undergone any socialization. He has not learned that society expects him to consider certain tastes as bitter

(and thus unpleasant) and others sweet (and therefore pleasant). He is reacting to the raw fact of the bitterness of quinine and the sweetness of honey.

One may protest that this is a purely instinctive reaction, a reflex deriving from the structure of the newborn's nervous system. So be it. The point is that the quality of reaction is universal. *All* newborns will recoil from a bitter taste, experiencing it negatively, and embrace a sweet taste, experiencing it positively and seeking to repeat it. Thus, *some purely individual value judgments are universal in that (1) they are shared and exhibited by all normally endowed humans and (2) they are rooted in a human nature that is essential in the precise sense that it inheres in the human genome and precedes socialization.*

This example, and a multiplicity of other similar examples, shows conclusively that cultural (socially learned) values are not the ultimate values. Indeed, socialization and individual learning build upon these fundamental, innate value preferences. For example, the fact that societies all over the worlds have organized the production of honey on a scale and in a manner that is different from the production of quinine is not just an arbitrary social value. It *is* a social value based on a collective learning process, but fundamental to all that process is the primal fact that honey tastes good (and is nutritious) and quinine doesn't.

Those who insist that cultural relativism is primary, might point out that it is possible to train and condition someone to the extent that they would prefer quinine to honey, or even find honey loathsome and repugnant. Such examples show that natural value preferences can be altered by socialization, but they do not constitute an argument against the existence of primal, natural value preferences in the first place. Or, put it another way. Such socialization would be universally recognized as an exception, which would require explanation (how is it that this person has acquired such a distaste for honey?). But if told that the individual loves honey, we would not require an explanation, because that is the "natural" state of affairs (the "default position" if you will).

In the example given above, the reaction of the infant is spontaneous and instinctive. Nonetheless, it can be legitimately analyzed into at least the following stages or components: (1) there is the fact of the objective difference between honey and quinine. This is due ultimately to objective differences in their molecular structure; (2) there is the capacity of the human sensori-neural apparatus to detect or experience this objective difference in some manner; (3) there is the relative value given to the difference -- the fact that the encounter with the substances is experienced positively (and to a certain degree of intensity), or else negatively (to a certain degree of intensity).

The transition from objective to subjective takes place in the second stage. The objective difference between the two substances is translated into or reflected by a difference in subjective, inner states provoked by encounters with the two substances. However, this subjective difference in experience does not in itself imply a discriminating value judgment. For example, it could be the case that the organism experiences each substance in a different way, but that these different experiences are perceived as equally pleasant (or equally unpleasant).

In the case where two stimuli produce experiences of opposite valency, we have, in psychological terms, an approach-avoidance configuration. When the two stimuli both induce reactions of either positive valency or else of negative valency, the subject would be motivated either to repeat (or to avoid) further encounters with each of the stimuli. In psychological terms, we would have either an approach-approach or an avoidance-

avoidance configuration. In both of these latter cases, there would be either no value discrimination, or else a value discrimination in the relative intensity of the motivation to approach (or to avoid).

In any case, the point is that stage (3) above, in which a value judgment is made, is distinct from stage (2) in which there is a subjective difference in the quality of the experiences induced or provoked by the two encounters. In other words, the making of value judgments presumes, or is based upon, the ability of the organism to discriminate between two different experiences, but the value judgment itself cannot be reduced to the simple fact of difference.

We may say that the value judgment arises from a second-order experience, the experience of experience (or the perception of perception). On the first level (stage (2) above), we in fact experience the encounters with the two substances as different. On the second level (stage three above), we *perceive our experience* as positive (relatively pleasant) or negative (relatively unpleasant). In other words, value judgments are not inherent in (primal) experience itself, but arise from the *consequences* of experience. In the simple instance above, the consequences are simply the emotions "pleasant," on one hand, and "unpleasant," on the other.

It is obvious that more complex experiences will give rise to more complex consequences. In particular, once the individual has matured to the point of acquiring not only sensori-neural sensibility but also human self-awareness, the third, evaluation stage can become more explicit and thus more autonomous. For example, the mature and autonomous human being may be able to say, of an initial experience of drug euphoria, "This was intensely pleasant but dangerous for my ultimate well-being and should be deliberately avoided in the future."

Value judgments of this sort are very sophisticated, and definitely involve a significant degree of conscious knowledge, both of the self and of reality. But they still fit the basic paradigm above, namely that the individual's value judgments are based on the consequences of experience. It is just that the self-aware subject has a certain knowledge not only of the short-term consequences of the experience (e.g., that it feels pleasant) but also of the longer-term consequences (e.g., that repeating the experience can lead to drug dependency and thus a significant loss of valued autonomy).

Thus, we repeat and amplify the fundamental point made a few paragraphs above. The fact that knowledge (socialization) profoundly affects value judgments does not mean that all value judgments are arbitrarily or wholly social in nature, because many value judgments are rooted in that primal experience in which we all naturally perceive various aspects of reality as relatively pleasant or relatively unpleasant. This primary, binary experience of pleasant/unpleasant (pleasure/pain, good/bad) is rooted in essential and universal human nature, and is thus fundamentally transcultural. In other words, there may indeed be value judgments that are arbitrarily generated by a given culture (process of socialization) but there are also value judgments that are universal and transcultural.

The examples we have given so far might be said to involve only the most primal physical instincts of man. One could still ask whether the higher order or moral value judgments are not wholly cultural in nature. Given that there are universal value judgments, are there universal *moral* values or value judgments?

Moral Values

When we speak of "moral values" we are still speaking, first of all, of values generically, as generated by the three-stage process mentioned above. Specifically "moral" values are those values which arise primarily from interhuman (social) interactions, and which involve judgments about how we experience both ourselves and others. The universality of such judgments arises from the fact that all humans experience love and kindness positively, while experiencing cruelty and hatred negatively. This universality is, again, rooted in essential human nature.

That humans respond positively to love, acceptance, and kindness is not just a dictum of moralists, but a scientific fact of human nature. For example, Sigmund Freud was an atheist who held an extremely negative view of human nature and intrinsic human potential. He was anything but a moralist. Yet all of his observations and theories support the thesis that the human personality is significantly determined by early experience, and particularly by the quality of early interhuman relationships, beginning with the mother and moving out gradually to the father and other significant adults. And the thrust of his findings was that children who receive love, acceptance, and nurturing from these significant adults are relatively healthy and happy, and those who are subject to the trauma of rejection, abuse, hatred, or (alas) aggressive cruelty generally suffer its negative effects for the rest of their natural lives.

These initial findings of Freud have been validated and revalidated by a host of other psychologists using many different approaches. But does anyone really doubt that intrinsic human nature responds positively to love and kindness and negatively to hatred and cruelty? Who has not experienced the warmth of being loved in contrast to the anxious knot in the stomach when aggressed, insulted, or rejected?

Moreover, this essential human nature is the ultimate source of all value judgments, whether positive or negative. This observation suggests that the highest value in creation (the highest value in existence other than God) is that intrinsic and essential human nature from which all value judgments flow. That there *is* such a universal human nature is a Platonic hypothesis, which can be confirmed but not proved by observation alone. Let us examine this more carefully.

The Platonic Underpinnings of Universal Morality

We observe that there are certain stimuli to which all but a negligible minority of infants respond positively -- honey and love, for example -- and other stimuli to which all but a negligible minority of infants respond negatively -- quinine and cruelty, for example. Does this not prove that there is indeed a universal human nature?

It certainly suggests strongly that there may be a universal human nature, but to answer the question in the affirmative, we have to consider the metaphysical basis of human nature itself. If we are materialists who hold that humans are just a particularly evolved species of animal -- whose nature at any moment of evolution is totally determined by the currently existing physical parameters -- then the answer may well be "no," because under such an hypothesis we cannot exclude the possibility that the physical parameters of our species will change in such a way that these intrinsic value responses are significantly altered. Perhaps there could be such drastic mutations that there would be no uniformities whatsoever in our spontaneous value responses to stimuli.

All available evidence suggests that there has been no fundamental change in human nature over the last, say, ten thousand years, so such a drastic change does not seem very likely in the foreseeable future. But that is not the point. The point is that *if* we attribute present uniformities in spontaneous human value responses solely to a presently existing fortuitous genetic configuration, then we cannot consistently talk about essential human nature as an existing entity in itself. We will only have human nature today, human nature tomorrow, etc. We cannot make any general statements about what is *essentially* human, since we have no guarantee that some subtle, even apparently trivial, genetic mutation could alter something we now consider essential.

We therefore posit, as a fundamental metaphysical truth, that there does exist an intrinsic, essential, universal human nature, and that observed uniformities and regularities in spontaneous human value response to external stimuli reflect, *albeit imperfectly and approximately*, this human nature. In Platonic terms, we are positing the objective existence of *the form of the human*.¹

The fundamental (but not exhaustive) characteristics of essential human nature are: consciousness (the existence of a subjective world of conscious inner states within each individual); mind (the capacity of this conscious subjectivity to reflect or model, if not perfectly at least significantly, the structure of the world outside our subjectivity); heart or affectivity (the capacity to feel certain emotions or subjective sensations, most particularly the capacity to experience the emotion of altruistic love); will and intentionality (the capacity to contemplate and execute certain courses of action). We might speak of cognitive consciousness, affective consciousness, and volitional consciousness.

We do not claim that this analysis exhausts all of the capacities of essential human nature. We assume only that essential human nature --the form of the human -- contains *at least* these capacities. In fact, these are the only capacities that we will need to carry through our analysis of universal values.

All human values and value preferences can be consistently regarded as generated by a suitably combined interaction of the fundamental human capacities of consciousness,

¹ We have elsewhere called such a metaphysical supposition "empirically grounded," meaning that the supposition is consistent with known facts and indeed is the most reasonable hypothesis in the light of known facts.

mind, heart, and will. Moreover, it is logically reasonable to assume that a cause or origin is greater than its effect or product. If we apply this principle in the present context, we arrive at the conclusion that essential human nature, as outlined above, is the highest value in creation (i.e. the highest value in existence other than God).

In other words, it is objectively the case (independently of all subjective value preferences) that essential human nature is the highest value in creation. Henceforth, we can judge our individual, subjective value preferences in the light of this truth. A value judgment will be *true or accurate* insofar as it is based on, and in conformity with, the truth of the value supremacy of our common humanness. True or accurate value judgments thus arise from a certain kind of knowledge, namely the recognition that there is, in creation, no value higher than the human being.

The Force of Love

But what does it mean to recognize that the human being is the supreme value? The human response to the recognition of value is a complex of thoughts, feelings, and actions that we call *love*. Our hearts feel deep emotions of attraction towards the valued entity. We want to move closer to it, to possess it if possible or else to establish a harmonious relationship with it. We want to know everything we can about the object of our love. We are fascinated with every facet of it. And we are moved to act so as to enhance and/or serve the valued object.

Love, then, is a force which inhabits us to the degree that we appreciate true value. Love is the response of the human being to the perception of value. If the perception of value is an illusion, then the love will ultimately prove false. But if the perception is true, then love will grow and develop.

In particular, true or authentic human relationships are based on a true perception of the intrinsic value each of the other (and of the self). What we truly perceive is nothing less than the essential, intrinsic, and universal humanity which each of us possesses (or, of which each of us is a local representative). I recognize that I am a human being who is self-aware, who thinks, feels, and acts in accordance with certain natural laws and principles, and I recognize that you are also a human being who feels and acts and thinks according to the same universal principles as I do. In particular, I know that what makes me suffer will likely make you suffer, and what makes me happy will probably make you happy. I will therefore feel *compassion* for your suffering and gratitude for your genuine happiness. Moreover, I will shrink from being the deliberate cause of suffering on your part.

In other words, mutual recognition of intrinsic value gives rise to *altruistic love* or *agape*. There are two basic components to this love. One is *concern*: we truly seek the well-being and autonomy of the other. The second is *acceptance*: we love the other *because* of what he is (an imperfect but authentic representation of the form of the human), not *in spite of what* he isn't (perfect and unchallenging to us). Acceptance means that we put no preconditions on our love; we do not require the other to be something he is not in order to merit our love. Thus, altruistic love is *unconditional concern for the well-being and autonomy of the other*.

Mutual love is a transaction between human beings in which both parties benefit. It feels good to love and it feels good to be loved. And love begets love. Love is the ultimate "win-win" interhuman transaction.

It is important to realize that power cannot control love. We cannot will ourselves or others to love. Love is an attractive force (like gravity or magnetism), which operates according to certain laws and principles. When we create the conditions necessary for love (like magnetizing an iron bar), then we become instruments through which and by which the force of love acts (the bar becomes attractive even to unmagnetized bits of iron). The process of recognizing and implementing the conditions necessary for the operation of love is what we call *justice*.

Relationships based on genuine love are necessarily symmetrical, because they are based on the mutual recognition of an intrinsic and universal value, thus a value shared by both parties. Once I achieve the ability to recognize universal humanness, I can recognize its manifestations everywhere, both in myself and in others.

Relationships based on power or dominance are necessarily asymmetrical, because it is logically impossible for each of us to dominate the other in exactly the same manner and

at the same time. It is a "zero-sum" game: the extent to which I win is the extent to which you lose, and vice versa. But love creates love, and so is inexhaustible. With love, nobody loses and everyone gains.

The seeking of power over others, on one hand, and the seeking of love and justice, on the other, are totally incompatible, like fire and water. The more you seek one, the less you have of the other. To be successful in seeking power over you, I must give priority to my needs over yours and even suppress feelings of compassion for your suffering at my hands, because such feelings will undermine my will to power. Thus, the seeking of love implies that we renounce the pursuit of power over others.

Moreover, true love always leads to lasting happiness and well-being, whereas power can lead at most to an unstable and temporary happiness on the part of the winner. And even this happiness is always tinged with the fear that some more powerful person will dominate him and take away his hard-earned power.

We have proved that love is more valuable than power, because the consequences of the love experience are positive whereas the consequences of the power experience are ultimately negative, especially when compared with the consequences of love. Thus, the presence of altruistic love in a relationship is the most significant indication that our value choices are authentic (i.e., in conformity with the value supremacy of universal human nature).

We may ask, in turn, what is the greatest indicator of genuine love in a relationship, and the answer is simply how we actually treat others. To treat them with kindness and respect is the greatest indication that we do in fact love them and thus recognize their intrinsic and universal value. It is rather useless to claim that we really love others if we consistently treat them cruelly or unkindly. You cannot consistently claim to *be* better than you *act*.

Hierarchies of value

The value-supremacy of essential human nature is only the highest step in a continuum of objective values that are each inherent in the structure of reality. In other words, there is an objective value relation ("greater than"), which holds between any two entities A and B whenever A is more valuable than B. In the physical world, governed as it is by the second law of thermodynamics, this value hierarchy is more or less directly reflected by the relative complexity of entities considered as thermodynamic systems. Let us take a brief look at this hierarchy as it presents itself to us in nature.

At the lowest end of the value scale are inorganic substances such as rocks and minerals. These entities have the simplest structure: about the only energy transformation of which such entities are capable is to absorb and to radiate energy.

Next in value would be plants, which are more structured than minerals and which can not only absorb and radiate energy but can also ingest inorganic substances and process them in a way that allows the plants to complexify their own structure (to grow, in a word).

Higher animals cumulate all of these functions but add the capacities of locomotion and sensibility. Sensibility, in particular, allows animals to process a wide range of energy events by an appropriate special (individual) response.

Finally, humans have all the abilities of animals but can also process energy in its most refined form, that is, as abstract (symbolic) information. Humans have the ability to attribute, to arbitrarily chosen symbols, a meaning or significance totally unrelated to the physical form or structure of the symbol itself.

One may protest that I have only described Aristotle's chain of being, imposing upon it a more "modern" interpretation. However, the crucial difference is that our hierarchy is no longer metaphysical but is totally, objectively definable in terms of the known dynamics of systems. More complex organisms are further from thermodynamic equilibrium and consequently have a more sophisticated and flexible level of functioning. They are "multivalent," to make a metaphorical use of a term from chemistry.

This cumulative multifunctionality of higher organisms gives us a more precise understanding of why the human being stands at the apex of the value hierarchy. Such an understanding has become especially important since the advent of computers that can outperform human mental functioning in certain specific respects. Why, as some philosophers of artificial intelligence have argued, could not some future, sophisticated computer not be of equal or greater value than humans?

The answer is two-fold. On the metaphysical level it will forever be the case that it is humans who have created computers, not the reverse. Electronic computers, however sophisticated, were not a naturally occurring phenomenon, and had to be conceived abstractly by the human brain before they existed concretely. If we accept the highly plausible philosophical principle that a cause must always be greater than its effect (which, in fact, is just a metaphysical form of the law of entropy), then humans will always be of greater value than computers or any other creation of the human mind.

Faith in the superior value of human beings has, for some people, been shaken by such things as the defeat of Gary Kasparov by the computer program Deep Blue. As for myself, I am quite willing to accept that it is possible to program a sufficiently complex computer to outperform human functioning in any given, specific area of endeavor. Indeed, this is already the case for human physical performance: our artificially created machines are faster, quicker, stronger than any humans. The superiority of human functioning lies

precisely in its seemingly inexhaustible multifunctionality. A single human organism has genuine self-awareness, can love, play the violin, do mathematics, invent computers, play tennis, reproduce, etc. The very definition of the human is that he is forever indefinable.

Clearly we will never be able to invent a robot that can, alone, accomplish all the various tasks that are accessible to the ordinary human being. For, if we could create such a machine, it would, by definition, be the human being: we would have recreated ourselves, a highly implausible if not logically impossible achievement (again in view of the known laws of systems dynamics, and in particular the law of entropy).

Thus, in the final analysis, morality and moral values arise, on the one hand, from the existence of an objective value hierarchy that is embedded in the very structure of reality and, on the other hand, from the universality of essential human nature, which allows us to apprehend this value hierarchy and act upon this understanding, if of course we choose to do so.

Conclusions

All of this analysis suggests that basic morality is really rather simple. Once we acknowledge that human beings are the supreme value in creation, we act on that knowledge. We treat human beings as the ultimate value, as ends rather than means. However, if morality really is so simple and straightforward, why has it always appeared so complicated? Virtually every human being will assent to the proposition that human beings are the highest value in creation, yet very few people really act consistently on the principle. Why? These are the questions we have striven to answer in another paper entitled "Powerseeking and Ideology."