Research Program: Value Theory

Wlodek Rabinowicz

We are living at a time in history when discussions about values are occurring all around us. In some segments of society, competing general ideologies are being fiercely disputed; in other segments, reliance on ideologies is being replaced by an appeal to values and value clusters. What is the significance of such shifts and schisms? Are we witnessing a substantial change in public discourse? Why do people invoke values at all?

There are large-scale studies such as the World Values Survey and the European Values Study that endeavor to answer these questions in an empirical way. In my own research, I hope to make a philosophical contribution to the area by investigating the very concept of value and the domain of its application. In recent years, I have been coordinating a relatively large project on these issues, financed by The Tercentenary Foundation of the Bank of Sweden, with practical philosophers from Lund and Uppsala as participants. The project ends 2006, but it would be desirable if the work we have started could continue. There is an obvious need of further research in the area and it would be a pity if the strong Swedish group of value researchers were to disintegrate because of the loss of funding. Already, one of the members of the group has moved to England (Oxford), while some of the other members consider making a similar move.

As the enclosed reference list attests, recent years have seen an exceptional increase in the philosophical study of value, especially among moral philosophers in the US, the UK, and not least in Sweden. Partly, this development has been precipitated by the internal dynamics of the discipline. Normative as well as conceptual debates about moral issues have made it necessary to address anew a whole range of problems about value. But the philosophical study of value has also been propelled by the influx of formal methods used in other disciplines, such as economics, and by an increased focus on values in the humanities and social sciences.

Overview of the research area

Philosophical discussions of value have centered around two basic kinds of questions. One group of questions has to do with conceptual issues, the other with substantive problems. Let me briefly discuss these in turn.¹

(A) Conceptual issues

The most fundamental conceptual question about value is how, if at all, the concept of value is to be analyzed. What is it for something to be valuable? One classical answer, given by G. E. Moore in 1903, is that the concept of value, being *sui generis*, is unanalyzable. Another answer, foreshadowed by Brentano in 1889, then taken up in detail by A. C. Ewing in 1948, and now the focus of intense debate generated by T. M. Scanlon’s influential book *What We Owe to Each Other* from 1998, is that something’s being valuable consists in its being an appropriate object of a favourable attitude or response. Following Scanlon, the latter view is often called ‘the buck-passing account of value.’ Its adherents take the value of an object to consist in the existence of normative reasons for favouring it, with “favouring” being a place-holder for a whole range of positively valenced attitudes and responses. In the pluralist versions of this view, different kinds

¹ The overview that follows has been prepared in collaboration with my American colleague Michael Zimmerman. Professor Zimmerman is currently applying for a Fulbright scholarship to spend the academic year 2007/8 in Sweden. He and I hope to collaborate on the problems described in this research program.
of value (admirability, desirability, etc) correspond to the different kinds of favouring that might be called for by the object. (For another potential source of value pluralism, see the third set of questions below. A yet another form of pluralism, concerning value bearers, is discussed in connection with the question set number seven.) The characteristic feature of this proposal is that the reasons for favouring are to be found in the properties that make the object valuable and not in its value itself. In this sense, the ‘buck’ is being passed from value to value-making properties. One of the goals of this program is to further examine the buck-passing account of value and to assess its viability.

A second set of questions concerns the relation between value concepts and normative concepts. The former are expressed by “good,” “bad,” “desirable,” “admirable,” and kindred terms, the latter by “right,” “wrong,” “ought,” “appropriate,” and similar terms that concern reasons for reacting in certain ways. What are the distinctions and connections between these two types of concepts? It should be noted that on the buck-passing account, normative concepts are analytically prior. Value on this approach is explicated in terms of the stance that ought to be taken towards the object. That it is fitting to have a certain attitude, that there are reasons to have it, or that the attitude in question is appropriate or called for, are different ways to express this normative claim. However, according to the influential consequentialist view of ethics, the fundamental ethical norm prescribes (some form of) value maximization. Thus, for a consequentialist, normative claims are secondary to claims about value. Can consequentialism and the buck-passing account be squared with each other?

A third set of questions concerns the different kinds of value that may be identified. There are aesthetic values, ethical values, values in terms of which personal welfare is to be measured and understood, and more. How are these kinds of values to be distinguished? How are they related? Do these different areas of value correspond to the differences between different different kinds of favouring or rather to different kinds of reasons for favouring valuable objects? And above all, how can one balance such different values against each other in situations of conflict? Is there some independent point of view from which the balancing can be meaningful? And if not, what are the implications of this absence of an Archimedean point for comparisons? Would it mean that the valuations made from different perspectives (ethical, esthetical, prudential, etc) cannot be pooled together in a judgment of value ‘all things considered’? What consequences would this have for our decision making?

A fourth set of questions concerns important conceptual distinctions that may be drawn within and that cut across the various kinds of value. Writers have contrasted “intrinsic” with “extrinsic” value, value “as an end” with value “as a means,” “derivative” with “nonderivative” value, “basic” with “nonbasic” value. How are these distinctions to be understood, and how are they related? For example, is it true, as several philosophers, including myself, have argued, that value as an end (“final value”) need not always be intrinsic, i.e., that certain objects might be finally valuable in virtue of their extrinsic rather than intrinsic properties (in particular, in virtue of their relations to other objects)? This would suggest that, contrary to a very influential tradition in moral philosophy, not only the instrumental value of an object but also its final value can vary depending on the context in which the object is located. To take care of this context dependence, substantive theories of value would need to be much more complex than it has usually been assumed.

A fifth set of questions concerns what is involved in making value judgements. Do such judgements have truth-values? Are they either true or false? Or should they instead be interpreted as mere expressions of approval and disapproval, or as imperatives or recommendations of some
sort, which lack truth value? On the latter view, how are we to account for reasoning about values? Doesn’t reasoning presuppose a transmission of truth from premises in an inference to its conclusion? However, if one takes the former view and does ascribe truth or falsity to evaluations, isn’t one committed to postulating the existence of some kind of strange value facts ‘out there in the world’? Furthermore, the connection between value judgements and motivation then becomes rather problematic. If one sincerely judges something to be good, mustn’t one be motivated, at least to some extent, to pursue it or sustain it? But if value judgements only state what is true or false, then why, indeed how, should they necessarily exert this motivating force on the judge? Answers to such questions are not only of purely philosophical interest. They have relevance for moral education, for the ways to conduct moral and political debates, for propaganda, etc.

A sixth set of questions concerns the epistemology of value. If judgements about value can be true or false, how can one come to know whether they are true? Can one do this by empirical methods or by some form of intellectual reflection? If not, what other ways of gaining knowledge stand at our disposal? On the other hand, if value judgements cannot be true or false, how is one to adjudicate disputes about value?

A seventh set of questions concerns the sort or sorts of things that can in principle be said to have value. There are many candidates: individual objects, persons, actions, characters, lives, social systems, properties, states of affairs, and more. Is it the case that, at bottom, only one sort of item can have value (as so-called monists claim), or can more than one sort of item have value (as pluralists claim)? If monists are right, and the ultimate value bearers can be found only in one domain, say, in the area of facts, or states of affairs, then how can one account for judgements that ascribe value to other things? Is there a way of reducing all such judgements to claims about the ultimate value bearers? On the other hand, if pluralists are right, what meaning can there be in aggregating and comparing value, if its bearers belong to fundamentally different ontological categories? Obviously, however, such aggregation and comparison are of fundamental importance in practical contexts, when it comes to making reasoned choices.

An eighth set of questions concerns the logic of value. For example:

(i) If one thing is better than a second and the second better than a third, must the first be better than the third? In other words, is betterness transitive? This may seem perfectly obvious, but there have been philosophers who argued that the transitivity principle has paradoxical implications. (ii) If one state (for example, being pleased) is good and another (for example, being in pain) is bad, what, if any, value is to be assigned to their disjunction (that is, to being either pleased or in pain)? In general, are there any logical principles concerning the valuation of disjunctions, negations, and so on? Is it even meaningful to ascribe value to disjunctive states or to negative states? (iii) Can there be items that are incomparable in value? What, exactly, is incomparability supposed to be? (How, for example, is incomparability to be distinguished from vagueness in value comparison?) (iv) If two items are comparable, does it then follow that either one of them is better than the other or they are equally good? Or are there other possible forms of comparability? Recently, it has been argued that being “on a par” is a form of comparability that cannot be interpreted simply as some kind of rough equality in value. Whether this is true or not, there is clearly a need for a logical taxonomy of possible value relations. We need to know what value relations there can obtain between different objects, if we want to make reliable comparative value judgments in particular cases.

A final set of questions concerns how value is to be measured and computed. For example: (i) Is value, like mass, simply summative, or is it to be aggregated in some more
complex fashion? How is something’s value related to the values of its parts? If the former is not just the sum of the latter, how do we go about determining the values of wholes? (ii) Are some values on a strictly higher “level” than others, so that, no matter how much of the latter there may be, they will never “add up” to the former? (iii) If some values are incomparable with others, how does their being so affect the overall assessment of a complex situation that comprises such values?

(B) Substantive problems

There is really just one fundamental substantive question about value: what values do things actually have? Of course, the answer to this question is constrained by the answers to the foregoing conceptual questions, but it is not dictated by those answers. There is also a dependence that goes in the other direction: some answers to the substantive question create special problems on the conceptual level.

Some writers claim that, at bottom, only one sort of thing has value (these are monists of a kind different from those noted above); others (pluralists) claim that more than one sort of thing has value. The most popular form of monism has been hedonism, according to which pleasure alone is good and pain (or displeasure) alone is bad. Another influential monistic position is welfarism, which takes all value to be determined by the distribution of welfare among individuals. Pleasure and pain represent one dimension in welfare, but not necessarily the only one. On some welfarist views, the only thing that matters is the aggregated welfare in a distribution (utilitarianism); on other views, welfare improvements for the worse off should be given more weight than the equal improvements for the better off (prioritarianism). Still other adherents of welfarism attach importance to the shape of the welfare distribution, with more equal distributions being valued more highly (egalitarianism).

Pluralists typically acknowledge the value in welfare, and in particular in pleasure and pain, but contend that value is to be found elsewhere as well (for example, in love, achievement, freedom, beauty, knowledge, or in the environment – sometimes the list gets very long). The questions mentioned under (A) concerning the bearers of value and the aggregation of value become especially pressing for value pluralists.

Inquiry into the conceptual and substantive issues just mentioned has been undertaken since ancient times. Enthusiasm for this inquiry has waxed and waned. At the moment, it is definitely waxing: Attention to many of the questions outlined above is intensifying considerably. A good deal of research is currently being done on both sides of the Atlantic. Among the prominent figures in the area one can name the following: in the States, Ruth Chang, Stephen Darwall, Fred Feldman, Thomas Hurka, Noah Lemos, Graham Oddie, Wayne Sumner, Larry Temkin and Michael Zimmerman; in Europe, John Broome, Jonathan Dancy, Brad Hooker, Kevin Mulligan, John Skorupski, Philip Stratton-Lake. As for the Swedish researchers, one might mention Erik Carlson and Sven Danielson in Uppsala, Gustaf Arrhenius and Torbjörn Tännsjö in Stockholm, Johan Brännmark and Toni Ronnow-Rasmussen in Lund, Bengt Brülde and Ingmar Persson in Stockholm, Krister Bykvist and Jonas Olson in Oxford.

In this research program, the conceptual issues will be given special attention. (This is the reason, by the way, why the above description of substantive issues was so extremely sketchy.) In particular, questions about the analysis of value, its logic and measurement will be at the forefront of discussion. The buck-passing account of value, the taxonomy of value relations and the hierarchy of higher and lower goods are examples of some problem areas that I want to
examine in detail. Some of this research will hopefully be transdisciplinary, in view of the foundational nature of the subject. For example, much work on the issues of measurement has been conducted by economists, psychologists and political scientists, while logical issues have been important to scholars in jurisprudence.

**Research standing and reputation**

Some of the results that have been obtained by my research group are quite impressive. I think it is fair to say that, internationally, we are both visible and well-respected. Much of the work we have done has been published in prestigious philosophical journals and some of it has given rise to intense discussions among philosophers.

As for my personal research standing and reputation, those matters are best judged by my colleagues, in Sweden and abroad. I have been Professor of Practical Philosophy in Lund since 1995. Before that, I was an associate professor in Uppsala. I was also one of the directors of Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in Social Sciences (SCASSS), together with Bengt Gustavsson and Björn Wittrock. For several years, from 1998 to 2002, I was an editor of an interdisciplinary journal *Economics and Philosophy*, published by Cambridge University press, first together with John Broome and Philippe Mongin, and then with Geoffrey Brennan, Marc Fleurbaey and Luc Bovens. In the 90-ies, I was also the editor-in-chief of *Theoria* and am now one of the co-editors of that journal. In addition, I am on the editorial board of ten international philosophical journals and book series. I am a member of Institut International de Philosophie and of the Royal Academy of Sciences. For three years, from 1999 to 2002, I was the president of the European Society of Analytic Philosophy and, in that capacity, I organized the 4th European Congress of Analytic Philosophy in Lund in 2002. In 2000, I was the Leibniz professor in Leipzig (as a second philosopher to hold this guest chair, after Georg Henrik von Wright). Along with my appointment in Lund, I am an adjunct professor at the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University in Canberra, and, since 2005, a permanent non-residential fellow at SCASSS in Uppsala.

**Ethical considerations and gender aspects**

As far as I can see, this research program does not create any difficulties as far as the ethics of research is concerned. Nor are gender aspects in the focus of study.

**References**


---

2 This reference list is by no means complete. It contains a few classic pieces, but the emphasis is on recent work, with my own publications excluded.


