

## The Value Firmament, Lecture I

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In this lecture I will make the case for conceiving “ethics” in axiological terms, I will briefly discuss some of the many questions that are raised by axiology, and outline a theoretical system that promises to provide a coherent picture of what might be called the dimensions of value and the “value firmament.” For a variety of reasons, both professional philosophers and the public at large have often come to understand “ethics” in what might be called “superego” or *obligatory* terms, as a restraint upon desire and satisfaction. By way of contrast, axiological ethics understands values, in both *obligatory* and *superogatory* terms, as things that we may not always be obliged to do, but which provide life with meaning and satisfaction, and which serve as the implicit background of all human activity, relationships and commerce. Axiological ethics, rather than focusing exclusively upon right and wrong, ought and ought not, focuses upon the rich tapestry of values that include creativity, compassion, beauty, spirit, etc.

### **Axiological Questions**

Axiological Ethics endeavors to ascertain, systematize and, if possible, derive from simpler principles, the values that are thought to constitute the meaning and purpose of human life, and, at least on some views, to exist objectively in the world. In addition, axiologists also consider a series of important philosophical and psychological questions regarding values and their nature. Amongst the philosophical questions they consider are whether there are indeed objective values at all; whether the terms we use to identify values (e.g. wisdom, compassion, truth) have generic significance or are simply relevant in their specific applications; whether values (or only their implementation) are relative to culture and history; whether so-called universal values actually disguise power relationships that should be disvalued (e.g. political critiques of “charity”); whether values can and should be deduced from non-axiological principles or should rather be enumerated via intuitive, experiential, or hermeneutic means; whether the system of values creates a *harmonious whole*, or inevitably leads to contradictions such that values come into conflict and must always be selected from and prioritized; whether certain values (e.g. justice) are valuable in

themselves or only as vehicles for the realization of other values; whether certain values, if taken in excess (e.g. kindness and wealth) become disvalues; whether values have a simple or highly complex relationship to their corresponding (or other) disvalues (e.g. humility and arrogance, knowledge and ignorance); whether certain presumed disvalues play a valuable role in human life; and whether values can in any way be measured, surveyed, and meaningfully compared with one another. Immediately relevant to the present inquiry, are the questions of whether the very listing and systemization of values itself violates the fundamental value of open-minded, non-dogmatic inquiry, and whether any classification of values, if it is true to its own project, must inevitably be subject to criticism, deconstruction, and revision.

In addition, we might also ask a series of psychological questions about values, including questions about the relationship of values to character formation and to psychological and moral development; the connection of values to emotions and cognitions; whether certain individuals are deficient in their capacity to recognize and/or realize specific values; whether the pursuit of values *per se* is psychologically (and ethically) productive or harmful; whether higher levels of individual or collective development will lead to an emphasis on some values over others or even to the discovery of new values altogether.

### **The Value Firmament**

Holding the above questions in abeyance, and bearing in mind the potential reifying and even dogmatizing consequences of creating a list or classification of the heads of value, I will offer a tentative accounting of what might be regarded as objective, or at least generic values, across nine general heads or dimensions, which together constitute what J.N. Findlay spoke of as the “Value Firmament.” In speaking of such a “firmament.” Findlay was referencing the realm of “ideas” and values that were thought by Plato and others to provide the foundation for all instantiated things. My account, though inspired by the work of such philosophers as Findlay, Scheler, and Hartmann, and such psychologists as Maslow, Seligman, Peterson, is my own. As I will explain, each of the general heads of value I describe correspond to a metaphysical category which philosophers have at one time or another regarded as basic for understanding the nature of humanity and the world.

Although I believe the following scheme to be useful and in some ways an important advance over other, particularly intuitive and empirical, schemes of value classification, I hardly consider it exclusive or final. As J. N. Findlay has put it:

...it would in no sense be a genuine reproach to philosophy if there weren't any single, absolutely *right* account of things, but rather a large number of alternative accounts, of varying excellence, which illuminate the 'facts' from different angles...We should, perhaps, no more regret that things can be spoken of metaphysically in a large number of distinct manners, than that things can be painted in a large number of distinct styles, or lived in a large number of distinct and different ways (J. N. Findlay, "Values in Speaking," *Language, Mind and Value*, p. 126-7)

The nine general dimensions under which I propose to subsume the heads of value are *being*, *experience*, *action*, *cognition*, *personal identity*, *relationality*, *equality (and inequality)*, *time*, and *transcendence*. Each of these dimensions can and has served as *the* foundational category in philosophy. Thus, we have various philosophers (Aristotle and Spinoza come to mind) who hold *being* to be the primary category or principle of metaphysics. *Experience* is regarded as foundational by the phenomenologists, *action* by the pragmatists, *cognition* by rationalists like Descartes and idealists such as Hegel, *personal identity* by personalistic philosophers like Brightman and Bertocci, *relationality* by Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, equality by Marx, and in an interesting manner (in regard to what he called the *noumenal* realm) also by Kant, *time* by philosophers as varied as Bergson and Heidegger, and transcendence by all religious thinkers who see the foundation of the world in God or some other spiritually transcendent principle,. Further, each of these categories has given rise to psychologies that, in effect, correspond to the metaphysical positions of their parent philosophies: there are existential psychologies of *being*, phenomenological psychologies of *experience*, pragmatic, behavioral (and also humanistic) psychologies of *action*, cognitive psychologies founded in *cognition*, "ego" and "self" psychologies of *personal identity*, social action psychologies rooted in *equality*, evolutionary and existential psychologies rooted in *time*, and transpersonal and other psychologies whose foundations are in personal and even cosmic *transcendence*. That each of these philosophical and psychological categories has

certain values associated with it suggests that none of them alone provides us with a complete philosophical, or at least axiological, account of the world, and as we will see it can indeed be argued that these categories are all axiologically and metaphysically interdependent.

Having described the general dimensions or categories of values, it remains for us to consider the *specific values* that are associated with each of these categories. There are, as I have already noted, certain risks associated with “lists” and systems of values (or indeed of anything philosophical). However, to my way of thinking, the risks of not enumerating and deeply considering basic values is far graver than the dangers of reification and dogmatism that (an uncritical) listing and systematization can bring. In addition, as we proceed, we will have occasion to consider the notion that any open-ended (and thus worthwhile) metaphysical account of value must, as part of its own system and truth, leave open the possibility for its own abrogation and emendation.

1. Amongst the values of **being**, are all those values and activities that nurture, support and perpetuate human and other life, and the life of the planet and cosmos, including the values of *life, health, material resources* and *wealth*, to the extent that these contribute to the continued existence, unfolding and development of human beings, animal and plant species, natural and other kinds and particulars (and on some account, ideas and even values themselves) that can be said to *exist* as part of the incredibly rich and diverse fabric of the world and universe.

2. The values of **experience** consist of the *pleasure, excitement, tranquility, experiences of richness, beauty, happiness, fulfillment, etc.* that constitute one’s internal, subjective awareness and which are sometimes thought by both philosophers and ordinary individuals to constitute the foundation of what is meaningful in human existence.

3. Amongst the values of **action** are *freedom from* unnecessary, unwanted and unwarranted coercion, restriction and limitations, and the *freedom to* engage in an infinitely diverse set of activities, take advantage of *opportunities*, and exercise respectful *mastery* over one’s self and environment.

4. **Cognitive** values consist of a diverse, yet mutually supportive set of values that include *interest* (curiosity), *open-mindedness, truth, learning, understanding, insight, wisdom*, and all of the values relevant to the expression of ideas, including clarity, economy, style, comprehensiveness, etc.

5. The values of **personal identity** build upon the values of being, experience, action and cognition to promote the development and individuation of an integral self. These include the values of commitment, persistence, vitality, achievement, personal power and recognition, responsibility, courage, integrity, humility/modesty, prudence, etc.

6. The **relational** values are those which are realized in connection with others, and include care, love, kindness, relatedness, intimacy, friendship, trust, humor, gratitude, compassion, forgiveness/mercy, etc.

7. Values of **equality and inequality** are thought by some to be the essential vehicle for the realization of all other values. The values of equality include justice, fairness, lack of bias, equality of opportunity, and, according to some views, equality of distribution of at least some of the other values in the value firmament. Values of inequality include those of excellence, depth, greatness, saintliness, etc. and like the values of equality are generally thought to be applicable in connection with other values in the value firmament.

8. The values of **time** include the “having” and “giving” of time, endurance and change, and more specifically, remembrance and respect for tradition on the one hand, and revolution on the other. Heidegger argued that all human care, interest and values only emerge with a recognition of finitude, and Alfred North Whitehead, noted that the conflict between the values of permanence and change is unavoidable, and in many ways sets the stage for both personal and world history,

9. Finally, **transcendent** values are those that move the individual beyond him/herself and his/her immediate relationships into creative endeavors, wider considerations, ideals and causes, and ultimately to human and planetary welfare and a comprehensive vision of the world. These values include creativity, humanity, vision, spirituality, and enlightenment, and are embodied in at least certain forms of aesthetic, philosophical, religious and mystical experience.

### **Derivation of the Value Firmament**

What is the origin of this system or “firmament” of values? Are values fundamental and therefore inexplicable categories, or can they be derived from other, non-axiological, principles or ideas? I would propose that the basic heads of value all arise out of the very meaning of human subjectivity in its necessary connection with a

world; in short, they arise out of the very meaning of what Heidegger termed, Being-in-the-world.

To be a human subject means first of all to be to exist, live and to be embodied (being), to have sensations and experiences (experience), to act (action), to think and reason, (cognition), to thereby attain a sense of individuality/personhood/perspective (personal identity), which, like all other aspects of subjectivity is dependent upon one's relations (relationality) with others, their continued being, welfare, and connectedness to oneself, and who, if one is to have the experience and language that constitutes one's world and hence one's own subjectivity, one must accept and acknowledge as nodes of experience, thought language and desire that are equivalent to one's own (equality). Each of these aspects of subjectivity unfold in *time*, and the problem of time and human mortality immediately raises the question of, and leads to a recognition of that which is part of and yet beyond oneself (transcendence).

One might say that the basic dimensions of value can be (1) deduced from the very meaning of human subjectivity, and (2) comprehended through a thorough phenomenology of human experience. But what about the specific values themselves? Here again, the specific values follow from the very meanings of the dimensions under which they are categorized. In the case of "being," it should be clear that the very nature and existence of human being is predicated upon *life* and *health*, and at least to a certain degree upon *material resources* and *wealth*. To take another example, *action*, if it is to fulfill its own potential, must be free from coercion and at least unwarranted restriction and limitations, must be *free to* engage in a range of diverse activities, be afforded *opportunities*, and have the possibility of resulting in at least a degree of *mastery* over one's self and environment. A similar analysis can be made with respect to the specific values that are subsumed under each of the other value dimensions. In each case the specific values follow in a loose "logical" sense from the very meaning of their overarching heads or dimensions. The specific values are thus a "spelling out" of the significance of the nine value dimensions, which are in turn a spelling out or articulation of the meaning of human subjectivity or "Being-in-the world."

## The Interdependence of Values

Another important feature of the value dimension, as well as of the specific values themselves is their interlocking and interdependence. Being, in the sense of life, health, material resources, and wealth is in one way or another dependent upon experience, action, cognition, and each of the other value dimensions in the value firmament. On the simplest of levels, in order to maintain one's own being (life, health and welfare) one must be aware of ones' bodily sensations and experience, take specific actions, obtain certain bits of knowledge, exhibit such personal traits as persistence, commitment, responsibility, etc., relate effectively to others, and be treated as an equal with one's peers by a variety of individual's who give of their time and who have transcended their personal interests. Think about how a simple act like that of obtaining an effective medical check-up depends upon the implementation of values across each of the above nine dimensions.

In virtually all instances of social commerce the values which underlie their effective implementation are hidden from view, but are nonetheless present, providing the implicit axiological background of human existence. Think of how, in our medical check-up example, how things would fair if one failed to report to the doctor how one felt, failed to take the action of going to the doctor's office in the first place, lacked all (cognition) of the medical system, lacked commitment to one's own health, failed to develop even a rudimentary relationship with one's physician—who him or herself failed to give of his or her time and to treat one without bias or with a capacity to transcend his or her own personal interest. A failure can occur at each point along this value continuum; e.g. one *can* fail to act on the need for medical care, the physician can fail to treat one's blood sample with care *equal* to those of his/her other patients, etc. and in such failures the axiological background of the medical check-up is clearly brought to our attention.

I will not spell out the interdependence of each of the other value dimensions and the values subsumed by them, as I am confident that you can do so for yourself. Not only are each of the value dimensions fully interdependent with each of the others, but both simple and complex human activities all have the full "value firmament" as their implicit background, a background which is tacitly assumed until something goes wrong somewhere along the being-experience-action-cognition-identity-relationality-equality-temporal-transcendence continuum. When something does go wrong the value firmament shows itself, like God revealing himself to Moses

after the sin of the golden calf, and everyone starts talking about a failure of values. Investors, for example, who lost millions in the recent financial scandals say that they thought they *knew* the people they had *trusted* with their money, or believed that they were committed to something *beyond* their own crass self-interest when they invested with them, etc.

### **The Psychological Relevance of the Value Firmament**

We have seen how a serious inquiry into values raises a host of psychological questions, pertaining to such topics as the relationship between values, cognitions, and emotions and the relevance of values to character formation and psychological development. Here I would like to point out that the value dimensions I have described also have a direct relevance to psychological assessment, both traditionally conceived of as an evaluation of psychological deficits and abnormalities, and especially as it has recently been reconceptualized by Peterson, Seligman and others , as an assessment of positive character traits and virtues. Indeed, we can readily conceptualize the psychological assessment process as an evaluation of the various values, traits and characteristics subsumed under the continuum of *being, experience, action, cognition, personal identity, relationality, equality (and inequality), time, and transcendence*. This is a topic worthy of a separate treatment, but generally speaking, an examination of these dimensions is in essence what psychologist already do, or should be doing, when they conduct a psychological evaluation. As psychologists we must evaluate an individual's overall health and welfare (being), their "executive functioning" (action), their thought process and content (cognition), their ego-functions and identity (personal identity), their "object-relations" (relationality), their self-regard and actual standing in comparison to peers on a variety of dimensions (quality/inequality), capacity for change, and relationship to their finitude, mortality, and time in general, and finally their creative interests and aptitudes, and capacity for creative, intellectual, humanitarian and spiritual transcendence. The close accord between the dimensions of the value-firmament and the dimensions of psychological well-being tells us something about the degree to which values are the very subject matter of clinical psychology.

## **The Questioning and Transvaluation of Values**

I have already hinted at several reasons that might lead one to reject or at least be suspect of the possibility of describing a value firmament or making any systematic list or accounting of presumably objective values. We have asked the question of whether value terms can be isolated from their specific applications and considered as Platonic ideas or kinds. We have asked whether values might not be relative to culture and history and develop and change over time, whether so-called universal values might disguise power relationships that should be disvalued, and whether any system of values inevitably leads to contradictions. We have also asked about the relationship between values and their corresponding disvalues, and whether a listing or table of values can lead to an unhelpful reification and dogmatism. Finally, we have suggested that certain values themselves (open-mindedness and creativity, for example) tend to contradict the notion of a fixed Platonic firmament of values. Bearing these issues in mind I will also return in another lecture to a topic that I hinted at earlier: the question of whether any open-minded (and thus worthwhile) philosophical account of value must, as part of its own system and truth, leave open the possibility for its own emendation, abrogation or demise.