Values

If nothing matters, then moral philosophy never gets off the ground, so the question of what has value must be the starting point for the subject. The big issues concern the nature of good character and right action, but the motivations and criteria for such things must derive from what is taken to have basic importance. So what are values, what gives things their value, and what sorts of things should be considered valuable? What is the source of '**normativity**' – expectations, requirements and standards - rather than mere passive facts?

V**alues** are concepts intended to inspire our behaviour, and guide its priorities. Values are fundamental to individual lives, and bind together families, nations, and the human race. Values range from major concepts like truth and justice, to the values which guide car maintenance and cooking. Values vary greatly between different eras and cultures, and their status can vary with circumstances (such as in times of plague or war). Some values are attached to real objects (such as paintings), or to features of life (such as health), while others (such truth or respect) are much more general. So do values arise entirely from the mind, or are aspects of the world objectively valuable (in certain circumstances)? One approach treats values as pure concepts not derived from anything else, while an alternative view looks for a reductive account, explaining values entirely in terms of other worldly properties (such as reducing the beauty of statues to observed shapes). Maybe all values can in some way be connected to the rest of the world, and for every value there is some non-valued entity or phenomenon which gives rise to it.

The scientific worldview challenges the idea that reality produces values, and says that no reasoning can ever derive values from mere **facts**, which are value-free. If reality contained no minds, it is indeed hard to see any place for values. But given the existence of human life, it is still plausible that certain things have to be valued (at least for survival). Such values are not entailed by reason (since it is not irrational to deny all values), but they are driven by the basic facts of existence. Some social facts (such as the 'unfair' distribution of food at a meal) have values built into them, and long-term motivation needs values. Promising make no sense without a normative aspect, and correct answers in arithmetic seem obviously more valuable than wrong answers. In general, if anything (such as an eye or an ear) is agreed to have a function, then this implies normative standards of success or failure.

Values might be **objective** facts if certain things have 'intrinsic' value (as opposed to 'relational' value). However, it is hard to think of anything being highly valued in total isolation. Pure ideals (such as perfect knowledge or power) might qualify, but their value is unclear if humans cannot aspire to them. We cannot logically infer values from facts, but there might still be overwhelming reasons to favour a value, which seems to give the values objective status. However, if we favour honesty because we fear being caught out, that is a good reason, but the 'wrong sort of reason', so having reasons isn't enough. Negative values, such as the unacceptability of cruelty to the innocent, can achieve a stronger consensus, even if they are not objective facts. Maybe we can achieve no more than saying a value is 'deserved', and must abandon claims of its 'truth'. Most people agree that moral values have some objectivity, whereas aesthetic values seem much more dependent on who is having the experience.

If values arise out of **individual** preferences, that doesn't mean they lack authority, and are entirely relative. The most sceptical view is that all values arise from individual desires, which often produce conflicts, and give little promise of shared values. If values as rooted in our need to survive, that at least is something we all have in common. If freedom to do as we wish is the starting point, that is an ideal with which can all identify. If values are rooted in love, that implies values which unite us. Most people (but not all) feel some love for other people, which necessarily means placing a high value on those other people. Love (of projects, places, activities and people) is a great motivator, and is thus important in forming values. We may only love things because we see great value in them, but it may be that things only acquire value if we love them, in which case our capacity to love is basic to all values.

It would be nice if we could distinguish those values which are **ends** from those which are merely **means**, and we might even identify **ultimate** values, towards which the lesser values contribute. If means are always subservient to ends, then ends have higher value than means. However, means are justified and useful, but ends are self-justifying and useless. Activities seen as ends in themselves (such as music or gardening) may derive their value from some further aim, such as pleasure or relaxation. Hence ends may not be ultimate values. Suggestions for ultimate values are usually very pure and general (such as 'The Good', or 'a good will', or 'autonomy'), but they seem rather vague. A possible ultimate value is **life**, since there would be no life without a shared commitment to its continuance. Most basic is the value we attach to our own lives, and we may then value the lives of others because they are persons, or because they are of our own species. If life is a supreme value, that may involve more than survival, and some see the leading of a beautiful life (like a work of art) filled with fine deeds, as the highest ideal available to us.

If we value the lives of others, that may arise from selfishness or from **altruism**. Some concern for others is a high value in all cultures, sometimes just as friendship among equals, and sometimes as compassion for everyone. Altruism can be emotional, if we share others' feelings, or rational, if we accept their reasons for things. We all have a naturally empathy for others (wincing if they hurt themselves), but some balance is required. If we are all continually altruistic, we would neglect our own lives, which sounds wrong. A minimum need to 'get on' with other people certainly seems at the heart of any value system.

We all place a high value on our own interests, and some thinkers consider such **self-interest** to be the only real source of value (even if it appears in disguise). It is said that we would all become criminals, if getting away with it was guaranteed. In practice it is prudent to be nice to people, and praise altruistic values, but only because we ourselves flourish best if nice values predominate. The main criticism of this unlikable basis for the noblest values is that concern for one's self does not entail dislike or exploitation of others. If we look after our health, educate ourselves, and achieve economic security, this is what is required for good citizenship, and other people will welcome us, if we have shown such sensible self-interest. Values need the right balance of altruism and selfishness.