

Value, Beauty, and Love: Whiteheadian and non-Whiteheadian Perspectives

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1. Value

The terms in the title of my paper - value, beauty, and love - are, of course interrelated. But in order to start at all, I have to begin with a separate discussion of one of them: value. With respect to value, the old question *ti estin* (What is this?) is not easy to answer. Evidently, the term in question has a broad variety of meanings, even beyond the limits where vagueness ends and equivocation begins.

Let me give an example. We may, on the one hand, agree that justice is a value. On the other hand, we may also agree that justice requires that values be distributed in a proper way. Shall we, therefore, agree that justice requires that justice be distributed in a proper way? - I am sure we shall not. The notion of justice requiring that justice be distributed in a proper way is nonsense, of course. I guess that even from the infinite regress into which it leads nothing is to be learned.

Evidently, *having value* and *being a value* is not just the same thing. One may, therefore, try to remove the equivocation that gives rise to the nonsense just mentioned, as follows. *First*, since *being a value* does not entail *having value* it may be assumed that justice *is* a value but, in so far as it is a value, *has* no value in any relevant sense. *Second*, it may be also assumed that, strictly speaking, there is no distribution of values but only of things that have value. Accordingly, in the claim that justice requires that values be distributed in a proper way, "values" is but a shorthand for: things that have value. Since justice is no such thing, the question of distributing justice in a proper way does not arise.

This, however won't do. If justice *is* a value in one sense it still may be claimed to *have* value in another. On the one hand, justice *is* a value in so far as it makes sense to *be committed to* justice. On the other hand, justice may be claimed to *have* value in so far as justice is desirable, that is, in so far as circumstances in which justice prevails are supposed to be preferable to circumstances in which this is not the case.

Justice, as desirable (and preferable to injustice), is a kind of fact or state of affairs. Consider a value *F*, that is, something to which it makes sense to be committed and a corresponding state of affairs Φ in which that value is realized. Is it evident that Φ has value since *F* is a value? I don't think so. Φ may have value for everybody who is committed to *F*. But if *F* is a value there may be nobody at all who is committed to *F*. Hence, there still may be nobody for whom Φ has value. If this is the case, there need not be any obvious sense in which Φ has value at all.

One may object that, at least, part of the value that justice *has* may be determined quite independently of the value it *is*. Let a just state of affairs, i.e. a state in which valuable things are properly distributed, replace an unjust state in which this is not the case. The replacement is inevitably a matter of losses and gains. For those who gain, the replacement is advantageous and, hence, justice is preferable to injustice. But for those who lose there is no such value in justice. The view that justice is the advantage of others (Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic* I, 343c3: *allogrion agathon*) is hard to refute since, one may even claim, this is notoriously so. That's why, if justice has value, the appreciation of it is not likely to be universal.

It is hard to deny that, on the one hand, justice *is* a value since it evidently makes sense to be committed to justice. But it is doubtful, on the other hand, whether justice *has* value in any obvious sense. It is important to see that the value justice *is* is not at all impaired by the doubtfulness of the value it *has*. I conclude from this that we must not think of the value justice *is* as being in any way derived from the value it *has*.

In general, let F be a value, and let Φ be the corresponding state of affairs in which F is realized. Accordingly, it makes sense to be committed to F (i.e. to the value). Does it also make sense to be committed to establishing Φ (i.e. to realizing that value)? The question may be answered affirmatively as follows. The most straightforward way to be committed to a value is: to be committed to realizing it. As a rule, one cannot be committed to a value without being also committed to realizing that value. Hence, if F is a value, realizing F must be also a value (and in this respect may be even equated with F).

Conversely, let Φ be any fact or state of affairs. On what conditions does it make sense to be committed to the promotion of Φ ? I have argued that it makes sense to be so committed if Φ corresponds to some value which is realized in Φ . Are there other cases? The only candidate I see is this. Perhaps it makes sense to be committed to the promotion of Φ if Φ *has* value, that is, if Φ is desirable by virtue of features that make it preferable to other states of affairs.

Granting that it makes sense to be committed to the promotion of desirable states of affairs, I nevertheless don't endorse the utilitarian claim that this is the one true commitment upon which morality must be entirely based. I have argued that we must not think of the value justice *is* as being in any way derived from the value it (doubtfully) *has*. That's why I also claim that we must not think of a true commitment to justice as in any way derived from the utilitarian commitment to the promotion of desirable states of affairs.

2. Value, Beauty, and Love

So far, the result of my discussion of the question, What is Value? is this. There is a difference between *having value* and *being a value*. What it is for something to *have* value may be straightforwardly explained in terms of preferences. In order to understand what it is for something to *be* a value we must try to understand what it is for a person to be committed to that thing. Accordingly, I suggest that commitment is a more basic concept than value.

But values are not just what people are committed to. Rather, I have proposed a definition according to which value is what it makes sense to be committed to. On the one hand, this definition even allows there to be values to which nobody is committed at all. If, on the other hand, someone is committed to something: must the thing to which he or she is committed be a value? My definition is so designed as to avoid precipitate answers. Rather, the answer depends upon what is meant, in that definition, by the phrase *to make sense*.

First. From a *semantic* point of view it may be sufficient for making sense that the relevant statements have certain meanings and, thereby, refer to some relevant facts. Accordingly, the statement that Smith is committed to *F* refers to a certain fact about Smith. This fact is also described by the statement that *F* is the value to which Smith is committed.

Second. Assume that from a semantic point of view there is no denying that *F* is the value to which Smith is committed. This is fully compatible with my claiming, from a *practical* or *moral* point of view, that I do not at all understand the commitment in question. That is to say, I may insist that it is absurd and (taken in this way) makes no sense at all to be committed to *F*. Accordingly, I may refuse to acknowledge *F* as a true value at all. I may even disapprove of Smith's commitment to *F* since *F* is incompatible with values to which I am committed myself. - Think, e.g., of certain matters of honour which I would dismiss as pointless (or even base if sexism, violence, and the like are involved).

In addition, it should be also noted that there is a difference between *understanding* and *sharing* a commitment. Accordingly, I may sincerely acknowledge that Smith's commitment to *F* is a true commitment to a true value, and still be not at all committed to *F*. - Think, e.g., of ways of religious observance in which I have no part.

As a result, I have to take four ways of being a value into account. There are

- (a) values to which I am committed,
- (b) values which I acknowledge as such, but to which I am not committed,
- (c) values to which, as a matter of fact, some people are (or may be) committed, but which I do not even acknowledge as such;

as a subcase of (c), there may be even

- (d) values which are incompatible with other values to which I am committed, or which I acknowledge as such.

The classification thus described is idiosyncratic. That is to say, my classification depends upon what the values are to which I am committed. Your classifications depend upon your commitments, and so forth. Accordingly, you may rank the values to which I am committed on a lower level, and vice versa. Not much trouble will arise from this if all of us do at least acknowledge the values to which any one of us is committed. But it is well known that this is not always the case. Contempt and enmity may result when values to which some are committed are dismissed as pointless or even rejected by others.

The commitments in question - "strong valuations" in Charles Taylor's language¹ - are described by Harry Frankfurt as second order desires that give "thematic unity" to "our volitional lives."² I endorse, and so far have tried to confirm, Frankfurt's point that valuation, insofar as it takes the form of commitment, is prior to value. Since love is the ultimate commitment, „love“ is also claimed by Frankfurt to be

"the originating source of terminal value. If we loved nothing, then nothing would possess for us any definite and inherent worth. ... Insofar as love is the creator both of inherent or terminal value and of importance, it is the ultimate ground of practical rationality."³

Frankfurt seems thus to come as close to Platonism as possible, given his recognition of the idiosyncrasies inherent in valuation, commitment, and love. A true Platonist, by contrast, is Whitehead who, on the one hand, would not hesitate to agree with the passages quoted. But, on the other hand, Whitehead would insist that both desire and love must be taken more seriously. He would insist that Frankfurt's notorious choice of the former term is, in spite of Frankfurt's equally notorious disclaimers,⁴ not just a *façon de parler*. For a Platonist, true desire is just the same thing as the kind of love (*erôs*) which Diotima is reported to have described to Socrates in the *Symposium*.

Plato sought to overcome the idiosyncrasies of valuation, commitment, and love by referring to an ultimate standard of correctness, i.e. the Form of the Good. According to the passage in the *Symposium* just mentioned, one approach to that standard is by coming to terms with desire. Desire (*erôs*) is described by Plato in terms of its objects. The characteristic by virtue of which things may suggest themselves for desire is beauty. Accordingly, Plato's argument in the *Symposium* allows that an ultimate standard of correctness in valuation is approached by becoming aware of, and desiring, Beauty itself.⁵

"Beauty," writes Whitehead, "is the one aim which by its very nature is self-justifying" (*AI* 266). Platonists hold that as beauty is there, and suggests itself, for desire so value is there, and suggests itself, for commitment. According to Whitehead, the way in which this is the case is determined by the "primordial nature of God" (*PR* 344.11 and *passim*). The divine "vision of truth, beauty and goodness" (*PR* 346.35) takes the form of "valuations determining the relative relevance of eternal objects [i.e. of the "pure potentials" in Whitehead's metaphysical scheme] for each occasion in actuality." (*PR* 344.16-18)

¹ Charles Taylor, "What is Human Agency?" (1977), in his *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I*, CUP 1985, p. 15-44: p. 16 and *passim*.

² Harry G. Frankfurt, "On Caring", in his *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, CUP 1999, p. 155-180: p. 162.

³ Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, Princeton University Press 2004: p. 55 f.

⁴ See, e.g., Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person" (1971), in his *The Importance of What We Care About*, CUP 1988, p. 11-25: p. 12n2; id., *The Reasons of Love*, op. cit.: p. 10.

⁵ Plato, *Symp.* 210e-212a. "Beauty itself": *auto to kalon* (211d3).

The "subjective aim" of each "actual occasion" is initially derived from the "primordial nature of God" (cf. *PR* 224.37-40). It corresponds, on the one hand, to a position vis-a-vis an actual world of settled experience and, on the other hand, to a novelty to be brought about. Whitehead grants that the derivation of initial aims from the "primordial nature of God" does not prevent the individual occasions from having "separate ends."⁶ Ultimately, their combination "in a solid community" is only provided by the reception of the temporal world into the "consequent nature of God".

"A new actuality," writes Whitehead, "may appear in the wrong society, amid which its claims to efficacy act mainly as inhibitions. ... Insistence on birth at the wrong season is the trick of evil." (*PR* 223.17-21)

In this case, "[t]he initial aim is the best for that *impassé*. But if the best be bad, then the ruthlessness of God can be personified as *Atê*, the goddess of mischief. The claff is burnt." (*PR* 244.20-22)

"The revolts of destructive evil, purely self-regarding, are dismissed into their triviality of merely individual facts; and yet the good they did achieve in individual joy, in individual sorrow, in the introduction of needed contrast, is yet saved by its relation to the completed whole. ... The consequent nature of God is his judgement on the world. He saves the world as it passes into the immediacy of his own life. It is the judgement of a tenderness which loses nothing that can be saved." (*PR* 346.10-18)

Whitehead does not seem to bother about the inaccessibility of the point of view thus described. But we should. We should keep in our minds that God is far too easily harnessed for our own idiosyncrasies. It rarely makes a real, as opposed to rhetorical, difference if someone's commitment to a value takes the form of a commitment to whatever divine concern. As a matter of fact, none of us knows who is in the blind alley and who is not.

Conclusion: Values, Justice, and Self-Preservation

Similarly with Whitehead, Frankfurt grants that his argument

"leaves open the possibility that someone may wholeheartedly love what is eventually nondescript, or what is bad, or what is evil. ... The function of love is not to make people good. Its function is just to make their lives meaningful, and thus to help make their lives in that way good for them to live."⁷

⁶ I am alluding to Whitehead's "metaphysical question" in his *Harvard Lectures for the Fall of 1926*: "How can there be individuals with separate ends and yet combined in a solid community?" (Lewis L. Ford, *The Emergence of Whitehead's Metaphysics 1925-1929*, SUNY Pr. 1984, Appendix III, p. 312). - This quotation is also the starting point in Maria-Sibylla Lotter's monograph *Die metaphysische Kritik des Subjekts. Eine Untersuchung von Whitehead's universalisierter Sozialontologie*, Olms 1996, p. 1.

⁷ *The Reasons of Love*, op. cit., p. 98 f.

Assume that I reject as evil a value to which Smith is committed. The verdict may express my own commitment to another value with which that value is incompatible. In this case, the situation is likely to present itself to Smith in the same way as it presents itself to me. If, therefore, Smith rejects as evil the value to which I am committed, we are deadlocked and, in the worst case, become ensnared in enmity and contempt.

There is, on the one hand, no escape from that *impasse* as long as the situation is described in terms of commitment and value. On the other hand, both prudence and justice require that the situation is handled in a well-balanced way. The requirement is only met by taking the commitments involved as what Frankfurt claimed they are: desires that give "thematic unity" to "our volitional lives."⁸ We have learned how dangerous it is to let the relevant desires clash with each other. Accordingly, we may also learn that it is a matter of self-preservation to avoid that clash by doing justice to the desires of both. But does self-preservation matter at all? If not, the contractualist approach thus adumbrated must fail. The clash is only avoided by incorporating the requirements of self-preservation into our volitional lives.

⁸ "On Caring", op. cit., p. 162 (as quoted above).