

Part 2 ⑥ Values and Society

Selfhood is not achieved by fiat. It is affected by conditioning circumstances and, of course, genetic factors. Just as the historian brings to his task a set of values, only some of which are explicit, so also did each historical person act within the framework of his values and of the values of each part of the context in which he was imbedded.

The biographer writing about an historical figure inevitably writes, sometimes unwittingly, about the values of that person and his milieu, but the historian usually does not analyze those value premises systematically in the way that philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, economists, political scientists, or critics of the arts might go about analyzing values.

The word “values” means different things to different people, but, whatever the definition, it often includes premises about space and time. At the very least, the way “values” are defined has an effect on thinking about space and time. See the discussions in Chapter 15 of the effects of an historical change in thinking about space and time, and in Chapter 26 about values and time.

Some 20th-century Western thinkers have regarded value as an intrinsic quality in each person and thing (e.g., a work of art) which we can know primarily by treating the value-carrier on its, his, or her own terms. The person or thing may be said to have less or more value depending on whether his, her, or its inherent potential is fully developed. According to this definition, value is of the here and now. It is rooted in the historic presentness of individuals and things, but endures as long as the value-carrier endures. This definition of value treats time not as a container or projection, but as a state of being. Each person or thing stands on his, her, or its own ground; space is not a box.

Others define values as relationships between subject and objects involving cognition, desire, striving, choice, judgment, and social norm. In this case, values are subjective. They may be objective only in the sense of being widely shared. Value, by this definition, equals valuation, which

can be measured in terms of sentiment or money or recorded in actions, feelings, attitudes, or beliefs which vary in intensity, preference and extent. Some people believe thought is the first basis of values. Others have said values are created by the feeling, willing, striving self—some putting feeling first, others putting willing and striving first—with cognition as an integral part of the process. Such goal-related values create a time-line, and the act of valuing may come at the beginning or end of the line or may be part of a continuing process evolving in time. According to this view, values vary from individual to individual and among different societies.

Some definitions bridge or fall between the objective and subjective extremes. According to 17th-century English political philosopher John Locke, the individual is a repository of universal (hence perennial or eternal) natural rights. Value therefore is intrinsic, because it rests on a universal. Values thus are both timeless innate ideas and temporally ephemeral qualities. Followers of this tradition said they could know such value through rational and empirical study, which implied a separation between subject and object. Locke's idea that rights are derived from universal natural law assumed a certain homogeneity of space and time.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant distinguished between fact and value. The Kantian position was that value rests in the world of pure idea or essence of which facts are only imperfect representations; we know value through intellectual intuition. Value, for Kantians, was rooted in a transcendental, timeless sphere.

For the German philosopher Hegel, values depended on time because they were exhibited in the earthly attributes or manifestations of unfolding Idea. The assumption of inexorable linear time was widely shared in 19th-century Europe and the United States—for example, in the thinking of Karl Marx. If self and society were seen as reciprocally dependent in a manner described by the late 19th-century sociologist Durkheim, then value was the result of that interrelationship, and knowledge of value was sociologically and historically relative (which is to say, time-limited).

German philosopher Max Scheler said that different kinds of value (on an aesthetic spectrum and on a spectrum from pleasure to ethics) may have different degrees of subjectivity and objectivity. Values may be epistemologically separable but ontologically inseparable from their object-carriers—that is, inextricably bound up with their carriers, but

susceptible to analysis as if they were severable. Therefore, Scheler said, values are not historically relative, but knowledge of them may be relative.

All questions and expressions about the subject of values spring from fundamental needs and problems so that similar concepts and images recur throughout history. But the emphases and priorities given to certain value premises, the configurations or hierarchy of value priorities, have changed. In each era or society, different values and definitions of value predominated while others remained subordinate.

Values have been the axiomatic and qualitative aspects of life, expressed in behavior, concepts, assumptions, and symbolic images. Some value concepts have been existential assumptions about how man knows and what reality is. At various times in their history, Americans defined the universe as evil, good, mixed or neutral; unitary or pluralistic, static or evolving; all spirit or idea, all physical, or both. Truth was seen sometimes as an objective existence in God or nature, sometimes as a man-made construct. Statements about truth sometimes stressed the unique, discrete, and particular; sometimes, the general, abstract, and universal. At different times, knowing was believed to be primarily by reason, experiment, intuition, or creative action. Then there were relational assumptions underlying personal behavior and institutional patterns; about man's basic nature; the meaning of birth and death; the appropriate relationships between individual persons, between person, society and government, and between freedom and order, liberty and equality; the meaning of justice; and similar kinds of questions. Some value statements or premises purported to describe reality; others exhorted or directed choices; all had implications in space and time.

Assumptions and concepts are rather thin carriers of value. Symbols embody values much more richly because a symbol by its nature involves more of the whole person and may mean many things. Value-laden (or valued) artifacts, even more than value-concepts, might play any of the roles that symbols are said to play. A whole city, such as Kyoto in Japan or Florence in Italy, can be such a value-laden artifact and play a richly-textured symbolic role. All cities are symbols to some extent.

The subject of values is so rich and deep that it cannot be summarized in short space. Values are an intrinsic part of culture and civilization; hence, they are an intrinsic part of history. It is difficult to make

cross-cultural and cross-civilizational comparisons of values because assumptions vary about the framework for such comparisons. When the historian takes as a framework time and space that cut across different eras or parts of the world or even different social groups within a particular era, he runs the risk of taking a “Self versus Other” point of view—i.e., he may see the world outside himself exclusively through the lenses of his own values as well as in terms of relevancy to his own sense of selfhood or relevancy to the context that reinforces his own sense of selfhood. To write histories that duly recognize and appreciate the life-worlds of others, the historian must to some degree be able to transcend his own life-world without repudiating it.