

Making Values

by Peter Gibson

1. Locating Values

In my attempts to evaluate the main theories of normative ethics, I have been repeatedly struck by a problem common to all of them, which is their largely unquestioned presupposition of supporting values. I will quickly cut to the chase, and address my response to that problem, but first I will very briefly give you my personal reasons for being dissatisfied with the four main theories. If you favour one of these theories, you are unlikely to be happy with my simple critique, but I hope we can pass over those issues for now. I merely wish to motivate a proposal concerning the way in which we should approach this problem.

I take the four plausible theories of normative ethics to be consequentialism, deontology, contractarianism, and virtue theory. I reject Millian consequentialism, because it either presupposes that some consequence such as pleasure is intrinsically good, or it has nothing to say about the preferred consequences, which renders the theory vacuous and unmotivated. I reject Kantian deontology because it offers no guidance in identifying the maxim of an action, thus facing the terrorist-versus-freedom-fighter problem, and it can only generate rational inconsistency in an action by claiming that the maxim that has been selected conflicts with other values which are presupposed. The one foundational value that is explicitly presupposed is rationality, but this is unsupported. I reject Hobbesian contractarianism because the only value presupposed is self-advancement, which is not a moral value, and the theory only offers traditional niceness as a neat strategy, which can be ditched whenever it is convenient. I personally am quite a fan of Aristotelian virtue theory, but it rests on the concept of human nature, which implies a range of virtues when it is functioning well. The problem it meets is when we ask *why* we should value human nature, for any other reason than that it is *our* nature.

Thus it strikes me that all four theories either presuppose values which should have been open to criticism, or else turn out to be devoid of any values which we might call 'moral'. Hence I have rather lost interest in traditional theories of normative ethics (though I admire aspects of all of them), and am now having sleepless nights about the nature and source of our values. I take it that the identification of fundamental values is the only means available for solving the debates in normative ethics.

I will now sketch the train of thought which led me to my current proposal. In the 1980s an idea from the early Wittgenstein was clarified and developed, with the aim of connecting thought more securely to the world, and avoiding the wilder regions of anti-realism. The simple proposal was that for every truth, there is a 'truthmaker'. Anyone attracted to a realist view of the physical world must find such an idea appealing. The sentence 'I am sitting' is true right now, and if we ask what *makes* it true, my current sedentary position has to be the answer. If I stand up, my physical action falsifies the sentence, and so the link between my posture and the truth-value of the sentence seems inescapable.

It would be nice if that theory were irreproachable, and solved heaps of problems, but we should be so lucky. Critics soon spotted a range of anomalies. The standard formulation of the truthmaker idea says that there is always some 'object' which makes a sentence true, but it is not only the objects picked out in a sentence which do that job, so pinning down exactly what it is that does the truthmaking is challenging. Two claims about non-existence (such as 'there are no mice in this room' and 'there are no cats in this room') can have the same truthmaker for different truths. Universal generalisations seem to need a timeless infinity of truthmakers, and these are not available to us. It is certainly unclear what truthmaker would then elevate a universal generalisation into a necessary truth. If I label something as a 'fiction', I actually seem to reject the truthmaker for my own sentence. Nevertheless, ignoring all of these difficulties, we will stand by the strong appeal of a simple truthmaker for 'I am sitting', because it seems to anchor philosophy in the world of common sense.

More recently Kit Fine has developed the idea that necessary truths do not hang in the middle of nowhere, advertising their veracity only to intuitively acute philosophers, but actually arise out of the nature of our world. Thus 'once an event happens it cannot unhappen' seems to be a necessity that does not arise out of the human concept of 'event' or of 'happen', but is rather a universal consequence of the nature of time and its processes. Similar claims would be made about the necessities of logic or arithmetic, and analytic truths arise out of the natures of words or concepts (so that 'all bachelors are unmarried men' is a necessity arising from the concept 'bachelor'). This line of thought, when compared to the truthmaker idea, invites the suggestion that there are 'necessity-makers'. Hence the necessities of logic might be required by the 'natures' of the various rules of deduction, and the necessities of arithmetic or geometry might arise from the axioms of those subjects. This would still leave open the question of whether those axioms were conventional truths, or arose from some deeper nature. We might also accurately describe the sort of justification which confirms that a belief really is knowledge (often described as a 'warrant') as a 'knowledge-maker'. If I believe I have 50p in my pocket, seizing hold of the 50p is the knowledge-maker for my belief.

You may think there is an excess of 'makers' here, but to me this approach has a strong appeal, because it supports a naturalistic picture of the world, in which all of its parts hang together in dependence relations. The train of thought from truthmakers, to necessity-makers, to logic-makers, to knowledge-makers, leads me to a proposal for my present

context. Instead of invoking our intuition, or our pure powers of *a priori* reasoning, or even the power of prayer, to elicit the values we need for a decent account of morality, let us consider the possibility of ‘value-makers’. That is, we will restrict all talk of values to contexts in which it is clear what gives rise to the value.

The most obvious immediate resistance to this proposal will come from platonists. The dream of platonism about values is best expressed, in my view, by the proposal that if nature suddenly ceased to exist in its entirety, values would nevertheless survive. G.E. Moore’s rejection of the idea that anything natural could ever be the ultimate good articulates this approach very clearly. Platonist eternal values are hypothetical values. If we agree that a rich sunset over the Bay of Naples is especially beautiful, then the destruction of planet Earth could not alter the truth that if there were a Bay of Naples, endowed with sunsets, then it would be beautiful. Hence before the creation of our planet, it was a truth that, should the Bay of Naples come into existence, sunsets over it would be beautiful. This is an eternal truth, even if the creation of the Bay of Naples is forever thwarted.

I take this platonist view to be untenable. It seems to me that the truth ‘sunsets over the Bay of Naples are beautiful’ has both a truthmaker and a value-maker, namely the topography of southern Italy. To me the sentence ‘the sunsets over the Bay of Naples are not beautiful, because there is no Bay of Naples and there are no sunsets’ makes good sense. The value involved is grounded in the facts, in the same way that the truth is grounded. If I design a beautiful building (as yet unbuilt), the beauty is in my thoughts, not in the platonic existence of the potential structure. The idea that the whole cosmos vanishes, but an infinity of ungrounded hypothetical values (most of them never realised) all somehow survive, strikes me as incoherent. If you agree with me in rejecting this platonist view, then the notion of more securely grounded ‘value-makers’ looks like a good alternative.

2. Emerging Values

Hence the search for value-makers must begin with the assumption that if nothing exists, then no values exist either. This is not to deny that there may still be hypothetical truths which lack a truthmaker, such as the necessities which constrain the logic, arithmetic and spatial structure of all possible universes, but it is hard to conceive of values among those constraints. If we move on from the state of nothingness, and envisage a minimal cosmos, consisting (say) of one lump of iron, the notion of a ‘value’ can still get no purchase on such a scenario. If we continue to scale up the nature of this hypothetical reality, one possible entry point for values is the step that introduces lives, where the cosmos contains plants but no animals. Scepticism is the normal response to that proposal, but a candidate for a value here would be health. The concept of a value which no one could ever appreciate seems counterintuitive, but it is an Aristotelian thought that lives introduce complex functions into the system, and functions bring with them success and failure, and that in turn offers a glimmer of what we call value. A key debate here is whether the human eye can be said to have an ‘intrinsic’ function, making clear vision an ‘intrinsic’ success, as opposed to our eyes merely satisfying our desire to see. We will note that question, and move on to the introduction of minds.

If there are any values, it seems obvious that minds offer much more fertile ground for their emergence. But we promptly face a dilemma for the story – do minds just enable an appreciation of value, or is value actually produced by minds? If we thought that health in plants was an intrinsic value, and the setting sun over the Bay of Naples had intrinsic value, then the advent of minds might just be the icing on the cake, because it is nice to have an audience for the performance. Alternatively, we can say that health and sunsets are only endowed with value because we like them.

We are now in familiar territory, and it would be absurd to offer definitive solutions or knock-down arguments to settle whether values are discovered or invented. It is, however, obvious that minds can endow things with value. Personally I love an old silver teaspoon, because my father won it in a competition. The spoon has a value which it will forever lack if I am no longer around. Because it is made of silver it also has a financial value, because people seem to like silver. In the first case the value-maker is my individual mind, and in the second it is a community of minds, and no one believes that silver is intrinsically more ‘valuable’ than iron, in a mind-free universe. Communities have a variety of ways in which they memorialise their collective values. The simplest means is monetary, but the subtlest may be in a spoken language. English is crammed full of value-laden words. Compare the words ‘kill’ and ‘murder’, or ‘walk’ and ‘trudge’. Putnam’s example of a word on the fact/value borderline is ‘inconsiderate’. If we think that a large segment of our language is value-free, we are probably deluded. (My own favourite is the word ‘gun’, which the NRA would love to be a value-free word).

In the case of the teaspoon, the value-maker is clearly my own mind, but I can enquire more deeply as to what it is in my mind that produces the value, and I may discover, if I am being honest, that the value arose in me because of some cultural and linguistic attitudes that I have acquired about fathers, competitions and souvenirs. That thought suggests that we should pay far more attention to cultural and linguistic traditions in our account of value-makers, rather than to the supposed free choices of individuals. Thus we now push on, and ask where the value-makers are to be found within a culture.

3. Naturalising Values

No philosopher has thought more deeply than Nietzsche about what I am calling ‘value-makers’. His key thought is a simple one – that the values embedded in our culture are the survivals of the creations of individuals, or small groups of individuals. This is the idea of the ‘superman’ (*Übermensch*). Nietzsche’s own taste in supermen was for slightly alarming aristocrats who generate new visions of how they themselves should live, but my own example of what he is

describing is the wonderful eighteenth-century thinkers who decided that slavery was unacceptable, and set out to abolish it. It is a truism of our society that slavery is a wicked institution, but that value did not come from nowhere – it is the result of the vision of a small group of people (and most notably an impassioned individual, the great Thomas Clarkson). On this Nietzschean view, the most important task of historians is to identify the value-makers of the past, and cultural commentators should focus (critically, of course) on the aspiring value-makers of today. Identifying the persons who originate our values does not solve the foundational questions, but it shows us where to begin our enquiry.

Nietzsche's answer to the foundational question is that values are relative, contain no truth, and are beyond reason. They are a natural phenomenon which arises out of a particular mode of life, and they are a consequence of the perceived goals of that life. Thus the hunter-gatherer life, or the military life, or the feudal life, or the industrial life, or the life of modern multicultural capitalism, each produces its own values, arising from the lives of the leaders of those cultures. Values accrue slowly, so we always live among the values of a previous culture which has now been superseded. The creation of values is as rare a gift as the creation of great art, but the role of philosophers is to find a ranking among the values that we encounter. Since the time of Socrates the standards of our conventional morality (with Jesus as a characteristic role model) have gradually been elevated to the highest rank, while other values have been marginalised. Nietzsche challenges values to a greater extent than other thinkers, and even the values of truth and rationality come up for question in his enquiry. Thus he lists the values of modesty, industry, benevolence and temperance, which all have high status in our current value-ranking, and points out that they are a description of the perfect slave. Nietzsche seems to seek the foundational principles we associate with existentialism – that the values we live by should be our own values, arising authentically out of our lives, and not out of someone else's. Thus he rejects what we now call 'virtue theory', because it is a conservative code which invites us to live by ossified values that are externally imposed on us. This is not, of course, to say that we should all be 'supermen', wildly inventing private values, but rather that we should embrace a ranking among given values which reflects something within us. For Nietzsche the word 'love' captures something of what we need, and a key thought for him is: "that which is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil" (*Beyond Good and Evil* §153). As an image for the expression of love in actual life, Nietzsche often invokes the idea of a dancer (and he describes good thinking as a kind of dancing). At one point he offers a list of the virtues which he himself admires, which are "courage, compassion, insight, solitude" (*Late Notebooks* 02[13]), but he adds (typically) that only the 'vice' of courtesy makes those virtues bearable. If you ask Nietzsche for a justification for this list, his only response is that these values are 'to his taste', because there is no reasoning about values. Nietzsche offers a rich account of values as relative to human life and human needs, but if you seek the value-makers for the values we are mentioning here, then you must study the history of human taste, rather than philosophy.

4. Human Life as a Value

An interesting test case for the question of value-makers is the value of a human life. As a starting point we can observe that to most of us nothing matters more than our own deaths, but if we are asked how important our own deaths are, our cultural values have trained us to give a modest answer. We typically say that in the great scheme of things our own deaths matter little, though we hope a few people will be upset. But if that rule applies to each of us, it would presumably have to apply collectively to all of us. In this scheme of thought we judge our own lives to be worthless in the great scheme of things, since the only value-maker for an individual life is the transient concerns of other people. However, this implies that, if humanity were exterminated in an instant cosmic collision, none of our deaths would have any value, because all the value-makers would disappear together.

This modest attitude to our own existence, and (by implication) to the existence of all of us, may seem nowadays to arise from an atheistic materialism that emphasises our accidental creation, and vulnerability to extermination. If the only value-maker available is mere physical material, we have no basis for thinking that humanity has any value. One strategy for materialists might be to flirt with the Aristotelian idea of function mentioned above, which suggested that successful functioning can be seen as an implicit and possibly non-conscious value. We would have to say that the cosmos is somehow 'healthier' if it contains us, because we in some way enhance its functioning, but we don't seem to have sufficient prominence in the cosmos for that, and to make the case we have to propose either a rather inflated account of the works of Shakespeare, Bach and Einstein, or claim that our conscious reasoning brains have an implausible cosmic importance (with optimistic references to quantum mechanics).

Nietzsche's discussion of this question, in the early pages of *Twilight of the Idols*, begins with the remark that "in every age the wisest have passed the identical judgement on life: it is worthless". Being Nietzsche, this consensus of the wisest is precisely what he wishes to reject. The modesty which we all express about the value of our own lives mentioned above is attributable to this general negation of the value of life, which is embedded in our culture, and which Nietzsche attributes to theists and platonists. This is precisely because they embrace idealised abstract values, but scorn the value-makers from which they derive. For theists these ultimate and purified values converge in the concept of God, and for the platonists the point of the values is precisely to be eternal and 'non-natural' (as G.E. Moore puts it), which endows them with their authority.

Thus Nietzsche does not connect the negation of the value of life with atheistic materialism. On the contrary, it is one of those surviving values from an older culture, in which lofty generalised values are sacrosanct, and our physical existence is downgraded. In particular, the very modest attitude we all typically have to our own deaths is a survival

from a time when a Supreme Being was available to fill the value-making gap. We were able to be modest, because we secretly knew that we were endowed with a value greater than sparrows by a loving God. But if we reject the idea of an eternal loving mind which cares for us, and we also cannot accept the idea that we somehow add value to the physical cosmos because we are so wonderful, then it might seem that the game is lost, and only our limited affection for one another survives as a value-maker. That is, there are four possible value-makers for human life, which are a supreme mind, a platonist notion of value, the function of the cosmos, and mutual affection. For many of us, only mutual affection seems to survive.

My reading of Nietzsche is that this analysis overlooks a fifth source of value, which is the fundamental value which we privately place on our own deaths, despite what the humilities of our culture require. That is, the fundamental value-maker is the attachment we have to our own lives, the desire we have to continue them, and the importance that our own activities have for us. This was called by Nietzsche the 'will to power', a term misunderstood because of its totalitarian associations, but seen most clearly, I think, when Nietzsche says we are watching the will to power in the reaction of two chemicals in a test tube. The word 'conatus' is used by Spinoza for a similar idea. To be alive is to place a central but indeterminate value on life. Occasionally this fails, and suicide results, but in a normal life the worth of one's own existence is the value from which all others derive.

I do not offer this as a solution to the problem of the value of human life, but as the best approach to the question. All sorts of issues remain. Humility, which is rather despised by Nietzsche, strikes many of us as (within reason) a rather admirable quality, and the sort of people who place an excessively high value on their own lives just seem to the rest of us to be intolerably arrogant, and the lavish tombs they build for themselves appear shallow and vain. It remains hard to pinpoint the value-makers which suggest that a widely-mourned celebrity was actually of less worth than a great scientist whose passing is barely noticed. We can only say that collectively we place a very high value on human life, because each of us is a value-maker for the value we share.

As an illustration of the way in which this sort of grounding can give rise to a cultural value we can observe that the British casualties of the Battle of Waterloo are consigned to oblivion, but the British casualties of the Battle of Mons are lovingly recorded for posterity, revealing that somewhere between those two events a new value was created in our culture. The nineteenth century saw war as largely a matter of victory and defeat, but since 1918 we have identified much more with the lives that are lost in a battle, and we record their names. The value we place on the lives of these ordinary men is now outliving the individual attachments that first motivated the memorials of the Great War, because we feel a community with the dead based on the value they placed on their own lives, and the similar value we place on our own. That gives a well-founded Nietzschean picture of how such values are generated, and it also implies a plausible account of how our culture sustains those values.

Readings

Fine, Kit (1994) 'Essence and Modality', in *Philosophical Perspectives* 1994

- the source of the idea that necessities are grounded in the natures of things

Hochschild, Adam (2006) *Bury the Chains*. Mariner Books

- history of the origins of the anti-slavery movement in Britain

Lowe, E.J. and Rami, A. (eds) (2009) *Truth and Truth-Making*. Acumen

- contains the origins of the truthmaker idea, and some critical discussions

Murdoch, Iris (1970) *The Sovereignty of Good*. Routledge

- nice attempt to articulate the platonic idea that 'the good' has an absolute and direct appeal for us

Merricks, Trenton (2007) *Truth and Ontology*. OUP

- illuminating and very critical discussion of the idea of truth-makers

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1888) *Twilight of the Idols*. Penguin

- a readable short text from his later writings

The thought about war memorials comes from the treatment of Hardy's poem *Drummer Hodge* in Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys*.