



Values

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The concept of values has recently re-emerged as the object of explicit theoretical attention in a number of disciplines, including anthropology. The aim of this entry is to review the different anthropological approaches that come together under the label of 'value theory'. At present, these can be sorted into structuralist and action-oriented camps. The former treats values as objective phenomena embedded in cultural structures; the latter conceives of value as something that must be continually produced by human activity. After reviewing classical and more recent statements of these two positions, we discuss a third approach that tries to link both structure and action perspectives.

Introduction

The concept of values occupied a central place in philosophy and the social sciences during the first half of the twentieth century. After having faded out of view for some decades, it has recently re-emerged as the object of explicit theoretical attention in a number of disciplines, including anthropology. An initial definition might state that 'values' have to do with the good and the important. But even this would suggest greater agreement about the nature of this concept than has so far been reached among anthropologists. The aim of this entry, therefore, is not to state authoritatively what value 'is', but to review the different anthropological approaches that come together under the label of 'value theory'.

At present, these approaches can be sorted into structuralist or action-oriented camps. The former treats value as an objective phenomenon embedded in cultural structures; the latter conceives of value as something that must be continually produced by human activity. Proponents of both camps agree, however, that an anthropological theory of value should ultimately be able to transcend this division. As one key contemporary value theorist puts it, value is

a term that suggests the possibility of resolving ongoing theoretical dilemmas; particularly of overcoming the difference between what one might call top-down and bottom-up perspectives: between theories that start from a certain notion of social structure, or social order, or some other totalizing notion, and theories that start from individual motivation (Graeber 2001: 20).

Foundations of value theory

The concept of value originated in eighteenth century economics and was taken up in late nineteenth century German philosophy from where it entered the twentieth century social sciences (Schnädelbach 1984: 161-91; Joas 2000: 20; Robbins 2015a). The emergence of a philosophical discourse on value known as axiology needs to be seen in the context of the rise of the modern [scientific](#) worldview (Schroeder 2012). Earlier ways of thinking, largely derived from Aristotelian thought, had assumed that how things *ought* to be could be deduced from the way things *are*. The scientific worldview, by contrast, advocated a strict separation between facts and what now came to be called ‘values’ (Robbins 2015a). For our purposes, two things are worth noting here. Firstly, in taking the position formerly occupied by the concept of the good, the notion of value assumed its meaning as something people want or should want to attain, as opposed to the right, which refers to those things people feel obliged to carry out (Venkatesan 2015: 442-43). It is this meaning that has remained most closely associated with the term ever since. Secondly, the distinction between facts and values raises the question of whether values are subjective or objective phenomena. On the one hand, it appears that understandings of the good, if not rooted in nature, could only depend on the whim of valuing subjects. On the other, reacting to the relativism implied by this position, early value philosophers, such as the neo-Kantians Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert, sought to re-establish an objective basis for value by trying to find ‘in the subjectivity of valuation the conditions for its universal validity’ (Joas 2000: 22). Early [phenomenologists](#) such as Max Scheler (1973) likewise argued for the objective existence of values as things in the world. The issue of whether and in what sense values exist independently of subjects has remained a topic of debate to this day and will reappear throughout this entry.

Through the work of Max Weber in particular (1949: 50-112; 1946: 323-61), himself deeply influenced by German philosophical debates, the concept of value entered the North American social sciences, where it gained a prominent place in the decade following World War II. A key protagonist of this movement was the anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn. According to Kluckhohn's influential definition, a value is a ‘conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action’ (1951: 395). The key term in this definition is ‘desirable’, which indicates that values are not simply desires but desires which people consider justified. It is such conceptions of the desirable, when [shared](#) by people, that Kluckhohn thought account for the uniqueness of cultures. Hence, the comparative analysis of cultures – anthropology – had to take the form, above all, of a comparison of values. As a way to investigate empirically the difference values make, Kluckhohn designed the ‘Harvard Comparative Study of Values in Five Cultures’. Conducted from 1949 to 1955, this large-scale research project aimed at comparing the values of five cultures – Navaho, Zuni, Spanish-America, Mormons, and Texan – that existed under similar ecological conditions in the Rimrock area of western New Mexico. Although resulting in a number of sophisticated descriptions of each

of these cultures' values (see Albert 1956; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck 1961; Vogt & Albert 1966), the project is commonly remembered as a failure because it did not achieve its core aim of finding a way of drawing comparisons between these value systems. Its lack of success in this regard has been laid at the feet of its failure to develop of a notion of the structures that relate values to one another (Graeber 2001: 4-5), or attributed to the difficulty from within the project's framework of determining how many values might be relevant to the analysis of a given culture or the comparison of two or more of them (D'Andrade 2008: 4). Perhaps as importantly, for various reasons – some of them personal rather than intellectual – the most prominent publication of the project, *People of Rimrock* (Vogt and Albert 1966), was not published until ten years after the project itself ended, by which time general interest in the topic of values had passed its peak (Powers 2000).

Louis Dumont, who commented on the Harvard project some twenty years later, was one of those scholars who attributed its failure largely to the absence of a notion of structure (1986: 240 ff.). Dumont's own work (1980, 1986, 1994) directly addressed that absence, and contributed significantly to the anthropological study of values. Dumont's starting point was the observation that whereas classical structuralism considered cultures to be made up of binary oppositions in which each element is as important as the one to which it is opposed, such oppositions in reality mostly take a hierarchical form. That is, not only do cultures draw distinctions of the type male/female, raw/cooked, hot/cold, but they also routinely accord a higher value to one of the poles of each opposition. Furthermore, Dumont suggests that in cases of hierarchal opposition, the higher ranked element can in some contexts 'encompass' the lower ranked one, coming to stand for the whole domain to which the two elements refer. Thus, for example, in the English language, the lexeme 'man' can in some contexts stand for both 'man' and 'woman' in the idea of 'mankind', even as in others it stands for male individuals.

Cultural meaning systems – 'ideologies' as Dumont called them (though here he was drawing on a sense of the word that has significant overlap with the English 'culture' and is not tied to Marxist definitions of the term that link it to notions such as class interest or false consciousness) – can be described as orders of such hierarchically arranged values and ideas. The overall hierarchical ordering of the various 'value-ideas' of an ideology is, in Dumont's view, an effect of certain overarching or 'paramount' values – things or states of affairs considered better and more worthwhile than anything else. All other values in an ideology are attributed a specific rank based on the extent of their contribution to the realization of its paramount value. In the ideology of the Indian caste system, for instance, 'purity' figures as the paramount value, and all things and social groups are ranked according to their relative degree of purity, ranging from the highly pure Brahmins to the impure 'Untouchables'. However, Dumont also emphasised that ideologies do not present one unbroken chain of decreasing value (1980: 239). Rather, on his account, ideologies also contain several 'levels'ⁱⁱⁱ, which are themselves ranked in relation to each other by virtue of their own relative contributions to the realization of highly ranked values. In moving between levels, 'reversals'

occur: a thing highly valued in one context may in another context be subordinate to and differentiated from what it previously encompassed. Thus, in India, the king is overall ranked below the Brahman, for power is less important than purity. But in certain worldly contexts defined as political this [relation](#) is reversed and the Brahman is represented as inferior to the king. The concept of reversal is important because it highlights that Dumont's notion of ideological structures of values is less neat and totalising than alleged by his critics (see Appadurai 1988; Dirks 2001). At the same time, it suggests that what appears as contradictory to an outside observer unacquainted with [emic](#) distinctions between levels may in reality conform to an overarching logic. All in all, then, Dumont proposes to think of value as embedded in the structure of culture. He thus takes a decidedly objectivist position according to which values exist independently from human subjects, though their existence as part of ideological structures also means that no values are necessarily universal across all cultures.

Parallel to Dumont, a second school of anthropological value theory developed across the Atlantic at the University of Chicago among scholars such as Nancy Munn and Terence Turner. Rather than focus on ideational orders, as Dumont did, the Chicago School directed attention to the role of human practice in the creation of value. For Munn, the impulse for this focus came from her work on Gawa, an island in the Massim region of Papua New Guinea well known to anthropologists as the area in which the Kula ring²⁴ is an important institution. Gawans' primary concern, Munn found, was to extend their 'fame' in the inter-island world by attaching their name to prestigious kula shells (1986). To do so required a long chain of exchanges (or 'value transformations'), in the course of which lower level valuables such as garden produce were exchanged against more valuable ones, such as canoes, which in turn could be exchanged against low-level kula shells and so on. If value in Gawa is *generated* by human acts of value transformation, then 'value is *signified* through specific qualities that characterise such components of practice as the body' or kula-shells (Munn 1986: 16, emphasis added). For example, heaviness and motionlessness are qualities of bodies that signify negative value because they index that a person has consumed food herself rather than using it in exchange for something more valuable. Lightness, by contrast, indexes positive value. Drawing on the philosopher C. S. Peirce, Munn refers to such qualities that signify value as 'qualisigns' – a second key concept, along with chains of value transformation, in her theoretical program.

Turner's (1979; 2003; 2008) theory of value similarly focused on practice or action more than structure, but he took greater pains to phrase his contribution in Marxist terms than did Munn (though she too was influenced by Marx). 'Value', in the Marxist tradition, first of all refers to the value of commodities and is understood to result from the [labour](#) invested in their production. This labour theory of value differs from the neoclassical view according to which a thing's value is rooted in the utility that it has for someone. On Turner's (2008: 46) account, contrary to other labour theories of value, such as David Ricardo's (2006 [1817]), the Marxist version of this theory moreover holds that the value of a product is not determined by the absolute amount of labour that went into its making but by the proportion of the total social labour

power of a system invested in it. Turner argued that this perspective has its merits even in non-capitalist contexts, where people are primarily concerned not with the production of commodities but with that of social persons. Thus, among the Amazonian Kayapo, with whom Turner did fieldwork, the people into the 'making' of whom the greatest fraction of labour had been invested – elders – appeared as imbued with the greatest value. Harkening back to Marx, Turner notes that value usually becomes embodied in and represented through some kind of material "value-form" (2008: 49). In capitalist societies, [money](#) is the primary value-form. Among the Kayapo, by contrast, certain types of ritual chanting and oratory take this position. The supreme value of elders is indicated by the fact that they are the only ones to have the right to engage with these forms of oratory and chanting (2003: 3). Turner went much further than this in his application of Marxist theory to non-capitalist societies, arguing that here too processes of fetishization and exploitation occur. For our purposes, however, the basic point to take away is the Marxist notion of value being an effect of human productive activity.

Contemporary developments in value theory

As mentioned earlier, recent years have witnessed renewed anthropological interest in the concept of value (see Otto & Willerslev 2013a, 2013b; Iteanu & Moya 2015; Haynes & Hickel forthcoming). While we do not have the space to discuss the reasons for this development, it is worth noting that it coincides with a more general '[ethical](#) turn' in the humanities and social sciences. Value theory is potentially well placed to contribute to this broader field of inquiry into the evaluative dimension of social life (see Robbins 2012; 2015b). The ability to do so, however, is likely to depend on resolving internal difficulties first. At this point, the two basic positions outlined in the previous section – the structuralist and the action-oriented – continue to oppose each other. Yet, there have been developments on both sides. We review these here before moving on to discuss a third approach to value that might be able to remedy a gap left unfilled by both the structuralist and the action-oriented approaches.

On the structuralist side, work has continued along Dumontian lines, with Dumont's followers defending his approach against a range of criticisms. The most widespread of these criticisms maintains, in many respects unfairly, that Dumont's notion of ideology relies on assumptions about its bounded, integrated, and unchanging nature that have been widely criticised as features of theoretical notions of culture more generally (for a review of these criticisms, and a discussion of some of the problems that beset them, see Brightman 1995; for examples of pieces that suggest that in fact they do not apply to Dumont, see Kapferer 2010; Ortner [1984] 1994). One promising response to such claims is Rio and Smedal's conceptual pair of 'totalization'/'detotalization', which introduces a procedural perspective that sees totality not as a *fait accompli* but as an ongoing movement (2008). From this point of view, '[h]ierarchy is an ideology in motion that constantly melts down categories and substances, things, ideas and people that come under its totalizing sway and transforms them and gives them value according to its own social universe' (Rio &

Smedal 2008: 237). In other words, value systems here are not conceptualised as existing in a fixed form but instead as being constantly (re)produced through the tendency of core values to attach value to the things around them. As an example of this process, one might consider the way economic values related to market freedom and the maximization of profit often move to influence spheres other than the economic one in social formations currently defined as neo-liberal.

A second way of addressing the criticism directed at Dumont's model – that it tends to represent value [relations](#) as static – is to be found in Joel Robbins' (2007) proposal to incorporate Weber's ideas about value spheres into Dumont's model. According to Weber, social life is divided into several spheres of activity. Weber himself distinguished six such spheres (political, economic, religious, aesthetic, erotic, and intellectual) (1946: 331), but Robbins notes that the number and shape of value spheres may differ across societies (2007: 298-99). In Weber's account, the different spheres promote different ultimate ends and therefore, like 'warring gods', stand in irreconcilable conflict with one another. Hence, where Dumont is often read as proposing that the different levels of an ideology are neatly integrated under one paramount value, Weber allows for the possibility that levels or spheres may also confront each other as equals. Robbins' suggestion is *not* that one of these views is more adequate than the other. Rather, he suggests that anthropologists should treat the question of whether value systems are 'monist' (with various values exhaustively ranked vis-à-vis one another and thus working together harmoniously) or 'pluralist' (with values standing in conflict to each other) as the object of empirical inquiry, and should be attentive to the tension between unifying and pluralising movements that often mark cultural process (Robbins 2013).

As important as this work has been in updating Dumont's approach, it has not addressed one of the basic problems associated with his approach, namely the lack of a theory of motivation. While Dumont's model excels at analyzing values on the cultural level, his theory does not attend to how values influence people's lives and what motivates actors to pursue them. As long as we do not assume that cultural systems [reproduce](#) themselves independently of human subjects, this neglect of the subjective dimension of value makes it difficult to understand cultural reproduction, or, for that matter, change.

Here, a return to the action-oriented camp is necessary, for its main contemporary proponent, David Graeber, explicitly states that theories in this camp 'start from individual motivation' (2001: 20). Graeber's approach strongly builds on Munn and Turner. He derives from their work the basic understanding that value 'is the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves' (2001: 45). The underlying assumption here is that people invest their energies into the things that they consider most important. Hence, if 'Americans spend 7 percent of their creative energies in a given year producing automobiles, this is the ultimate measure of how important it is to us to have cars', and 'if Americans have spent, say, .00000000007 percent or some similarly infinitesimal proportion of their creative energies in a given year on *this* car, then that represents its value' (Graeber 2001: 55). Like Turner, Graeber assumes that value inevitably comes to be represented in value-forms, such as [money](#), kula-shells, or chiefly

chanting. The crucial point is that such value-forms are not simply representations of value but elicit people's desire and thus actually bring into being the very thing that they represent. This had already been noted by Turner (2008: 51), and is further emphasised by Graeber. Money, for instance, appears as 'an object of desire, the pursuit of which motivates [workers](#) to actually carry out the very creative actions whose value it represents—since, after all, this is the reason one goes to work to begin with: in order to get paid' (Graeber 2013: 225).

This argument certainly goes some way toward formulating a theory of motivation. Yet it only pushes the problem one step further back, because it does not explain how value-forms become desirable in the first place. This appears as a question particularly worth posing for cases (take contemporary Western societies as an example) where different people pursue different forms of value (e.g. money or academic standing). The traditional answer to this sort of question would point to the influence of social structures in making certain things rather than others appear as desirable to people (see Bourdieu 1984). But this response does not appear possible within Graeber's framework, because he is at pains to reject the notion of structure as something that precedes and guides human action, putting in its place his understanding that structures are 'really just patterns of action' that are constantly subject to change (2001: 59). This position makes it as difficult to bridge the gap between structure and motivation from within his theoretical perspective as it is from within the structuralist paradigm.

A third approach to value

So far, we have encountered values as existing as elements of cultural or ideological structures and as products of human action. One might speak, then, of cultural values, construed as collective representations of what is good and important in life, and personal values understood as that which persons feel is worth striving for. The question that has emerged from the preceding sections is how these two levels are linked. As Claudia Strauss once put it,

knowing the dominant ideologies, discourses, and symbols of a society is only the beginning - there remains the hard work of understanding why some of those ideologies, discourses, and symbols become compelling to social actors, while others are only the hollow shell of a morality that may be repeated in official pronouncements but is ignored in private lives. Our key questions thus becomes: How do cultural messages get under people's skin [...]? (1992: 1).

Here, a third lineage of value theory deriving from Durkheim (1974) is worth considering. The basic idea of this approach is that a commitment to values arises out of certain types of collective experiences. Values, Durkheim says, arise when people participate in rituals that lead them to feel a kind of heightened state he calls 'collective effervescence'. This feeling, he says, leads people to the experience of being in the presence of something greater, more important, and we might say more desirable than themselves and the

things to which their own individual desires are attached (Durkheim 1974). They come to associate this feeling with the objects, ideas, states of affairs and goals that the ritual promotes, and in this way these things become values for them (see Turner 1967). As Robbins, who has recently (2015a) argued along these lines, suggests, it is not only through ritual that values become represented to and lodged in subjects, but also through the influence of exemplary persons (see Humphrey 1997; Scheler 1987; Wolf 1982) or through people's encounters with myths and other types of value-laden narratives.

With this approach, one gets some sense as to how values that exist on the cultural level become subjectively attractive. To be sure, this perspective raises its own questions. For instance, it does not solve the question of intersubjective variation in values. Why do people of a given social formation, if exposed to the same rituals, narratives, etc. not always value the same things with the same intensity? Robbins (forthcoming) has recently argued that the supposition that values on the subjective and the objective level should look alike depends on a flawed 'fax-model of socialization' (cf. Strauss 1992: 9). Because all cultures contain more than one value, people come to internalise several values which can be difficult to pursue all at once. It thus becomes necessary to work out their [relation](#) and accommodate them to the requirements of everyday life – a process which leads to the kind of variation in personal values to be observed in many societies.

Clearly further questions pose themselves. For instance, would the Dumontian model not suggest that the more important values get communicated more frequently and/or with greater intensity, so that the cultural value hierarchy becomes [reproduced](#) within individuals, rather than different values coming to exist as equals within people? Nonetheless, a focus on the interrelation between objective and subjective forms of value, between value as structure and value as a motive for action, might well proceed along Durkheimian lines and would certainly help to advance contemporary anthropological engagements with the concept of value.

Conclusion

Having built this entry around the cleavages that mark the contemporary debate about value, we would like to close by noting three points of convergence. Firstly, there appears to be agreement that the study of value requires a holist style of analysis. This follows from the nature of value: like meaning, value derives from reference to sets of [relations](#) and often to larger wholes and can therefore only be understood with regard to these. Secondly, scholars of value seem to converge in rejecting the 'flat' [ontologies](#) of the social that have proliferated in recent years in approaches such as actor-network theory. To look at value inevitably brings hierarchy to light: even the most [egalitarian](#) social formations contain at their heart a hierarchy of value, namely the subordination of inequality to equality (Robbins 1994). Finally, and most importantly, there is agreement that greater attention to value would return to anthropology a perspective that was foundational to it but has increasingly gone missing over the years: the interest in what really

matters to people around the world and in how cultures differ not simply as systems of power, production, or meaning, but as schemes that help to define what is ultimately good and desirable in life.

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[1] The notion of level roughly corresponds to such better-known concepts as ‘fields’ or ‘domains’, e.g. the political, the religious, and so on.

[2] An inter-island trading system based on the movement of valuables made from shells first made famous in anthropology by the work of Malinowski (1922).