Introduction: The Many Faces of Value

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Introduction: The Many Faces of Value

Abstract This chapter sets up the upcoming chapters of the book and introduces four essential aspects of value. The topic of value has personal, social, and cultural dimensions, and value considerations are related to conceptual and metaphysical questions. These four dimensions of value correspond to four crucial academic disciplines that have focused their theoretical and empirical attention on value(s): psychology, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy. These four disciplines developed their own value theories and conceptualizations of value. To make progress in value theory, an interdisciplinary exchange is necessary. This chapter motivates the book's aim to provide an accessible introduction and overview of value theories in the four disciplines. Paying attention to how different disciplines approach the topic of value is the first step toward a comprehensive, interdisciplinary, and improved understanding of value.

Keywords Sociology • Anthropology • Psychology • Value theory • Philosophy • Interdisciplinary

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Values are ubiquitous, important, and a meaningful element of human life. To take some mundane examples: Whenever people come together to talk about societal and political issues, the conversation will, at some point, turn to values. People pick romantic partners (partly) based on whether their values match. Often, people make political choices based on the values a party or candidate represents. Indeed, whether people identify as liberals or conservatives is a matter of personal values. Furthermore, when people make major life decisions, like whether or not to start a family, where to live, or what job to take, they evaluate these decisions in the light of their values.

Values are deeply personal, but they also have a social dimension. Take as examples the Coronavirus pandemic and the topic of climate change. Both issues relate to important public and social values, like social security, public health, consideration for people in need, and solidarity with future generations. The pandemic and climate change highlight that political and social conflicts are often conflicts of value. Social issues often involve debates about which values are most important in a society. Stemming a pandemic and battling climate change requires that values and interests are weighed because it is often impossible to realize all values, and compromises are necessary.

The different responses of countries to the pandemic and climate change also reveal that values are culturally and socially embedded. That is to say, cultural norms, habits, and social and political institutions all stabilize particular value systems. That is why values can take a long time to change and why changes in social institutions, like laws and conventions, often accompany value change.

Considered together, all the examples above illustrate three essential aspects of value. First, value is personal. That means values are linked to personal identity and self-concept. The kind of person somebody is, what decisions somebody makes, and the attitudes one takes towards things are partly defined by values. Often, people explain and justify their beliefs and actions by referring to their values. For instance, 'I don't eat meat because it is incompatible with my values'.

Second, value is social. People are social animals that do not live in a social vacuum, which means other people influence their thinking and behavior. Society affects what values people endorse, and people are often

socialized into value sets shared by others in their surroundings. Family and social institutions play a huge role in developing personal values as they reinforce existing societal norms and standards. Furthermore, values shape social interactions and how people interpret these social situations. Social interactions, in turn, stabilize the value system of society.

Third, value is cultural. That means that group members share values, and there is a cultural variability of values. What is considered good and important can differ between social groups. Value is also cultural in another sense. Members of a group or society express value commitments to each other in distinct cultural forms. For instance, values are exemplified in norms, rituals, and value-laden objects and symbols, like totems and monuments.

The fourth aspect of value has to do with conceptual and metaphysical questions. Philosophers like William Frankena (1967) and Reinhard Pauls (1990) have highlighted that people can have different things in mind when they use the word 'value'. Most importantly, we need to distinguish between value and valuation, a distinction that roughly maps the subjective and objective aspects of people's value talk. For instance, people may use 'value' in the sense of object value, referring to an object's worth. For instance, when we say that a movie has artistic value, we assign value to an object (the movie). Frankena calls this notion '*value as concrete noun*'. This is to be distinguished from a more abstract notion of value, where value is the standard used to evaluate something. For instance, when people say 'I have my values', they use value as a standard, or what Pauls calls '*value-as-criterion*'. There is yet another sense of value because value can also mean 'to value something'. Frankena calls this notion '*value as a verb*'. For instance, we use value as a verb when we say that we appreciate or like a movie because of its artistic elements.

The distinction between value and valuation brings out important theoretical considerations. For instance, we can inquire how the different value concepts, and notions of value, relate to one another. Furthermore, we can also ask what makes something good or which properties make something valuable. Another possible question that arises from the distinction between value and valuation is whether something can have value if nobody ever values it. Finally, one may wonder whether (and if so, in what sense) there is value over and above people's valuing attitudes. After all, the existence of subjective valuing attitudes and the fact that

people value different things are less controversial than claiming that objective value exists. All of this indicates that the topic of value comes with abstract metaphysical and conceptual questions.

To recap, the topic of value has personal, social, and cultural dimensions, and it comes with conceptual and metaphysical implications. These four dimensions of value (loosely) correspond to four crucial academic disciplines that have focused their theoretical and empirical attention on value(s): psychology, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy. The chapters of this book will review how these four academic disciplines define, theorize about, and conduct research on value.

Psychology. While also considering social and cultural aspects of value(s), psychology often views value through the lens of personality and from a *personal perspective*. As scientists of the human mind and behavior, psychologists are interested in how value(s) shape people's personal beliefs and behavior. As we will see in more detail, psychology stresses the relation between value, personality, and self-concept. Psychology is also more interested in value as valuation.

Sociology. In sociology, value is predominantly theorized and investigated from a *social perspective*, which includes a focus on how people interact in social contexts and how social structures, like family or class, influence the actions of individuals. Because values shape social behavior, sociologists are interested in the role of value in society. One crucial question in sociology is how society shapes individuals and their values and how the actions of these individuals, which are motivated and influenced by values, shape society.

Anthropology. Anthropology considers value from a *cultural perspective*. That means that anthropologists are interested in collective differences in what people value. Additionally, they investigate the cultural forms through which people express value(s) and try to account for how people create and preserve value(s) in a cultural setting.

Philosophy. Recall that the topic of value is related to *metaphysical* and *conceptual questions*. These questions fall within the purview of philosophy. Among other things, philosophers are interested in questions about whether values are real and objective and how different kinds of values relate to one another.

These four disciplines take a distinctive perspective on the world and focus on different aspects of value. Consequently, the four disciplines often ask very different questions about value. The disciplines have also developed their value theories and conceptualizations of value.

The different approaches and conceptualizations of value reflect the different epistemic goals of the disciplines. However, the consequence of this plurality is a "balkanized nature of the research" (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004, p. 359). One must sift through idiosyncratic accounts with deep historical roots to learn how other disciplines think about value. This makes it very difficult to get a good overview. In addition, value accounts of another discipline can be hard to understand because they are often steeped in jargon. These difficulties may discourage scholars from considering what other academic fields can offer, which can hinder mutual learning.

This book wants to ameliorate disciplinary balkanization and highlight how different disciplines think about value. The aim is to provide an introduction and overview of value theory and research in sociology, psychology, anthropology, and philosophy. The hope is that this will support the conversation between disciplines and thus contribute to an enhanced understanding of value(s). Furthermore, paying attention to how other fields investigate and conceptualize value promises to be mutually enriching because more interaction and cross-pollination can help to refine conceptual tools and improve value theories.

The debates about value within one discipline have often reached a very high level of abstraction. Even introductory texts within a discipline usually start from a certain level of conceptual understanding and often presuppose the mastery of jargon. To support interdisciplinary exchange, this book provides an accessible guide to the value theories of the disciplines mentioned above—without assuming background knowledge in any of the four disciplines. To achieve this goal, the chapters provide an overview of how psychology (Chap. 2), sociology (Chap. 3), anthropology (Chap. 4), and philosophy (Chap. 5) theorize about value. Specifically, the chapters will introduce theories and conceptualizations of value that are crucial for developing value theory in the discipline. Because thinking does not occur in a vacuum, the chapters will also include some empirical research.

Because the issue of value is multifaceted, we need the effort of multiple disciplines to understand value. To make theoretical progress, scholars must get out of their disciplinary silos and should not neglect perspectives from other disciplines. Paying attention to how different disciplines approach the topic of value is the first step toward a comprehensive, interdisciplinary, and improved understanding of value. To promote this understanding, the last chapter will highlight in more detail the overlap between the different disciplines and what they can learn from one another. Bringing disciplines together is the first step towards crossing disciplinary boundaries, resolving conceptual differences, and increasing interdisciplinary communication.

An important caveat is that it is not the goal to give an exhaustive representation of all the details of the accounts of value. Instead, the text provides as much detail as is necessary for a general understanding. The hope is that this will make the text accessible to readers from all academic backgrounds and can serve as a valuable resource for scholars who want to learn how other disciplines think about value.

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