

# Value and Society: Re-discovering the Primacy of Cultural Context



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## **Lecture Series-IV**

### **Value and Society: Re-discovering the Primacy of Cultural Context**

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## Editor's Note

The Centre for Positive Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Studies (CPPIS) Pehowa (Kurushetra) publishing this series of lectures since 2012. The present lecture "Value and Society: Re-discovering the Primacy of Cultural Context " delivered by Prof. Geeta Manaktala, Professor (Reemployed), Department of Philosophy, Panjab University, Chandigarh in *ICPR Periodical Lectures-2015* organised by the Department of Philosophy, P.G.Govt. College for Girls, Sector-11, Chandigarh held on 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2015.

In this lecture she expressed that philosophers and social scientists have attempted to understand and explain the concept of values, which is said to possess a dual nature. Values embody components of reason, which is essentially an affair of the mind and is therefore regarded as the philosopher's province. The role of Philosophers and Sociologists must therefore be regarded and coordinated in this regard. Values often owe their origin to the socio-cultural context from which they arise. Their connection with the material world and the influence to which they are subjected to in specific societies and in the behaviour of given individuals are realities in human situation. Besides the individuals create values and their existence is to be seen in the behaviour of the members of a given society as well as in the customs and conventions, which people generally accept. Values therefore being moral in nature, are social facts and may act as individual motives as well much of the social contest within which social life is lived. Modern theories of values and indeed, many classical ones are psychologically based, but they differ from one another in the psychological phenomena what they selected as the ground of values. In general it may be set that value have normative significance of human conduct; it presupposes World of Situation which affects human conduct, tradition and culture. It is because values can be augmented and diminished, created and destroyed and individuals/societies can be benefited and harmed, that our actions have value significance. As concrete actualization, they make the human Self worthy of its desirability rather than the attainability. This lecture is an important document for the student and researchers.

Hope this initiative of the Centre welcome by our scholars and a kind response we will hear from them. We are thankful to our teachers and scholars who are continually motivating us for this kind of initiatives. We seek their blessings all time to do CPPIS's work better.

Dr. Desh Raj Sirswal  
19<sup>th</sup> November, 2015  
(World Philosophy Day)

## ***VALUE AND SOCIETY: RE-DISCOVERING THE PRIMACY OF CULTURAL CONTEXT***

Philosophers and Social Scientists have attempted to understand and explain the concept of values, which is said to possess a dual nature. Values embody components of reason, which is essentially an affair of the mind and is therefore regarded as the philosopher's province. The role of Philosophers and Sociologists must therefore be regarded and coordinated in this regard. Man being gifted with intellect and will began to contemplate on what is right and wrong, firstly from the individualistic point of view, then from the point of view of society and finally from that of humanity as such. The ratiocinating capacity of the human self vis-à-vis consciousness reached the conclusion that his value considerations cannot be applied unanimously at different places, time and circumstances. Hence man came to the conclusion through reflection that with the change of time, place and circumstance it is necessary that value conceptions need to be looked at differently. Accordingly man realized the importance of time and space in his value considerations.

Values are also based on the living experiences and cannot be studied in abstraction. Fundamental problems of value so to say axiology are not only stated in books, Journals and philosophical discussions but are present in the most diverse manifestations of daily life. There is not a discussion or difference of opinion with respect to a person's behaviour, a woman's elegance, the justice of a sentence or the enjoyment of a meal that does not have as its basis a reopening of the question of values. Many of the complicated value problems are discussed and debated in the common places like a street, parliament, café and in the most modest homes although with an attitude and in a language which can hardly be called philosophical. Their special nature arises from the fact that they are said to be the basis for action. Unless they are regarded as an essential part of action, values become meaningless. Looked at from this perspective, we may say that values give meaning to human action and that meaning of each value depends at the same time on the modality of the value system in a given society.

The understanding and conception of a 'value' has had its own history in which its primary intuitive definitions were connected with the use of everyday language and first philosophical formulations. The term 'value' was used interchangeably with the term 'goodness' Goodness is the highest value in Plato's vision of reality; it was regarded by

Plato as the Self-comprehensible reality above being and all ideas through which everything is comprehensible. Goodness is the source of reality as it is the one and the absolute identity. Plotinus observed that goodness is diffusivum Sui, for it goes beyond itself and permeates everything that is.

When two people are not in agreement as to whether a meal or a beverage is or is not pleasant, and they fail in the effort to convince each other, the discussion generally ends with the assertion of one or both participants that he does or doesn't like it, and no one can convince him of the contrary. Are these discussions, then, futile, and is there no way of determining the value of an artistic work or the conduct of a person? He who supports the thesis 'de gustibus non disputandum' wishes to affirm a peculiar characteristic of value, i.e., the intimate and immediate nature of valuation. The pleasure produced in us by a glass of good wine, the reading of a poem, is something personal, intimate, private and frequently, ineffable. We do not wish to relinquish this intimacy, for if we did, an essential note of aesthetic enjoyment would then slip through our fingers. How can anyone convince us with syllogisms and learned quotations, when our pleasure is so immediate and direct that it does not admit any possibility of error?

However, if one takes refuge in the protective heaven of subjectivity, and tries to keep a cool head in spite of the fact that his heart is anything but calm, he will soon find that this doctrine cannot satisfy us completely. What would become of the ethical and aesthetic world if, as we affirm the subjectivity of taste, each of us would abide by his own particular way of looking at things? How can chaos be avoided, unless there are standards of value, norms of behaviour? If everyone carries his own yardstick of valuation, with what standard shall we decide axiological conflicts? Aesthetics and moral education would be impossible, decent life would not be sensible; repentance of sin would seem absurd. "Decent" for whom? "Sin" for whom? One would have to ask constantly. On the other hand, if one were to measure aesthetic value by the intensity of individual or collective emotion, greater value would accrue to screen or radio melodrama (Which have caused so many tears to be shed) than to Hamlet or King Lear, which have appealed to an audience, considerably reduced in number. If we convert man into a measure of aesthetic pleasure and moral law, it would appear that there would be, strictly speaking, neither "good taste" nor effective law.

This conflict is one of those which has agitated contemporary axiology considerably. Indeed, it was born together with axiology itself, and the history of the theory of values

could be written, considering this problem as the axis and outlining the various solutions, which have been proposed in order to resolve it. Although the meaning might be different, the question was already present in Plato; Shakespeare posed it in *Troilus and Cressida*, and Spinoza chose one of the alternatives in his *Ethics*.

It is not easy to reduce to simple terms the constellation of problems with which axiology is concerned today; the core of the problem may be summed up in the following question: Do objects possess value because we desire them, or do we desire them because they possess value? Is it desire, pleasure or interest that which bestows value upon an object, or conversely, do we experience these preferences due to the fact that the objects in question possess a value which is prior and foreign to our Psychological and organic reactions? Are values objective or subjective? Value is "objective" if it owes independent of a subject or a valuating consciousness; conversely, it is "Subjective: if it owes its existence, its sense, or its validity to the reactions of the subject who does the valuating, regardless of whether these be Physiological or Psychological.

We cannot speak of values without considering actual or possible valuations. In fact, what sense would values have if they could completely escape man's appreciations? How would we know that such values exist, if they were forced to sustain themselves outside the sphere of human valuation? In this respect, subjectivism seems to be on firm ground: value cannot be free from valuation. As far as objectivism is concerned, it creates a basic distinction which prevents us from pursuing the already open road of subjectivity. It is true, maintains the objectivist, that valuation is subjective, but it is essential to distinguish between valuation and value. Value is prior to valuation. If there were no values, what would we evaluate? To confuse valuation with value is akin to confusing perception with the object perceived. Perception does not create the object; it grasps it. The same thing happens in the case of valuation. The subjective approach is equivalent to the process of apprehending value.

In the face of this kind of reasoning, subjectivism takes refuge in experience. If values were objective, it asserts, then individuals would have come to an agreement about such values. But history demonstrates to us a continual disagreement; this is due to the fact that each of us has his tastes and cannot surrender them. Does history, by any chance, reveal agreement concerning the basic principles of science? Retorts the objectivist. The error incurred in by certain persons does not invalidate the objectivity of truth. There are still people who believe in spontaneous generation. Truth does not

depend on the opinion of individuals, but on the objectivity of facts; hence it cannot be strengthened nor weakened by the democratic procedure of counting votes. So, similarly, in the case of values. The opinion of those of poor taste does not impair the beauty of a work of art. It would be idle to try to obtain unanimity of opinion. But, the objectivist goes on to say, that the discrepancy refers to goods, not to values. No one can fail to appreciate beauty; what may happen is that people may not recognize the presence of beauty in a certain object, whether this be a statue, a painting, or a symphony. Similarly, in the case of the other-values: who can fail to appraise utility, prefer the pleasant, or appreciate honesty?

It is not so, the subjectivist will probably reply; the discrepancy reaches into the values themselves. When an Italian and an American are not in agreement as to the elegance of a pair of shoes, such an argument about a concrete object is due to a different manner of understanding elegance itself. This is what transpires also in numerous discussions concerning the value of a poem, the justice of a sentence, the honesty of one's behaviour; the disagreement over these objects frequently reveals a profound discrepancy with respect to what is understood by the terms beauty, justice or decorum.

What aesthetic value would a painting have if men did not have eyes? And what sense would there be in talking about the aesthetic value of music if God had condemned us to eternal deafness? In the last analysis, we value what we desire and what pleases us. Not so, replies the objectivist, we value also that which displeases us. For example, duty is objective and is based on a moral value which is equally so, and lies beyond the fluctuations of our likes and dislikes, our interests, our comforts. Or, if more ordinary types of examples are preferred: who likes the "torture: to which we are subjected by the dentist? One must distinguish between valuation as a Psychological act and the truth of the valuation. From the subjective point of view, a wrong perception is as much a perception as a true one; yet we do not, on that account, equate the two when we judge the accuracy involved.

Such examples are, for the subjectivist, a sample of the superficiality with which one considers the thesis they uphold. At first glance, it seems evident that the dentist is the cause of our annoyance or pain, when he drills one of our teeth, and that consequently, the value which we ascribe to his work has nothing to do with the pleasure which he affords us, but is rather dictated by a higher element; but the latter is also based on pleasure; We prefer a temporary pain for a few minutes to a toothache which we can

look forward to in case we don't take care of a cavity. Or, if it is a matter of aesthetic motivation that makes us willing to submit to torture in the dentist's chair- it is because we prefer the more lasting pleasure afforded by a pleasant looking denture to the uncomfortable feeling brought on by the necessity of having to exhibit a sickly looking set of teeth.

One cannot formulate a theory based on such examples. The virtue of decorum resides in its capacity to overcome the claims of our pleasures, appetites and comforts. Pleasure operates on a low level of our personality, and we cannot sacrifice the highest (which is what moral values are) to the lowest. But even within the realm of the pleasant and the agreeable, it is necessary to distinguish between that which pleases us and that which we recognize as being pleasant. We frequently differentiate between what is agreeable and what we like because of personal or circumstantial motives. It is necessary to separate what is desired from what is desirable. The fact that people desire something does not change it to something desirable.

The subjectivist does not believe that one should postulate a world of the agreeable and the desirable "in themselves", both are related to real, concrete pleasures and desires. Anything that is pleasant in an object is derived from the pleasure which, in fact, it calls forth. Could anything be pleasant if it did not please anybody, or if there were no possibility that it might please? The pleasurable is a concept which is based on personal experiences of pleasure, and does not exist in a metaphysical world. If we sever the connections, between pleasure and what is pleasurable, the latter disappears completely. Similar considerations would have to be granted in the case of the desired and the desirable.

When we define the desirable as that which could be desired, we do not transfer the concept to a meta-empirical world; what we mean is that it would be desired by a person in normal circumstances. In other words, values express this dimension of 'goods' as related to persons who actually acknowledge it as a good and respond to it as desirable. Thus, different individuals or groups, or possibly the same but at different periods, may have distinct sets of values as they become sensitive to, and prize, distinct sets of goods. More generally, overtime a subtle shift takes place in the distinctive ranking of the degree to which they prize various goods. By so doing, they delineate among objective moral goods a certain pattern of values which in a more stable fashion

mirrors their corporate free choices. This constitutes the basic topology of a culture; as repeatedly reaffirmed through time, it builds a tradition or heritage.

## MODERN THEORIES OF VALUES

Modern theories of values and indeed, many classical ones are psychologically based, but they differ from one another in the Psychological Phenomena they select as the ground of values. The hedonistic theories such as classical utilitarianism select the spectrum of Pleasures and pains as the totality of contingent values, positive and negative. Such theories have largely been either displaced or supplemented, however, by two other forms of value theory, the conative and the conceptual. Conative value theories focus on motivations and attitudes as the indicators or basic determiners of value. One thinks of Plato's conceptions of Eros by which worldly creatures participate to limited degree and in contingent ways in goodness by virtue of the fact that the striving which animates them has as its proper objective the eternal good. Modern versions of conative value theory, such as Perry's interest theory, are more inclined to stress conations as the creator of value than as a response to it. The emotivist theories of the positivists, the preference based theories of the economists and the accounts of freely generated projects of the existentialists are at variants of conative theories of value. Finally, there are several conceptualistic and linguistic theories of values. Karl Aschenbrenner calls attention to a vast array of evaluatively charged world in our ordinary vocabulary such that our social descriptions of friendly, ugly, cruel, efficient etc. Persons and objects are also at the same time evaluative. Robert, S. Hartmann states as his Paradigm value judgment, "X is a good Y", interpreted to mean that the object denoted by 'X' well fulfills the properties of the concept of a 'Y', that is, the 'X' is a good specimen of a 'Y' and well exemplifies the concept. And Nicholas Rescher offers as interpretations of sociological concepts of value that they are 'slogan' (s) for the rationalization of action. What is common to all these accounts is that they appeal to the human capacity to conceptualize norms by which the world we confront, and we ourselves, are measured. According to these theories, value at least in their contingent worldly embodiments, are mentally dependent phenomena requiring desires, feelings, and conceptualizations.

There are various theories in moral philosophy which are dead or obsolescent. The first is that we can get some normative principles from the analysis of ordinary language, or alternatively, that we can show by examining ordinary language that there is no such

thing as truth or justification in ethics. We suppose R.M. Hare is the outstanding example of what we take to be the obsolescent theory at the present time. There have been ideal observer theories and interest theories and so on and on. We suggest that it is philosophically not useful, at least for the present, to establish ethical principles by reflection on the meaning of ethical terms. The terms have no definite meaning in ordinary use, to the extent to which they do have a meaning – it appears to differ from person to person, place to place and time to time.

The second dead theory is Non-Naturalistic Intuitionism, the theory that some synthetic ethical propositions are self-evident and can form the epistemological basis of ethics. This view is hardly defended today. There are, however, some other options. One is a kind of coherence theory of Ethics which is illustrated by Professor Rawl's conception of "Reflective equilibrium" and appears to be the guiding idea behind discussions of normative problems like infanticide, Euthanasia, and capital punishment at the present time.

One cannot imagine a life without values. Actions of a man speak loudly of the values he believes in. If someone decides to lead a life devoid of any values, which in the first instance is impossibility, even his decision is value loaded because not choosing at all again is a value. So, there can be no escapism from values. Obviously, then, the study of values becomes very important.

Phenomenological Existentialist account of values helps man in understanding and projecting his image as an "Authentic being". One is free, no doubt, but at the same time is responsible for the consequences that follow out of his freedom. So, a phenomenological existentialist approach brings man face to face with the concept of "Responsibility". This approach accords "Man" due importance by calling him the "Creator of his own values"- Man is not seen as subservient to any "Book of fixed morals" but at the same time, it brings everyone's attention to the fact that when a man chooses a particular course of action for himself, he is choosing it for the whole mankind, i.e. he is justifying it. Naturally, this view helps us in abstaining from a wrong course of action.

## **VALUES: THE SOCIO CULTURAL CONTEST**

Values often owe their origin to the socio-cultural context from which they arise. Their connection with the material world and the influence to which they are subjected to in specific societies and in the behaviour of given individuals are realities in human

situation. Besides values are created by the individuals and their existence is to be seen in the behaviour of the members of a given society as well as in the customs and conventions which people generally accept. Values therefore being moral in nature, are social facts and may act as individual motives as well much of the social contest within which social life is lived.

Society is not simply a conglomeration of individuals such that a dichotomy and then conflict arises between the individual and the common good –though this constitutes a moral problem itself –but it is constituted by persons who can act freely and responsibly. The person constitutes society just as he or she is constituted by society. Every finite person is as much a collective or social person as an individual person. Accordingly a good society, whether national or global, can only be built on the quality of its individual members who are wise, compassionate, courageous and creative. Ultimately development both as fulfillment of basic needs and as enjoyment of the quality of life, is founded upon and sustained by the right human values of the individual and of society. “Hence a society is what you and I, in our relationship have created; it is the outward projection of all our inward psychological states. So if you and I do not understand ourselves, merely transforming the outer, which is the projection of the inner has no significance, whatsoever, I create society which is the replica, the outward expression of what I am. We see that all knowledge (information) thought structures, ideals, beliefs, concepts are sterile in transforming the psyche of man, or in other words to being radical transformation or mutation in the human psyche”. This implies that only those values of life are to be praised which makes a man a human being in the true sense of the term and through which he leads a virtuous life. In fact the true evaluation of a society is based upon the practical life of its people. Every society has a traditional culture and its creation is based upon those values which are adopted by our ancestors. Such a line of argument and thinking obviates the necessity to regard that new-normative structures take shape in the value conceptions of society within the dynamics of social movements and thereby institutionalize new forms of social integration.

A rational explanation that can be adduced for such a line of thinking is that values and cultural tradition maintain the identity and integrity of the culture-subject, presenting it from historical selection. They remain the skeletal structure to which the culture subject adheres in developing its unique self-formative history with its linguistic- anthropological, socio-psychological but also its limitations in its self-understanding. Hence, more often

than not, it fails to exceed these categories in perceiving, maintaining and evaluating values as social and cultural realities. Accordingly, values are regarded as the parameters of self-understanding of a given culture and of its understanding. Hence values and tradition, while positive in the sense of maintaining identity and integrity and preventing negative historical selection by oppressive outside cultural forces, can constitute an obstacle to liberation from within.

Values, it is claimed must go beyond the individual satisfaction of desires and the merely organic welfare of a society. No adequate conception of human values can be formed without incorporating the concept of self-realization. More precisely, a moral concept which refers to realization of the self and hence becomes moral. Moral value therefore, is differentiated from other kinds of values precisely because it appeals to man's distinctive character as a person. Moral values desire its normative binding power from its essential link with the good of man as a person.

All men are not necessarily persons in the deepest meaning of the term, because the concept of person involves maturity and complete powers of judging and choosing. The human subject is not identical with the substantial soul, is not mental, and has nothing to do with Psychophysical problems, character, or the health (as opposed to the sickness) of the soul. Neither substance nor object, it is rather the concrete unity of acts, which is not in itself objective, the human subject is only revealed in its actions. But this does not mean to say that it is a vacant spring board (Ausgangspunkt) for acts, and still less that it consists in the sum of such acts, as Kant thought. The fact of the matter is that the human subject is committed in each act and varies in each act without exhausting its being in any one of them. The acts which the spirit generates are not functions of a self; they are non mental, (but not thereby physical) because acts are committed whereas mental functions occur. It is the act of ideation, i.e., the ability to separate essence and existence, which constitutes the fundamental sign of the human spirit. Spirit is therefore, objectivity, the capacity of being determined by the objective nature of things.

Every man in the degree to which he is a human subject, is a unique being and a unique value. The human subject is doubly autonomous, first through autonomous personal insights into good and evil and, secondly-through autonomous personal volition for the good and the evil concretely given. Although the human subject is bound

to his body he does not stand in a deepest relationship toward it because control over the body is one of the conditions for personal existence. Finally, the human subject is never part of a “world” but always its correlate, so that each subject corresponds to a world (microcosm) and each world to a subject. The essence of the human subject is found in the fact that his whole spiritual being and activity is rooted both in individual reality (individual person) and in membership in a community. Therefore, every human subject “owns” both an individual and a common person, the latter springing from the manifold sources of experience, which form the totality of shared experience.

The moral good is conceived with one’s free and responsible actions. This has the objective reality of the ontological good, for it concerns real actions which stand in distinctive relation to our own perfection and to that of others –and indeed to the physical universe and to God as well. Hence many possible patterns of actions could be objectively right because they promote the good of those involved, while others, precisely as inconsistent with the real good of persons or things, are objectively disordered. This constitutes the objective basis for the ethical good or bad. However our realm of objective relations is numberless, and since our actions are concrete and oriented, it is necessary to choose between the good and the bad, but in each case of choice, innumerable possibilities render concrete value situations. However broad or limited the options, as responsible and moral, act is essentially dependent upon its being willed by a subject. Therefore, in order to follow the emergence of the field of concrete moral action, it is imperative to examine not only the objective aspect, namely the nature of things involved, but one must also consider the action in relation to the subject, namely the person who, in the context of his/her society and culture, appreciates and values the good of his action, chooses it over its alternatives and wills its actualization.

Moral agents create different constellation of values at different moments of their existence. The precedence they give to any particular value over other depend on the kind of project they have at a given moment. Thus no value can be unconditionally and intrinsically superior in all situations. This only implies that even though values are universal, no single hierarchy of values can be ascertained universally. However this also does not imply that the human situations are so unique that there is nothing common between a single agents value hierarchy with another. The foundational values, such as respect for life, autonomy of the human subject and universalize ability

or potential share ability and communicability of the norms of action imply that, no matter how unique one's constellation of values, they are shareable by every autonomous agent.

This process of deliberate choice and decision transcends the somatic and psychic dynamism. Value as the somatic dimension is extensively reactive, the psychic dynamism of affectivity or appetite are fundamentally oriented to the good and positively attracted by a set of values. These, in turn evoke an active response from the emotions in the context of responsible freedom. But it is in the dimension of responsibility that one encounters the properly moral and social dimension of life. For, in order to live with others one must be able to know, to choose and finally to realize what is truly conducive to one's good and to that of others.

Our discussion thus far on the concept of value has attempted to offer some of the characteristic features of this concept by emphasizing its wider connotations and vivid dimensions. Some of the problems which appeared in the conception of values in a society/culture are profound irritants to any methodology of which such a concept is, when exemplified for a philosophical scrutiny. However, our interest in understanding this concept is focused on Value as a dimension of mundanity. The issue in this: How are we to understand the placement of the individual in a value situation as lived/practiced in everyday lives.

The ultimate justification of a philosophical theory must appear to its power to solve theoretical problems and to illumine a range of concepts, theories and phenomena in a suitably intelligible, coherent and adequate way. Obviously, such a justification must await the explication of the theory with sufficient definiteness that denials can be formulated and compared. Accordingly, the fundamental problem which any value theory confronts is this. Given a human career, what are the most general conditions necessary for accounting its coherence in a given Society? In general it may be set that value have normative significance of human conduct; it presupposes World of Situation which affects human conduct, tradition and culture. It is because values can be augmented and diminished, created and destroyed and individuals/societies can be benefited and harmed, that our actions have value significance. As concrete actualization, they make the human Self worthy of its desirability rather than the attainability.

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