



Is Value Entirely Subjective?

✘ Is Value Entirely Subjective?

When we speak of something's value we speak of its 'goodness' (Crisp, 2016). Where does this 'goodness' come from though? Is something good only because an individual bestows goodness upon based upon their preference for it? In order to answer these kinds of questions we must explore the different kinds of value that something can hold, explore various value theories, and explore various questions about the value that various things can hold. It should become apparent after exploring these ideas and questions that value is not entirely subjective. There are things which are not valued simply because an individual bestows value upon, but that individuals should value these things independent of our preferences; there are things that even if nobody in existence value them, they should. Let us begin by exploring the kinds of value that something can hold.

Let us begin by exploring the idea of instrumental value. If something has instrumental value then its value comes from its usefulness. For instance, money gets its value not from itself, but from what it allows us to achieve. We can exchange money for goods, for shelter, for transport, or for entertainment. Hoarding the money in particular societies may

give an individual certain status, hence money can also be used to gain status. However, its value comes only from how useful it is. Money is simply a means to an end, rather than the end itself. We can use money to achieve a final end, but money itself is not a final end. Things that have instrumental purpose get their value from an individual's preferences, the value comes from how much an individual prefers it and why they prefer it. This would imply that things of instrumental value get their value because we prefer it, but are there things that we should prefer because of their value to us?

In order to explore that question we must begin with what the extreme of the claim that all value is entirely subjective would mean. It would mean, of course, that the following statement would be true: If nobody valued X then X would have no value. In other words, if something existed, and nobody held any value for that something, then that something would have no value. Considering the sheer amount of things that exist, from physical to concept, should we be comfortable to make such a blanket statement about the value of things? There will be those who will be comfortable to make such a blanket statement, and if that blanket statement holds true then we would have to agree that all value is entirely subjective. However, by substituting X with some everyday concepts and items we will, hopefully, see that there are things whose value does not depend on someone valuing them.

First let us substitute X with the concept of rationality. We often find ourselves arguing that people should be more rational; it allows us to think in a clearer way, it allows us to make good decisions, it enables us to be more effective in our judgements, to find truth more effectively, and much more. In other words, we argue that those who do not value rationality should value rationality. Rationality gets its value not from our preference for it, it has value simply for what it is. There will be those that argue that rationality is simply a tool, and therefore only has instrumental value, but

there must be something intrinsic in rationality that leads us to the conclusion that we should value it. Imagine a world in which everyone behaved irrationally, could we truly say that rationality would hold no value in that world? Of course not, we would argue that the introduction of rationality would add value to that world, we would argue that people *should* prefer a world with rationality because of what rationality could add to that world. However, if all value is entirely subjective then in a world where everyone was irrational, and nobody valued rationality, then rationality does not, and could not, hold any value. This suggests that there are certain things because of the goodness that they contain, and that our lack of preference for them does nothing to detract from the goodness that they contain.

Let us also substitute *X* with something like vaccinations for polio. Imagine now a world in which polio is rampant, a world not unlike our own before the introduction of the polio vaccine. However, consider that everyone in this imagined world was entirely against vaccines, instead preferring to pray to whichever God they believe in to stop the spread of polio. In such a world, would it really be true that prayer to God is valuable, but a successful vaccine has no value? Let us narrow it down even further. Imagine that in this alternative world God is a stone that someone found thousands of years previously, that is kept in a locked box on the top of the highest mountain. This stone has no magical properties, it is simply a stone. However, the population of this alternative world earnestly believe that this rock is a god that answers prayers, much in the same way that those that inhabit our planet believe that God answers prayers. The prayers obviously do not heal polio, and cannot heal polio. However, does their preferring praying to this stone give their prayers more value than a working vaccine? It would be counter-intuitive to argue such a case. The polio vaccination would produce positive effects, and would lessen the amount of suffering and disease that existed in the alternative world. We would argue that

even if they preferred to pray to the rock on the top of the mountain, they should prefer to invest their resources in an endeavour to create a working vaccine. That we would argue against the effectiveness of the prayer to the rock as a means of eradicating polio, and argue that the people of this world should prefer to create vaccinations, suggests that the value of something does not come entirely from what we prefer, and is not entirely subjective. Once again we see an example of something that we should value for its goodness, and in this case even seeing that preferring something need not necessarily suggest that it contains goodness. A society that values praying to a rock to cure polio does not mean that praying to the rock has any value when it comes to curing polio.

✘ Returning now to the world we exist in, but continuing with the idea of vaccines, we find that we often argue against the anti-vaccination crowd. Not only do we argue that their view of the science is wrong, but we argue for the value of vaccines. We argue that they are 'good'. If value was entirely subjective we would not argue this, nor we would be able to argue this. Instead we would find ourselves simply saying 'well if you find no value in vaccinations, then vaccinations are of no value to you'. However, this is not what happens. We argue that vaccinations make positive contributions to the societies that we live in. They reduce suffering, they reduce illness, and they help stem the spread of dangerous and/or painful diseases. We find ourselves arguing the same for various other things, such as education, or art, or literature, or a healthy life style. We argue for things that contribute to our well-being; in other words, things that contribute to our well-being have value in and of themselves, rather than simply having value because we value them.

There is a distinction that needs to be made here, and that distinction is the value that something holds by virtue of what it is, and the value it holds because we make use of it.

Something can have value that we do not appreciate, but that does not diminish the value it holds. The value it holds by virtue of what it is gives us cause to value it. There is of course some level of subjectivity to value, there is some value to things that is defined by our preference for it. Consider the following examples taken from H. E. Baber's paper *Adaptive Preferences* (Baber, 2007).

The first example from Baber (2007) to be discussed is that of the wife who is beaten regularly. On first examination of the wife's circumstances we might hastily conclude that the wife prefers a life where she is beaten regularly to one where she is not beaten regularly. This would be a mistake though, as pointed out by Baber. Baber argues that it is not that the wife prefers being beaten to not being beaten, it is that the wife has had to choose from various bundles of things. One bundle contains the security of housing and food, but also contains being beaten, where the other bundle excludes the security of housing and food, but does not contain being beaten. It is not that the wife prefers being beaten, it is that the wife prefers housing and food and is willing to put up with the beatings to get it. The beatings do not add to her well-being of course, and it would be a mistake to say that the beatings are given value, or goodness, simply because she would prefer to have food and shelter. As Baber argues, she would more likely prefer a bundle that contains housing, food and no beatings, but of the options actually available to her the bundle she prefers contains an item of no value. Taking this into account should add weight towards the idea that our preferences do not wholly determine the value of something, otherwise it would have to be argued that the beatings contain goodness due to the fact that they allow her to have food and shelter. When really what should be argued, as Baber suggests, is that the beatings are not preferred, contain no goodness, and given the chance the wife would quickly choose a bundle that had food, shelter and no beatings.

The next example to look at is that of the young girl from Afghanistan. Here Baber (2007) gives us an example that contains a young girl's mother choosing a life that does not contain education, preferring instead to teach the young girl about taking care of a household and a husband. This choice is made because in that particular society an educated woman is not looked on in the same way that they would be in somewhere like Britain. The husband of that particular society is looking for the woman who is a good home maker, and who will stay at home and look after the children. Therefore an education may negatively impact the child's chance at finding a husband, and therefore securing a stable future for herself. However, this does not necessarily mean that the mother would not prefer her child to have an education. If it is the case that the mother would prefer her child to have an education if it were a viable option then it also seems to be the case that education has a particular value that is defined in and of itself. If education has a value in and of itself then it would also be the case that the value of it is not entirely subjective. In a world in which education exists, but everyone within that world preferred something else, education would still have a certain value. In the case of the girl from Afghanistan, the value of education to her personally is determined in part by her preferences as well as her circumstances. However, the value of education itself is a separate issue. Here we must learn to separate the value of something, such as education, from the value of something to us.

Here again we see that there are things that we should value because of the properties they hold in and of themselves, from the things that we prefer. The things that we prefer may be shaped by our environment, causing us to value something that we really should not prefer. Someone may prefer being beaten to being homeless, but that does not mean that being beaten contains any intrinsic 'goodness'. However, a society that provides education, and better options than being beaten or

being homeless, would mean that this someone would prefer something different, even if the option to being beaten was available to them. This means that something like education, or a safe living environment, have value outside of our preferences for them. There are properties contained within those things that means we should prefer them. Once again meaning that value is not entirely subjective, instead there is an objective element to value.

Now imagine for a moment the existence of world in which only Islam existed. Consider that all of our information about the natural world came only from the teachings of the Qu'ran. The Qu'ran is chosen here as an example because of the many claims that Muslims make about how the Qu'ran contains true knowledge about the universe. Claims such as it containing detailed information about embryology, the big bang, the weather system, and much more. Would we be accurate in saying that science would have no value in this world? Would we be accurate in saying that the Qu'ran would have more value for finding out about the universe than science would? This is what we would be saying if we were to say that value is entirely subjective. However, it would be an incorrect thing to say. The Qu'ran does not contain more value than science when it comes to discovering truths about the natural world, and one would not argue that it does unless one is a Muslim. However, we would still argue with that Muslim that the Qu'ran is not of value when it comes to discovering truths about the natural world. While the Qu'ran may have subjective value bestowed upon it by the Muslim, the Muslim should instead value science regardless of whether it conflicts with the Qu'ran. In fact, we argue that the Qu'ran should be discarded in favour of the findings of science. Meaning that science has a value in and of itself, and that we should prefer it because of this value; this value being truth. This would also mean that truth holds some value in and of itself, and is not something that gets its value simply because we prefer it. A world with truth has more 'goodness', or value,

than a world without truth. If everybody preferred to lie all the time, they should instead prefer a world in which truth exists. The value of truth is not something that is entirely subjective.

✘ Again, here we see the idea of the value of something, and the value of something to us. Showing once again the importance of the distinction between the two things. The value to us is something that takes on a subjective nature. There are also things that are entirely of subjective value. Music itself may have intrinsic properties, however our preference for different types of music is something that is subjective. Some music may move us, some music may move us to switch it off. The one that we prefer to listen, and therefore value, is determined entirely subjectively. Literature is another example. While reading in general may contain intrinsic properties, the genre we prefer, and therefore value, may be entirely different. One may choose to read Hume, while another chooses to read Harry Potter. The same may be said of past-times. While one person may prefer to sketch a drawing of a beautiful countryside, another may prefer to play video games. The contributions that certain things make to our well-being causes us to value certain things that another may not, are still instilled instrumental value by our using them. However, it is our preference for them that gives them value, they are means to another end, such as happiness, or education. Meaning that value can still be entirely subjective. The mistake comes not from declaring that value can be subjective, but from declaring that all value is subjective.

All of this means that we should conclude that value is not something that is entirely subjective. There may be a certain amount of subjectivity involved when it comes to value, and in some cases something may get its value entirely subjectively, but to declare that all things get their value entirely subjectively is too simplistic of a claim. Some things do

contain a value in and of themselves, giving us cause not only to value, but to argue for why we should value certain things. This would not be possible if value was entirely subjective. To argue for why we should value something is to argue that the something has value apart from our preferences. It is to argue that our preferences should adapt themselves to this value being argued for, and therefore that there is a certain amount of objectivity to that value being argued for. In conclusion, we should be arguing that value is not entirely subjective, and to argue that cause is to argue for far too simplistic a conclusion. A simplistic conclusion that does not hold up to scrutiny.

References

Baber, H. E. (2007) 'Adaptive preference', *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 105–26

Crisp, R. (2013) 'Well-being', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [Online], 8 May 2013. Available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/well-being/> (Accessed 24 Jul 2017)