I

The nature of the theories

1 THE THEORY OF VALUE

1.1 Some basic features of the concept of value

Some things we like, or find interesting, or useful; other things we abhor or find distasteful. We judge some objects and activities to be valuable or disvaluable, and sometimes we work hard to appreciate that which we believe to be of value. We compare the value of a multitude of things, activities and states of affairs, and these comparisons are central to our deliberations about what we should do. We pursue what is of value, avoid or attack what is disvaluable; we plan our lives around our most cherished values. And we constantly argue with each other about what really is and is not valuable, yet nothing surprises us less than others valuing that in which we can find little or no value.

These, then, are some of the central characteristics of the practice of valuing. As has been noted by others, compared to issues concerning right action and obligation, recent ethical philosophy has paid scant attention to the problems of valuing.[1] Even utilitarian theory, which would seem inevitably focused on a theory of value, has been largely preoccupied with what Rashdall called the "consequential or teleological criterion" of right action.[2] Indeed, today it is common to understand "utilitarianism" as meaning much the same as "consequentialism"; that is, it has come to be interpreted as a doctrine about rightness with only minimal, or vague, commitments to a theory of value.[3] Not that

1 See, e.g., Joel J. Kupperman, "Value Judgements," p. 506.
2 Hastings Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil*, vol. II, p. 121. On consequentialism, see also G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy."
3 "The central thesis of utilitarianism, in its most general form, is that actions are to be judged solely by their consequences and are not right or wrong

contemporary ethics actually does without theories of value; utilitarians are apt to reduce all questions of value to a matter of "preferences" or "desires,"[4] and the contemporary followers of Aristotle seem to equate what is valuable with what is good for humans. And, of course, John Rawls has made much of the idea of a "plan of life" as establishing "the basic point of view from which all judgments of value relating to a particular person are to be made."[5] I shall have something to say about these proposals later on,[6] but it is worth noting here that none of them have emerged from analyses that closely attend to the main features of our practice of valuing. To a remarkable extent, contemporary ethics has employed theories of value and goodness with little attention as to whether they adequately capture our concept of value and the practices that it informs.

Let us begin, then, by considering the nature of our concept of value. Among philosophers who have considered the problem, the following are perhaps the most widely recognized characteristics of value discourse and practice:

(a) Value language is grammatically complex, having a verb form (where someone *values* something), an adjectival form (where something is said to be *valuable*), and an abstract noun form (where something is said to be *a value*). Let us call these, respectively, *valuing*, *valuableness*, and *a value* (or *values*).
(b) Valuing, judgments of valuableness, and values provide reasons for action and choice.[7] They guide choices and enter into deliberation by providing at least a partial ordering of persons, acts, rules, institutions, experiences, objects, etc.[8]
(c) We argue about values, judgments of valuableness, and whether cer-

in themselves." D. H. Monro, "Utilitarianism," p. 444. This tendency to focus on utilitarianism as a theory of right action is particularly striking if one considers some of the major works of contemporary utilitarian theory, such as David Lyons, *Forms and Limits of Utilitarianism*, and Donald H. Regan, *Utilitarianism and Co-operation*. See J. Griffin, "Modern Utilitarianism."

4 On the place of preferences in utilitarian theory, see Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams, "Introduction" to *Utilitarianism and Beyond*. I consider the notions of desire and preference at length in §7.2.

5 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 409. See §14.3 in the present volume.

6 See §§7.3, 14.3, 15.3.

7 See Joseph Raz, *Practical Reason and Norms*, p. 25; E. J. Bond, *Reason and Value*. Michael Slote, however, argues that the link between recognition of value, or valuing, and reasons for action is not "axiomatic." *Goods and Virtues*, p. 124. See also Neil Cooper, *The Diversity of Moral Thinking*, p. 95.

8 See John Laird, *The Idea of Value*, p. 357; Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, p. 429; Kurt Baier, "What is Value?," pp. 58ff.

tain valuings are correct. We often charge that another's values, value judgments, and valuings are wrong, ill-founded, or somehow inappropriate.[9]

(d) Values, judgments of valuableness and valuings are impersonal: "value-grounding considerations are not respecters of persons. . . . [I]f *X*'s contention that *V* is a value is correct and well-founded, then *V*'s status as a value is just as compelling for *Y* as for *X*."[10]

(e) Not only do we often agree to differ about values, value judgments, and valuings, but in some cases we also believe that people can disagree or differ on questions of value and yet each can quite properly and correctly maintain that neither is in any way mistaken. It is often said that "one man's meat is another man's poison" and that "there is no arguing about tastes."[11]

(f) Valuing and value judgments are in some way grounded in the properties or characteristics of the thing valued or judged to be valuable.[12]

(g) Values are often said to be chosen.[13]

(h) Every person experiences situations in which his values, valuings or value judgments conflict.[14]

(i) Value is typically divided into the intrinsic and instrumental; it is also often divided into types such as aesthetic, hedonistic, economic, moral, etc.[15]

(j) Value is both positive and negative, that is, it concerns both goodness and evil.[16]

(k) Valuing is somehow related to the affective and/or conative side of life.[17]

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9 See Nicholas Rescher, *Introduction to Value Theory*, pp. 10, 56; Lawrence C. Becker, *On Justifying Moral Judgments*, p. 22: Kupperman, "Value Judgements," pp. 514–15.

10 Rescher, *Value Theory*, p. 11.

11 See Bond, *Reason and Value*, p. 97; C. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, p. 526; Becker, *Moral Judgments* pp. 21–2. However, the Austrian axiologist Christian Ehrenfels maintained that tastes could indeed be disputed. "The Ethical Theory of Value," p. 376.

12 See Elliot Cohen, "The Epistemology of Value," pp. 179–80; Samuel Hart, *Treatise on Values*, p. 54.

13 See Eva H. Cadwallader, "The Main Features of Value Experience," p. 232; Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, pp. 447, 558ff.; Rollo May, "Values, Myths, and Symbols," p. 270.

14 See Cadwallader, "Value Experience," pp. 232-3; Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, pp. 446–50.

15 See Derek Wright, *The Psychology of Moral Behaviour*, pp. 197–8; Aurel Kolnai, "Aesthetic and Moral Experience" and "Contrasting the Ethical with the Aesthetical"; Laird, *The Idea of Value*, p. 88.

16 See Bond, *Reason and Value*, ch. 7; Nozick. *Philosophical Explanations*, p. 420; Bernard Gert, *The Moral Rules*, ch. 3.

17 See Becker, *Moral Judgments*, p. 25; Rescher, *Value Theory*, pp. 9–10.

Some of these claims can be disputed, and others could be added; indeed, as we progress, I will both criticize some of them and point to a number of other features of value practice and discourse. But in general, and subject to some disagreements at one point or another, (a)–(k) enumerate the main claims made by philosophers regarding the concept of value. To some it may seem that this is simply an enumeration of things that philosophers of very different persuasions have said about the concept of value. How, one might say, could we possibly hope to make sense of such a list of claims? But if some theory could do so, if it could bring order to this enumeration and account for these seemingly unrelated claims in a coherent fashion, then such a theory could lay claim to integrate the insights of a number of philosophers who have thought about the problem of value.

"Conceptual clarification," Joel Feinberg has written, "is the most distinctively philosophical of enterprises."[18] I aim to present in this book a theory of the concept of value. However, in contrast to many conceptual analyses, I hope not only to explain our most basic intuitions about value but also to make sense of the claims that previous philosophers have made. Philosophy, it is often said, is not a cumulative discipline; each philosopher must, as it were, start from scratch or at least very nearly so. This seems to me a mistake. Philosophers of earlier generations devoted a good deal of attention to the problems of value; keeping their claims before our minds, and trying to integrate their findings, will, I think, help us to avoid a number of mistakes.

1.2 *Theories of concepts*

My attempt to explicate the concept of value will, then, pay at least as much attention to what previous axiologists have claimed as to what seems intuitively correct to reflective agents. But I still have not explained just what a theory of the concept seeks to do. Clarifying a concept, or presenting a theory of a concept, can take radically different forms. Keeping (a)–(k) in mind, we can usefully distinguish three understandings of the aims and nature of a theory of our concept of value.

The first conceives of a theory of value as simply descriptive, in the sense that it aims only to fully describe (a)–(k) and other

18 Joel Feinberg, *Harm to Others*, p. 17.

relevant features, telling us, for instance, what sorts of reasons for action value judgments imply, or what are the accepted uses of notions like "economic value." At its most basic, this descriptive project is more lexicographical than philosophical because it does not seek in any obvious way to explain, criticize, or defend some understanding of value. On a more philosophic level, this essentially descriptive endeavor may take the form of a "semantic map" or "model" of the concept of value.[19] Such a semantic model might not only seek to describe the main features of the concept, but also to show how they are related to each other and how the concept relates to other normative notions, psychological or metaphysical beliefs, understandings of agency, the nature of social life, various practices and even institutions. These relations, of course, will by no means be exclusively, or perhaps primarily, logical; they may usefully be called "ideological" in one sense of that much-abused term. The resulting model or map would then provide an account of the internal relations among various features of the concept and its external relations, embedding it in a particular form of ethical life.

But, for all that, this sort of conceptual cartography remains essentially descriptive. And, like any map, it is a fault of such a semantic map if it fails to include some significant feature and to relate it to the rest in a consistent way. Insofar as it does fail in this manner, its claim to describe and explain is not fully justified. However, because linguistic and social practices are complex, and especially because in a plural culture such as ours such practice-oriented concepts are apt to reflect conflicting sets of presuppositions and beliefs, it is often impossible to construct conceptual maps that coherently relate and explain all the relevant features of a concept. Stanley Benn and I discovered this in our work on the notions of the public and private.[20] Our Western, liberal, understanding of publicness and privateness seems unable to be coherently described by a single model (or, to continue the map metaphor, all the significant features cannot be placed on the same map). Although discourse relating to the public and private can be largely understood in terms of an "individualist" model,

19 On semantic models, see S. I. Benn and G. F. Gaus, "The Public and Private: Concepts and Action." See also Benn, *A Theory of Freedom*, ch. 16.
20 S. I. Benn and G. F. Gaus, "The Liberal Conception of the Public and Private."

some crucial features (for example, the public interest) only make sense in terms of an "organic" model, which draws on a different, and it seems incompatible, theory of social life. Thus, we concluded, in a fundamental sense the liberal notion of the public and private suffers from an incoherence. Now this conclusion is, I think, useful and informative on the explanatory-descriptive level: if our interest is simply in explaining and describing (charting) the nature of a concept and the practices and discourse it informs, we may well conclude that it is incoherent in some fundamental way. But this will hardly do if, as agents, we are interested in a reasonable way to employ these concepts, make arguments drawing on them, and so forth. That one is appealing to inconsistent presuppositions when drawing on the full range of liberal public/private discourse provides a rational believer-agent with reason to rethink his conceptual commitments.

All this is relevant to the concept of value. The question whether values are in some sense "objective" or "subjective," to give just one example, has dominated much of modern ethics. And by this time both objectivists and subjectivists have had significant success in molding value discourse to reflect their ways of thinking. It would be surprising indeed if, after centuries of disagreement, any straightforwardly subjectivist or objectivist account could embrace all the significant features of value discourse and practice. Even a cursory examination of (a)–(k) suggests that features such as (c) and (d) incline toward an objectivist outlook and (e) and (k) are apt to be more in tune with subjectivism. I do not rule out a priori the possibility that some "mixed" – subjectivist and objectivist – theory may be able to account for all the features in a consistent and persuasive way; perhaps the whole debate can be avoided by some all-embracing account. Nevertheless, it should not be too surprising if we discover that a coherent and reasonable conception of value does not include every significant feature of value discourse.

Some seem to believe that, once a theory begins rejecting or omitting significant features of a concept, analysis has been forsaken in favor of *stipulation*, our second sort of "theory."[21] On this

21 This seems to be the position of Grenville Wall, "Against Subjective Intrinsic Value," p. 40. Cf. also Feinberg's remark in relation to the concept of "harm" that "insofar as it is ambiguous, we must select among its normal senses the one or ones relevant for our normative purposes, and insofar as it

view, one either stays true to the concept in its full complexity or one is simply stipulating that, in one's personal vocabulary, "value" just refers to whatever characteristics are accepted; or perhaps it even refers to something entirely different than (a)–(k). Now, although they have legitimate uses in developing certain sorts of technical theories, purely stipulative definitions do not engage our theoretical interest in the notion normally denoted by the term. If an account employs the words "valuable," "valuing," or "a value" in unfamiliar ways to perform functions not normally associated with value, it will not relate to our preexisting interest in the concept of value. And, perhaps more importantly, it will fail to engage our practical interest as agents, that is, valuers. We all care for some things, make judgments of valuableness or worthlessness, wonder whether our valuings are sound and take action to promote our values. As rational agents, we are concerned with the internal consistency of these related practices and activities, whether they presuppose false theories (for example, false ontological theories), etc. And, perhaps most importantly, we seek to eliminate errors in our own practical activity by coming to better understand its rational grounding and its rationale; we may thus, for instance, eliminate errors in our value judgments by better grasping just what they are judgments of. If a theory of value strays too far from the sorts of practices and activities depicted by (a)–(k), it is not likely to be of much assistance in these matters.[22]

Stipulative definitions are objectionable on another count. Suppose a stipulative theory accepts (a)–(d) but, without showing good reason, omits or rejects all the other features. Its use of "value" will then have some relevance to our normal notion, and so may at least engage some of our practical value-related interests. However, as Lawrence C. Becker has argued, because it arbitrarily rejects or omits significant features of what we understand by "value," such a stipulative account fails as a philosophic enterprise, that is, as a "reasoned explanation of things."[23] Becker

is vague in those senses, it should be made more precise – the task that requires some degree of stipulation, not simply a more accurate reporting of current usage." *Harm to Others*, p. 32.

22 The extent to which accounts of value can diverge from our normal notions about value is nicely brought out by T. Y. Henderson, "A Substantial Theory of Value."

23 Becker, *Moral Judgments*, p. 9.

thus requires that a theory of moral life – in which he includes value – must provide reasons for either accepting or rejecting "the existing intuitions, practices, and institutions of moral experience. . . . When a theory does either in an arbitrary way, one is justified in judging it objectionable in direct proportion to the importance of the issue (the 'given') at stake."[24] In contradistinction, a theory that provides reasoned explanations of its positions engages our theoretical concerns relating to the concept of value; and it guides intelligent practice by providing good reasons for either continuing to accept, or revise, the existing practice.

This, too, has direct relevance for the theory of value. Technical decision theory and economic theory, especially welfare economics, often employs a largely stipulative notion of "value." In these theories, to say that someone values ϕ-ing is just to say that he or she has a reason to do it; or, alternatively, to value X over Y might be understood in terms of preferring X to Y, where "preferring" means something like "has more reason to choose" or is disposed to choose (and actually does when the choice situation arises).[25] This clearly departs from our ordinary notions of preference and value. "In ordinary speech, I *can* decide (or choose) to do something different from what I should prefer to do, as for instance when I do something reluctantly from a sense of duty. 'To prefer,' in that case, is roughly speaking 'to like better'; and when we act dutifully we often do what we like least."[26] In a similar way, we sometimes do something even if we do not value it, but because we think it is the right thing, or the just thing, or the rational thing to do. Valuing certainly provides reasons for choice and action, but to simply equate valuing with choice or rational action misses and obscures a good deal, making it impossible to even sensibly ask why one might have reason to do one's moral duty when one does not particularly value the dutiful action or its consequences. Now in the context of a technical theory of rational choice none of this is apt to be particularly troublesome; its concern is what is done, or what is decided upon, and not in distinguishing various sorts of reasons from others (for example, the reason to act morally). But much ethical

24 Ibid.
25 See S. I. Benn and G. W. Mortimore, "Technical Models of Rational Choice," p. 161.
26 Ibid., p. 160.

theory, especially utilitarian ethics, has adopted this essentially stipulative use of value and employed it as if it were an adequate theory of our normal conception of value.[27] And, as we will see, that is indeed troublesome.

The theory advanced in Part I of this book is thus neither a semantic model nor is it stipulative; it takes our existing concept of value as its starting point and aims to defend a well-grounded and coherent version of that concept and the practices it informs. This method thus shares much with conceptual "reconstructionism," according to which "[c]onceptual analysis aims at clarification and systematization of concepts and is not bound to reflect usage where that usage is confused and likely to mislead."[28] But, unlike most proponents of reconstructive conceptual analysis, I make no attempt to engage in conceptual clarification divorced from normative theory.[29] On this point, I agree with von Wright:

> The idea of a sharp separation of normative ethics and meta-ethics seems to me to rest on an oversimplified and superficial view of the first and on an insufficient understanding of the nature of the second. The view of normative ethics as (some sort of) moral legislation, perhaps in combination with a criticism of current moral standards, is one-sided. So is the view of normative ethics as casuistry. "Normative ethics" is not a suitable name for any *one* thing. Those, who use the name, tend to heap under it a number of different philosophic and moralistic activities. *One* of these activities, thus classified as "normative," I would myself call *conceptual* investigation; and I would not know how to distinguish it sharply from the allegedly non-normative conceptual analysis belonging to meta-ethics.[30]

If all that is proffered is a semantic model of a concept – "people talk and act in these internally related ways, which are in turn related to a particular set of beliefs" – then, I suppose, the conceptual investigation really is largely without any significant normative implications. (Even here, however, it may be found that some concept is thoroughly muddled, and that certainly has implications for practice.) However, if one is reconstructing a con-

27 See Sen and Williams's "Introduction," pp. 11–14. Cf. John C. Harsanyi, "Morality and the Theory of Rational Behaviour."
28 Joseph Raz, quoted in Felix E. Oppenheim, *Political Concepts: A Reconstruction*, p. 180. Ch. 9 of Oppenheim's book presents a detailed defense of reconstructionism. See also R. B. Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right*, pp. 2ff.
29 See, e.g., Oppenheim, *Political Concepts*, pp. 187–9; Joel Feinberg, *Social Philosophy*, pp. 1–2; Alan R. White, *Rights*, p. 1.
30 Georg Henrik von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness*, p. 3.

cept and claiming not just that this reconstruction makes the concept internally consistent, but also that good reasons exist for accepting some features of it and rejecting others and, further, that the concept is practical insofar as it guides action and deliberation, then it does indeed seem impossible to deny that this is a normative project too.[31]

1.3 *Grounds for accepting the theory*

In Part I, then, I propose a theory of value that I call the *Affective-Cognitive Theory*. Put very roughly, and thus inaccurately, the main claims of the theory are that *valuings* are dispositional emotions, that *value judgments* concern the appropriateness of certain sorts of valuings, and that *a value* or "*a person's values*" are either important and abstract valuings or patterns of valuings. The general concept of "value" is thus explicated in terms of: (i) valuings, (ii) value judgments, and (iii) the idea of "a value" or "a person's values." I think G. E. Moore would have called this a subjective account of value,[32] though I will argue later (§10) that it possesses a number of features typically identified with objectivist accounts. For the most part, however, I will avoid describing the theory as either "subjectivist" or "objectivist," because these are particularly ambiguous labels, sometimes referring to ontological theses, sometimes to epistemological claims, and yet at still other times referring to the agent-relativity or neutrality of value reasons.[33]

Why accept the Affective-Cognitive Theory? Thus far, I have been discussing the first ground for embracing it: that it provides a reasoned explanation and defense of the main features of the concept of value. Not that it eschews revision: as we will see, I am generally critical of feature (g) – the idea that values are chosen – though it seems intelligible enough in relation to adopting certain sorts of ideals (see §14). More radically, I argue against a strong version of the claim that value judgments are not "respecters of persons"; that is, I am critical of the claim that, if *V* is a

31 See Ronald Dworkin's theory of interpretation in *Law's Empire*.
32 See G. E. Moore, "The Conception of Intrinsic Value," pp. 253–4.
33 This point is made by Stanley Benn, *A Theory of Freedom*, ch. 4. As I have since discovered, my earlier use of the labels "subjectivist" and "relativist" to describe the theory invited confusion. See my "Subjective Value and Justificatory Political Theory."