

FOUNDATIONS OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF VALUE

CHAPTER I

CURRENT THEORIES ABOUT VALUE

THE deplorable *imbroglio* in which the Philosophy of Value is entangled has been to no slight extent due to persistent confusion between problems of Philology and problems of Philosophy. When two men of keen and penetrative intelligence write wisely and well upon two different things, there can be no immediate conflict between their views. For conflicting views must be about the same thing. The selection of the same word by which to refer to the objects of their speculations is insufficient to provide the identity of content from which philosophical disagreement must initiate. But the limitation of sapience to which subtle minds are prone has often accounted for profitless tilting on the field of Philosophy about problems which come only within the province of the grammarian. Current theories about Value are concerned with different things and their only source of contact is the common use of one set of terms, to which they severally ascribe different meanings. Argument between theories thus initially separated cannot advance beyond persuasion, and discussion becomes objurgation. From the habitual presumption that the use of a common set of terms implies a common content of ideas—from the confusion of verbal with conceptual definition—

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derives in large part the “trostlos Bild”¹ of Value-philosophy to-day.

A glance at some of the scattered definitions and epitaphs upon Value will amply illustrate the maelstrom of current theories. The science of Value, we are told by the more conservative, embraces, while at some points extending, the field of traditional Ethics.² “Value” is synonymous with “good and evil”, and to be preferred because of its freedom from the theological and transcendental implications of those words in the older philosophy.³ More broadly, values are ideals; and the Absolute Values are the Absolute Ideals of Truth, Beauty and Goodness. From “ideal” the definitions advance along the path of generality to “purpose”, and thence to that vague and vagrant word “meaning”. With more definiteness we get a group of “psychological” definitions. Value is “satisfaction”, “desire”, “enjoyment”, “an attitude taken up towards an object that is valued”. Distinct from such individualistic conceptions is the group of “social” definitions, falling roughly into two sub-classes: either, Value is the object of socially approved ideals or purposes; or, it is conduciveness to the prosperity of society. Intellectually quite unrelated to the foregoing are the metaphysical definitions such as Whitehead’s, who finds Value in the concreteness of actual as opposed to conceptual existence. In another opposed and unrelated class stand the Realists, who think Value to be undefinable and unanalysable—a simple

¹ The phrase is used by W. Strich, “Das Wertproblem in der Philosophie der Gegenwart”.

² Sorley, Bosanquet, etc.

³ J. S. Mackenzie, “Ultimate Values”, pp. 15, 93.

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and intrinsic quality of things. And, finally, Value has been heralded into the missionary field by theological authors.

Now were we asked soberly to believe that all these presumptive definitions or indications of the nature of Value endeavour to define or to indicate *the same thing* we should be involved in a veritable philosophical nightmare, in which nothing was itself rather than another thing and anything might seem to be anything at all. It is as fantastically irrational to suppose that the same object should be taken by so many observers to be the relation which arises between a desiring person and the object of his desire, social salvation, and a simple unanalysable property, as it would be to suppose that three men confronted with the same object could describe it severally as a quadruped of the genus *equus*, a rack for the drying of clothes, and an instrument of torture. In order to preserve our mental sanity we must accept the obvious conclusion that the “theories about Value” are about different things obscured under the same name. And this conclusion is put beyond reasonable doubt by the consideration that the various writers have not only given different and apparently unconnected definitions of Value, but detect its presence in as widely different fields. If two men looking in opposite directions describe differently the contents of their fields of vision, it is comparatively unimportant that they should both employ the same word to indicate the totality of what they observe.

If this conclusion seem presumptuous or, by ascribing over-much simplicity to subtle minds, seem itself to partake of *naïveté*, we answer that the word “Value” has wide and deeply seated emotional associations, from

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which philosophers are no more exempt than lesser men. Although emotional considerations should be strictly banished from objective science, they inevitably exert a powerful, and sometimes a decisive, influence over the choice of vocabulary. Hence the philosophers have not been “philosophical” enough to waive the terminology, while insisting upon the content.