A CRITICAL INQUIRY INTO THE SOURCES OF VALUE

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ABSTRACT

Value plays a vital role in directing the course of social existence. It is an important factor in guiding human behavior. While the importance of value is not so much in doubt, the question of source(s) of value continues to evoke debate among scholars. Some scholars argue that the source of value is divine command; some others say it is nature; yet some others say it is culture and traditions. This paper critically evaluates these believes. It argues that value is a product of convoluted factors but with foundation on human social fabrics. This implies that while different elements highlighted by the scholars play vital role in arriving at moral values and standards, social matrix, human interests, happiness and critical reflections play ultimate and fundamental role in value formation.

INTRODUCTION

Human beings are problem-solving organisms just like every other form of life. They are faced with problems and difficulties, which they deal with in their diverse daily commitments. One of the areas where their problem-solving ability is tested to its limit is in ethical problems. Ethics is concerned with the fundamental questions of how we should live; it is preoccupied with the diverse principles of right and wrong. Most of the demanding ethical problems, contrary to public assumption, are not always about conflicts between right and wrong; they are rather conflicts about competing rights. We resolve such conflicts by the use of value, often times unconsciously.

Values provide us with moral templates for assessing and judging the intentions and conducts of others and for evaluating our own actions. Values are important for human harmonious existence and development. Understanding the meaning and the source of value is therefore necessary. So what then are values? Where do values come from? How does each culture establish its commonly accepted values?

Analysis of different literature on values reveals various responses and perspectives to the questions. Scholars have attempted to respond to these questions, directly or indirectly. While their views vary, they provide a resource for understanding the source(s) of values. Their suggestions can be broadly classified into (a) the idea of divine will or God as the source, (b) nature as the source and (c) human being /society as the source. The responses depend largely on the philosophical proclivities of the scholars; whether they are objectivists, subjectivists or Universalists. The responses also depend on what the authors conceive value to mean and valuation to imply.

Value and valuation

Understanding the meaning of the concepts *value* and *valuation*, would be relevant for the rest of the discourse. The contemporary use of the two terms by scholars is oftentimes confusing. Traditionally, value meant "the worth of a thing" and valuation "meant an

estimation of its worth" (worth was then conceived mainly as economic or quasi economic).[1] In time, the idea of worth was extended to include issues discussed under such heading as the good, the end, the rights, obligation, the beautiful, the truth, and so forth, by scholars from the time of Plato to scholars like Rudolf Hermann Lotze, Albrcht Rischl, and Fredric Nietzsche[2].

In our time, value has acquired variety of usages. It is used as an abstract noun, concrete noun and as a verb. As an *abstract noun*, value is used in a narrow sense to refer to what is considered good, desirable or worthwhile. It is also used in a wilder sense to cover all sorts of rightness, obligation, virtue, beauty, truth and holiness; such that it is considered positive and its opposite, which is on the negative side, is disvalue or vice. As a more *concrete noun*, value refers to what is judged to have value; what is thought to be good or desired to be good. For instance, if I say, my value or your value system, it simply refers to what I think is good or right or obligatory. The implication of this is that what is good would depend on my thinking or desire or your thinking or desire. And this is subjectivism. In this concrete sense, value also means what *has value* or what is good or what is valuable and not what is regarded or believed to be good. Accordingly, things are said to have value irrespective of our thoughts (this is objectivism). As a verb, value is used in expressions, such as 'to value', 'valued', valuing'.

Valuing is generally "synonymous with valuation or evaluation, when actively used to mean the act of evaluating and not passively to mean the result of such an act"[3]. Value is equally used to designate the kinds of valuing that involves "reflection and comparison or judgment about what is good or bad, desirable or worthwhile. John Dewey makes this distinction clearer in his two senses of value where in one sense to value is to apprize, appraise, estimate, evaluate, or valuate. Here reflection and comparison are involved. In the other sense, to value is to prize, like or esteem, cherish, or hold dear. Here there is no reflection or comparison; however, desiring or liking is a kind of value. It is common that some scholars follow Dewey to make similar distinction and yet it is common to find others who limit value to include judgment rather than mere desiring. Nevertheless, what is much important here is to know that value and valuation should be used with utmost caution and consistency so as to endeavour to eschew the ambiguity that beclouds the concepts.

Categories of Value

Different uses of values reflect (or even influence, as the case may be), scholars' worldviews or ideological referents – religious, cultural, metaphysical, scientific and so on. Beyond the senses of human value and valuation, most uses of value can be broadly categorized into three[4] as stated by Clifford Sharp.

The first are those values that relate to an individual, such as good or bad. It can be called individual value. When considered carefully, such value relate primarily to the person, so that when we say good, one could ask, good to whom?

The second are values where some elements of consensus are involved or implied. Such values are expressed in terms like 'fair', 'decent', 'tolerance', etc. Third are used to relate to

[1] William K. Frankena, (1967) "Value and Valuation" in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd Edition, p.636
[2] Ibid

[3] William K. Frankena, (1967) "Value and Valuation" in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd Edition, p.637
[4] Clifford Sharp, (1997), *The Origin and Evolution of Human Values*, Britain: Pen Press, pp.2-3

things primarily in terms of 'fitting', appropriate for their purpose, such as good pen, good car, etc.

The first two types of values concern individual and culture or society, though individual values are often times influenced by cultural values. Nevertheless, the two are more of moral values. This work lays more focus more on moral values. Moral values are fundamental for social relations and for driving the course of social existence.

Different Sources of Value

There are different sources of value that scholars have identified directly or indirectly in their conceptions of the good and bad, just and unjust. Oftentimes, scholars' conception of the source of values depends on their beliefs or understanding of the cosmos of meaning. In order times, the sources of value would depend on whether the values are seen as intrinsic or extrinsic or instrumental, primary or secondary. However, I classify the sources of value into three broad categories. These are divine will or God, nature and Human beings. Let us analyze these sources.

Divine Will or God as the Source of value

The idea of divine will or God as the source of values is based on theocentric worldview. Theocentric worldview puts forward the claim that God is the creator of the Universe. It holds a fundamental assumption or belief that God is transcendent being, real and immanent; He made himself tangible and created the world and life within it. He is the source of every contingent being, that is, every existent reality. According to this view, values have their source in God. God is the source and the foundation of values. He determines what is right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust, useful and worthy.

The idea of God as the source of values is advocated by different religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other religious groups. In this view, values are strictly theological and require that they are expressed in theological concepts and moral terms. There are two broad approaches to discovering of the values.

The first is that moral values are God's will. The values do not require any justification or reason beyond the fact that they are willed by God. In the thoughts of Harold Titus, Marilyn, Smith and Richard Nolan, "the more conservative form of this approach is a biblical literalism in which religion is viewed as a final body of truth that has been completely revealed. All we need to do is to discover this truth through reading the sacred writings, and obeying its laws"[5]. The truth or values are given by God and revealed to man. To be sure, these values are hidden in his words in the scriptures that were handed over to man. The second is that we are inspired by our view of humanity and of God and His love to discover the good and live so as to achieve it. Through our experience and knowledge of God, we discover the task we need to do, for humanity, and this task should be seen as our duty to the love of God. For example, since human life begins at conception, abortion is murder and must be stopped. In all, it is God that commands what is valuable or not.

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[5] Harold H. Titus, Marilyn S. Smith and Richard T. Nolan, 1995, *Living Issues in Philosophy*, *Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, p*.128

Religion is the guardian of the values. It preserves and teaches the values. It is a motivating force of the values through the emphasis on the purity of motive and encouragement of abundant live that is to be achieved through the life of simplicity, courage, love, kindness, humility and loyalty.

In Christian religion, for instance, to live a good life is to obey God. The abundance of Christian values is found in teaching of Jesus and in his lived-life. Thus, human beings are seen in relation to God. They have greater value than anything else. They are ends in themselves. Thus, love of God and love of other humans are fundamental values. From these supreme values, scholars have derived other values. St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas are among the scholars who spent most of their theological works demonstrating that the good is in accordance with the will of God. In essence, God Himself has made known to mankind what he wants men to consider as morally good and what they should consider as morally bad. Augustine believes that morality is in accordance with the will of God. God has impressed moral law in every man's heart. Moral law is fundamental moral principle. It is the moral law that tells or enjoins man to do good and avoid evil. God is righteousness itself and all values – justice, obedience, mercy, courage, kindness are perfect in God. The will of God is the criteria for right action.[6] Consider the thought of William of Ockham, a Franciscan, of medieval time, who maintained that the goodness or badness of things depend on God. Things are good because God commands it so. Things are bad because God prohibited it. Even though this sounds authoritative and arbitrary, it expresses the idea that values have their source in God[7].

The moral truths that flow from the religious worldview endorse specific moral values from the outset. For example, since human life begins at conception, "abortion is murder and must be stopped"[8]. In this view, God does not value things because they are right. God does not will the values because they are right. Rather, they are valuable because God wills or commands them to be so. He is the one that makes them valuable.

Nature as the Source of value

Is nature the source the source of values? Some scholars have argued that nature is the source of values. In this view, values are not located outside nature but within nature. Values are inherent in Nature. The source of values does not lie in the metaphysical or transcendental will or in the valuer – in their attitudes, preferences or desires – but in nature. The basis of the argument of this description is that nature has an order, pattern, laws, properties and qualities that we are bound to understand and respect. The qualities and properties are good and useful in themselves. They do not depend on human valuations to be good. The values are rather discoverable through human reason and scientific investigation.

The radical view of this description is that natural world and even the state of affairs have intrinsic values, not just instrumental ones. An object has "instrumental value in so far as

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[6] The basic elements of theistic idea of value in Augustine's thought can be found in his work, the *Confessions and the City of God.*

[7] See T. I. Omeregbe, 1993, *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study,* Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited.

[8] James D. Hunter, (1991) *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books, p.122

it is a means to other ends"[9] or if it is a means to intrinsic values." [10] Intrinsic value of a thing is "said to be the value that that thing has in 'itself', or for its own sake" or in its own right".[11]

To be sure, before the twentieth century, most moral philosophers presupposed that the intrinsic goodness of something is a genuine property of that thing. That is the genuine property of things, the order of nature, has intrinsic value. The view has been defended by Panayot Butchvarov and G. E. Moore. Some philosophers, including Chisholm[12], have argued that states of affair are the bearers of value; to this view, N. M. Lemos maintains that it is the states of affairs that obtain in concrete existence that have intrinsic value, where as properties and states of affairs that do not obtain in concrete reality do not have intrinsic value[13]. Others have held that facts are bearers of value. W. D. Ross and M. J. Zimmerman are among scholars that have provided arguments for intrinsic value. The idea of intrinsic value (which means worthy of being valued) naturally supposes that for something to be intrinsically good, it means it is worthy of being valued for its own sake[14]. This argument provides background for believing that things in nature and states of affairs are sources of value, since they are good in their own right.

The views that natural world is bearer of value or that values (intrinsic values) are inherent in the nature of things (or actions) have been greatly challenged by scholars. It is argued that the idea of intrinsic value residing in nature is implausible. Dewey, for instance, provides a strong challenge to this idea of nature-imbedded value of things. He argues that nature is precarious and ever changing. The solution in one problem is the source of another and the end in one context is a means in another. Therefore it is a mistake to offer a timeless list of intrinsic goods or evils that are resident in nature. Rather, the source of values lies more in human reflections and their ability to resolve a problematic situation.[15] Nature and states of affairs could have properties and qualities, but this does not translate into being good. If you say something is good, you will be asked, good to whom. A distinction could be made between possessions of a property and the object being good, especially, when it is conceived in the moral sense. That an object has a property is not a moral claim but a meta-ethical claim. Moral claims 'are bearing on man and, therefore, commands moral obligation while meta-ethical claims are just at the level of analysis" according to John O'neil. Thus, properties are conceived

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[9] John O'neil, 2014, "The Variety of Intrinsic Value" in *Environmental Ethics*, A. Bright & H. Rolston 11, USA: Blackad p.139

[10] E. S. Brightman, An Introduction to Philosophy, p.147

[11] Toni Ronnow-Rasmussen & Michael J. Zimmerman, 2005, *Recent Work on Intrinsic Value*, The Netherlands: Springer, p.xiii.

[12] Roderic Chisholm, 2005, "Intrinsic values" in Toni Ronnow-Rasmusesen & Michael J. Zimmerman, 2005, Recent Work on Intrinsic Value, The Netherlands: Springer, p.61-75.

[13] N. M. Lemos, 2005, "The Bearers of Intrinsic Value", in Toni Ronnow-Rasmusesen & Michael J. Zimmerman, 2005, Recent Work on Intrinsic Value, The Netherlands: Springer, p.181..

[14] Toni Ronnow-Rasmussen & Michael J. Zimmerman, 2005, Recent Work on Intrinsic Value, The Netherlands: Springer, p.xix.

[15] John Dewey, 1992, *Human Nature and Conduct,* New York: H. Holt.

valuable when they contribute to human well-being. Other scholars, such as Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, and Monroe Beardsley who took the lead from Dewey, also raised doubt on the idea of value residing intrinsically in nature. Hume, for instance, takes all ascriptions of value to be projection of one's own sentiment onto whatever is said to have value[16].

It is also argued by scientific minded scholars that value is a product of natural traits which influences people's actions. Recent investigation into human genome indicates that problems-solving ability (together with language learning ability) derives largely from the operation of the frontal lobes of the brain. This area has a decided inheritance factor making us susceptible to one particular pattern of values than others[17]. The importance of nature and *nurture* of inheritance and environment has been of serious debate among scholars. But, due to the outcome of research in human genome and the probability of traits and inheritance factor, consensus seems to give increasing weight to genetic factors with nurture being regarded as a modifying process, a polishing agent, but does not alter the original character itself. Yet, there is still a common consensus that the influence of inheritance and the environment vary from a person to persons

Human Beings as the Source of Value
Some scholars rejected the idea that divine will or God or nature is the source of value. They see the idea as mistaken assumption and hold that human beings are the source of value. According to this view, nature is simply a "store house, resources to be organized and used by humans"[18]. Values are not resident in nature to be discovered by man; rather they are developed by man through experiences, decisions, evaluations, reflections, and judgments. In order words, the ultimate sources of value are the experiences and evaluative attitude of humans. Protagoras states that man is the measure of all things. To measure is to value. The belief that human beings are the source of value may take an individual or social form.

Individual Evaluation: There is a strong believe among some subjectivists that individual persons are the source of values by the virtue of experiences, worldviews and desires. This view insists that values are ascribed to actions by the individual persons and not God or nurture or even the society. In this sense, values are rooted in individual desires, beliefs, and feelings. One determines what is good and bad for oneself. That means, it is the evaluative attitudes and interests of individuals in the society that originates values.

David Hume, for instance, conceives moral value expressions to be expressions of personal feelings or emotions about things. For him, values are ascriptions of one's own sentiments onto whatever is said to have value. Therefore, he gives credence to human feelings, emotions and dispositions regarding sources of value. Existentialist Philosophers, such as Frederic Nietzsche, John Paul Sartre, and Soren Kierkegaard, provide philosophical

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See David Hume, (1737), *A treatise of Human Nature*, London: Thomas & Joseph Allen

[17] The importance of nature and nurture of inheritance and environment has been of serious debate among scholars. Pp.13-17

This is an instrumentalist view; see John O'neil, 2014, "The Variety of Intrinsic Value" in *environmental Ethics*, A. Bright & H. Rolston 11, USA: Blacked p.139

postulations that give support to individualist value creation. When Frederic Nietzsche assumed that 'God is dead', he was rejecting the authority of God in commanding values for humans and laying down a charge that we are free to create values and meaning ourselves. In his book, *The Genealogy of Morals,* Nietzsche traced the origin of moral value-concepts to human experiences in the society. That means, we should embrace freedom and create values of which we are wholly responsible. In the same vein, Kierkegaard maintains that one must invent one's own values and commit oneself to the life that follows from them. John Paul Sartre was passionate in his belief in human freedom, such that his early philosophical writings present individuals as the meaning making beings and value creators.

Furthermore, Betrand Russel's argument for subjectivity of value roots value in human desires. He sees our desires as the source of values. This is the major reason why he argues that ethics contains no statement that could be true or false but desire or desire of a general kind. And, you cannot argue that someone's desire is true or false. He maintains that value arguments is simply an attempt to show that our "desires have some quality which makes them more worthy of respect". It is when a desire is strong that it produces its own morality. The business of institutions is to create harmony by harmonizing the interest of society with the desire of the individuals[19] than that of others. While analyzing the role of experience on value diversity, Nicholas Rescher states that values "do not issue from intersubjectively invariant considerations, but emerge as products of reflective human judgment based on individual differences and variations of needs and wants"[20].

The ground for Rescher's argument lies in the fact that there are clearly a wide variety of discrepant and ultimately incommensurable value positions that are relative to individual experiences and needs in different social context. People tend to have different values and priorities and accordingly evaluate the available alternatives differently[21]. Individuals are the basic unit of the society and experiences are had by individuals. Though it could be argued that some individual experiences are cultural and communal experiences that have developed over the years and passed to prosperity, yet the experiences can still be traced to individual experiences.

Society/Culture as the Source of Value: The idea that society or culture is the source of value has long history and wide acclamation. It is of the opinion of some scholars that values have their roots in social experiences and communal worldview. According to this conception, values are not given by any transcendental being or nature. Values do not predate human society. They are rather products of human social interactions, decisions, evaluations and judgments. In this conception, human actions, social conducts or behaviours are considered good or bad, just or unjust in accordance with standards stipulated by the society. It is society that sets the criteria for value judgment. The purpose of stipulating values is for social cooperation, harmony and social participation in the attempt to achieve the common good.

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[19] Bertrand Russell, 1989, "Science and Ethics" in James White, *Introduction to Philosophy*, New York: West Publishing company

[20] Nicholas Rescher, 1993, *Pluralism,: Against the Demand for Consensus*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 131

[21] Nicholas Rescher, 1993, *ibid.*

Society comes about values through some collective human experiences. It is social experiences, over time, which informs the value categories of the society. Different societies have different experiences and consequently different values systems.

Richard Rorty, follows John Dewey to argue that human society is confronted by problems of social existence that varies from time to time and in different contexts[22]. Human beings develop or construct values or ideas or alternative methods, to respond to the problematic situations. The ideas or values that respond to the problem in question become valuable in so far as it responds to the problem that gave rise to it. It is through this process that societies respond to different problems in different times and context. So values are developed in different contexts to respond to relevant practical issues.

James Evans brushed at this view when he writes, in another context, that value attitudes are "the result of social structural experience, which is usually identified with social groups"[23], institutions, religious organizations and culture. Values are developed in different cultures, by different institutions - social, legal, - political and scientific. For instance, different cultures have different values due to their peculiar experiences. Culture could be referred to as a set of values, rules and standards transmitted among generations which are acted upon to produce behaviors that fall within acceptable limits. Cultures develop values and norms of conduct that guide human behaviours; in some cases the practice of norms and values in a particular culture makes the society different from the other cultures, even though the values could overlap with that of other cultures. Again, different institutions create different values that guide human behavours in the society. Thomas Hobbes believes that before society became organized into civil one there was no systemic value system that guided people's behaviour except war against all. It was through social contract and consent that values were introduced to guide human society. Thus, human beings construct values so as to institute social harmony and cohesion.

However, it has been argued that human beings value only what is valuable. To be valuable means to have qualities that are good. Such argument removes the source of values from human reflective faculty, interest and social interactions. Social view of value rejects such perspective. It maintains that something is considered good and valuable, if it is precisely good to human well-beings. And it is human beings that determine what is valuable for their well-being. So the source still lies at the level of human evaluation and reflective inquiry.

Complexity of Factors

From the foregoing analysis, human values are product of interdepended sources. Values are influenced by diverse factors. But fundamentally, our esteemed moral values are stimulated by problem-solving activity. The values arise from human problem-solving experience from which values are formed and reformed to deal with the problems.

Formed values are not static. They can be remolded, influenced by further experiences. It is the product of plural factors but with greater influence in human experience. Human traits,

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[22] See Rorty, 1999, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, New York: Genguin Books

[23] John H. Evans, (1997), "Worldviews or Social Groups as the Source of Moral Value Attitudes: Implications for the Culture Wars Thesis", *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (pp.371-404), p.372

culture, ideologies – religious, social, cultural and scientific, individual experience, emotions and mental reflections – play different roles. This is the reason while caution should be taken in our human interactions. As soon as we realize the fact that values are product of diverse influences and are subject to remolding, then we will realize that we should be willing to revalue our values towards human well being

With regard to individual, experience has shown that most our values are influenced by emotion even though we claim to be rational beings. What we do is to act with emotional sense, and go forward to justify it with convenient rational reasons. With regard to cultural values, sometimes, such values could be an imposition of certain class of sentiments or mystical responses to human problems. Human values must also be reevaluated for social progress.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis presents the source of values identified in different philosophical orientations. They sources are broadly classified into divine, nature and society. The analyses of the perspectives reveal that values, especially moral values, are not products of simple minded and straight forward projection. They are rather products of convoluted factors but with foundation on human social fabrics. This implies that while different elements highlighted by the scholars play vital role in arriving at moral standards, social matrix, human interests, happiness and reflections play ultimate and fundamental role in value formation.

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