**The Philosophy of Individual Valuism**

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**Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to identify the nature of value and goodness, words used to describe how things and actions should be desired. Historically, perceptions of desirability have been colored by lenses of culture and mysticism that declare what is supposed to be right no matter the consequences of those beliefs. Individual Valuism is the philosophy that individuals are capable of judging values without objective, universal, or other viewpoints. Furthermore, values can *only* be defined relative to individuals. Outside of a mind with preferences, goodness does not exist.

**Values and Ethics**

**Value:**

Good and bad. Right and wrong. Moral and immoral. There are many words to describe value, or how a person, place, thing, quality, or event is worth having or existing. Value must be recognized in order to want to possess something, to want something to happen, or to want something to be a certain way. Additionally, it is necessary to know what is *better* than something else. That is, to have the ability to prefer respect over shame, activity over stagnation, and even life over death.

But how is value measured, exactly? What justification is required to call something useful, desirable, or good? Examine that question with something that seems to have obvious value: healthiness. What responses would people give if they were asked why they should value good health (defined as being free from disease and having typical human capabilities)? They could simply say that it suits them to value health or that is just how they are. They could say that health is a major part of their happiness or ability to enjoy life and is therefore valuable. They could say that they were taught or commanded to value health. They could say that health has value because it is instrumental for something else that is believed to be valuable, such as physical activity, interaction with society, or ability to work or travel.

No matter the reasoning, no matter how many further ends are referenced, there can only be two explanations for the value of anything. One is that value exists because one automatically believes that it does. It is commanded by some authority that something is of value, so it is. Society believes that something is of value, so it is. Tradition says that something is of value, so it is. One was brought up to believe that something is of value, so it is. The other explanation is that value exists because the state of existence is influenced in a positive way. In other words, something is of value if it causes a desirable outcome. The first of these explanations is based in mindlessness and results in a morality determined by chance, whim, and the subjugation of thought. The latter is based in the ability to understand what is preferable and results in a morality focused on what is best to want and how is best to act.

**Subjective Value:**

In describing value, I have mentioned words such as “desirable” and “preferable” several times. Notice that these words only have meaning relative to a mind. “*Bob* desires good health.” “Peace is preferred over war *by Susan*.” Something cannot be valued without a consciousness. It makes no sense to say that anything is valued objectively because if there is no subject, there can be no preference for anything. The act of charity cannot be found to be good without a mind any more than the smell of a flower can be found to be pleasant without a nose. Unfortunately, most people are reared to believe the opposite. They are taught that value is defined by some impersonal standard that one is supposed to know or discover. Such a standard cannot exist. Value is a property that exists within minds. Something can be valued by some people in the world, nobody in the world, or even everyone in the world, but there cannot be a value that is “objective,” “necessary,” or “a priori.” In other words, there cannot be anything that is desirable to, and independent of, every possible point of view. Any belief that such a value exists can only be supported by unsound arguments that fail to make a connection between what exists and what ought to be. In order for something to have value, there must be a point of view to perceive it. Knowing value requires a mind to think in the same way as knowing beauty requires eyes to see.

Despite how value without consciousness is a concept as absurd as sight without eyes, people have wasted thousands of years looking for the “true” measure of value, or coming up with various principles to determine goodness. None of them have ever provided any real justification. Many of them simply created value systems based around mysticism and refused to explain any further, proclaiming the authority of the supernatural. Some believed that reason alone can prescribe value, as if there exists some logical process that explains the worth of self-interest, utility, pleasure, other people, certain ways of living, or whatever. Both types have convinced many that are not willing to think but they have never really proven anything.

**Fact and Value:**

Value is that which affects the universe in a desirable way, but how does one evaluate such a thing? Certainly there must be a foundation for value that is better than choosing what is preferable on a whim! There certainly is. The ability for an entity to judge value lies in the foundation of its thought. In humans, this is the nervous system. Essentially, we come to know what is preferable through pleasant and unpleasant sensations. Sensory input creates the framework for what is considered good and bad. A computer, which is not capable of feeling any sensations, is incapable of judging value at all. No logic can be used to prefer one thing over another if a difference cannot be observed between them. The interaction of biology and the external world that determines the way in which a person comes to know something as positive or negative is a complex system that creates a person’s ability to judge what is good to him.

Note that this ability involves more than simply defining value by what feels right at the moment. Sensations are only the building blocks of the ability to know goodness. Over time, a person is able to judge what is good and bad beyond immediate causes and sensations derived from effects. They are able to know that, in general, having friends is good and that breaking promises is bad without largely considering what is pleasurable. They are able to judge value in ways that don’t rely on feelings. They can prefer such things as truth and wisdom over feeling good. However, sensory input is essential in the *development* of values. If goodness is what is desirable, how can people identify what is desirable without feeling anything? They can’t, unless they accept goodness automatically. Only in the framework created by sensory input can one know value.

**Individual Ethics:**

Knowing that value requires a point of view, whose viewpoint matters? Many people listen to the judgments of their family, friends, society, and god, but fundamentally, whose judgment of the universe, for example, should you consider to accept health as a value? The answer is your own. Every individual is an independent consciousness capable of knowing goodness. When a cat eats a mouse, it is good to the cat and bad to the mouse. It makes no sense to make up an “objective” preference for either. It makes no sense to say that the cat is wrong because other cats wanted to eat the mouse instead. It makes no sense to say that the mouse is wrong because other mice were glad it made the sacrifice. Likewise, I am capable of judging what is good to me without the thoughts or feelings of others.

When I say “good to” a person, I am referring to whatever accords with that person’s standards of desirability. This does not imply that the person is benefiting according to some external standard. For example, culture may say that having a lot of money is good, but for charitable people, it can be better to them to give away money instead. There is also no contradiction to the nature of individual values if people decide to form groups and behave in how is best to the group. The important part is that the individual agrees to follow the group. Groups that try to force me to work against my individual values are my enemies.

I also want to denounce historical views of moral relativism that argue that ethical assertions are relative to the traditions or beliefs of a culture, individual, or group. The most obvious reason is that values exist as relative to individuals; a person is not morally bound to the views of any culture or group. Furthermore, traditions and beliefs are not the same as values. Values are what *actually* result in good consequences to a person. A child could *believe* that inoculations are bad, but they may actually be good to him, if they save him from a terrible illness. Someone could sacrifice animals because *tradition* tells him to, but doing so may actually be bad to him, if the animals would be more useful alive. For some reason, some people say that having relative ethics implies that all moral decisions are equally valid and should be tolerated. There is no valid reasoning for this. All individuals are at liberty to consider their values first and reject and respond to opposing judgments.

**Culture, Reality, and Religion**

**Cultural Values and Ethics:**

Values are not like currency. Money is worth only whatever people agree that it is worth. But the importance of wisdom and truth to an intelligent person cannot be validated or invalidated by the views of anyone else, not even the entire world. Unfortunately, human nature seems to be obsessed with culture. Culture is a system of thought that defines values to be whatever society or tradition says to be good, not by what has actual good consequences to anyone. Over 2400 years ago, the Greek historian Herodotus wrote about culture. He recognized that different societies have vastly different social practices, and nearly all members of any particular society are convinced that their own practices have merit above all others. He illustrated this by comparing the methods of disposing of corpses in two different societies. Each person in his story expressed approval for their own culture’s method and disgust for the other. Herodotus came to the conclusion that custom, behavior promoted by culture, is king over the judgment of men. While I agree that is often the case, I also have a serious problem with it because it means that beliefs that are strongly considered to be valid can actually be arbitrary and irrelevant.

The problem is twofold: societies teach that values are not to be judged by individuals and human nature compels people to accept it. I have long felt disgust for the former. All around the world, people try to give children their values from the moment they are born. Children are given automatic beliefs just as they are given automatic countries, families, religions, wealth, status, and identities. We are all reared being told what to love and hate and how to act, though we are rarely given logical reasons why we should do so. We are told that our identities and desires are not our own to critically evaluate and discover, but are determined by the identity and values of others. Culture does not teach that people have individual views of value that comes from what is desirable to them. It claims that value is something to be believed automatically, without reason or explanation. Societies have corrupted the meaning of good and bad because their standards are only defined through culture. What happens when such standards of morality are applied to real life? Well, when your system of morality comes from *your* values, your thoughts and actions work devotedly towards the goal of making the world a better place to you. When you surrender your mind to the values of culture, at best you are working for what *might* be good to you *most* of the time. At worst, your thoughts and actions are based in unproductiveness, fantasy, and the destruction of your real values. Often, that is exactly what happens. When a culture tells people to dance to produce rain, it is focused on unproductiveness. When a culture tells people to pray to cure a disease, it is focused on fantasy. When a culture tells its citizens to be collectivists that are obligated to act for the benefit of others, it is focused on destroying their real values. Since most people—despite the best efforts of propaganda and conditioning—are too egoistical for such a system to work, that sort of society only leads to the oppression of the majority, who must live in the hell of having their individual values endlessly conflict with their cultural values.

Of course, while societies can promote some bad ideas, many of their rules do have a purpose. People would live in chaos if everyone decided for themselves which side of the street to drive on, what time of the day it is, or how long a meter is. Humans are social by nature and they need to be able to interact effectively with others. But this need doesn’t only apply to useful guidelines; the need people feel to fit in with their families and societies can drive them to accept practically any beliefs of their fellows, no matter the content, origin, or logic. Few people can hold onto their own values while living with a cohesive social group with near-unanimous convictions, seemingly-valid authority figures, and rituals that decrease personal awareness. Social pressure to agree with the crowd is a constant erosion of individual values. When it happens enough, a person can accept anything as the definition of goodness. Altruism, Nazism, religion, pleasure, anything. The content is irrelevant; the problem is the process in which people select their values. More often than not, camaraderie is more appealing than truth.

**Epistemology/Metaphysics:**

As the primary focus of Individual Valuism is Ethics, it is necessary to speak of the nature of reality as well. One can only know what is best in the context of how the universe exists. For example, if you are currently dreaming and will wake up in a few hours, what is right to do is basically whatever you fancy. You are safe and powerful in the confines of your own mind and may do whatever you like with no ill effects when you wake up. If, however, you are awake and the universe you observe around you objectively exists, then what is right to do is whatever results in the most positive state of this universe to you over all time. If the world is subject to the influence of supernatural forces, then what is right to do is whatever results in the most positive outcome to you within the rules of those forces. It is impossible to know for certain the sort of reality we are in because it is impossible to disprove the existence of any number of forces that have the ability to deceive us. The universe as I know it could be a projection of a brain in a vat kept alive by a scientist in another world. The world of that scientist could have been created by a god. That god could exist in a reality created by a computer simulation. The world with that computer simulation could have been created by an all-powerful flying spaghetti monster. And so on. But there is a big difference between not being able to prove something false and having reason to believe that it is true.

The importance of knowing reality should be clear. If one arbitrarily assumes the existence of a supernatural force that is not actually real, he is likely to lose sight of what makes life good to him. Feel free to try to find out if your world is a dream or under the rule of supernatural forces, but don’t accept such ideas without serious thought. Instead, focus on what you can observe to impact your life. From what I can tell, this only includes matter and energy (which can be measured in force per distance) that have consistent properties and are subject to laws of logic and causality. In this line of thought, I believe there is a table in front of me. Can I prove that it is *really* there? No, but I can see it, touch it, and put my computer on top of it. Whether or not I have sufficient justification to know its existence is not as relevant as the fact that it clearly affects my life. The table also conforms to a set of natural laws. Its existence is objective; its form doesn’t change according to anyone’s perception. Its value is subjective; what it’s worth to a person depends on how it affects that person. It is subject to causality; if I cut the table in half, it will not be fit for use. I have nothing to gain by assuming mystical influences. No matter how much I hope or pray or chant, the table is not affected.

By just living normally, everyone should quickly recognize that only the existence and properties of matter and energy affect their lives and that any indications of supernatural influences are illusory. Somehow, most people fail to see this. Instead, they give their minds over to magic. They believe in such things as lucky numbers, ghosts, astrology, psychic abilities, and gods. I once witnessed an example of how a person can credit the supernatural despite clear involvements of simple causal relationships. A friend of mine had a loved one that needed dangerous surgery. In informing those close to him of the situation, he mentioned two things: “We were able to get one of the best surgeons in the world” and “I would really appreciate if you could keep her in your thoughts and prayers.” After the surgery went well, he said, “All I can say is the success of her surgery was through the grace of God!” and “Your prayers and good wishes and those of all of our friends have made the difference in the success of her operation.” Is that what really happened? What caused the success, the expert workings of a qualified doctor or good wishes magically thrown by friends and family? Which one actually had an effect on the universe? If they had gone to a quack instead of a great doctor, what do you think the results would be? Would the consequences show the “the grace of God” or the reality of causality?

**Religion:**

As bad as culture is as a proponent of automatic beliefs, it is even worse when combined with the supernatural. That is, when people accept beliefs and values not just to fit in with others, but because those ideas are portrayed to be coming from a transcendent authority. This problem is religion, a system of beliefs which claims that reality is influenced by something other than the causal relationships of matter and energy. This includes any concepts of deities, karma, mysterious forces, etc. Typically, religions also demand adherents follow rules of living and thinking that are based on its mystical premise.

The deepest trap of religion is convincing people to allow their thoughts to be based in a “higher” reality. Once someone is in this trap, he is able to rationalize any mistake, inconsistency, or contradiction. He is not worried about logic, causality, or physical evidence. The foundation of his knowledge of reality is “above” such things! But where does a person obtain this knowledge of higher powers, anyway? Someone tells him that it is true? He “feels” that it is true? He has some ancient stories proclaiming it is true? Are those good reasons or are they the same reasons everyone from every religion in history would give? These are examples of how people everywhere accept the supernatural without reason, and it only results in them losing touch with truth and becoming attached to fiction.

Just look through history to see what happens to those who have put their beliefs in higher powers. Centuries ago in Central America, humans sacrificed other humans for the purposes of pleasing gods and ensuring the existence of sun and rain. Around 1850-1864 China, a man heard some Christian doctrine, declared himself the brother of Jesus, and convinced thousands of people to join his army in taking over much of the country with fanatical discipline and devotion. In 1997 USA, thirty-nine people taken in by a cult killed themselves in order to be transported to a hidden spaceship. In 2001 USA, groups of men with absolute conviction they were going straight to Heaven crashed large planes full of civilians into large buildings full of civilians. Throughout the last millennium, there have been crusades and holy wars in Europe and the Middle East. Century after century, different religions and sects declared war on each other, spilling blood to cleanse the land of nonbelievers, all while declaring with perfect certainty the perfect benevolence of their god. The violence continues to this day.

All of this has happened because most people don’t require their beliefs to be supported by physical evidence. But does society look at these atrocities and cry out in horror at the potential of human cognition to be so blind and gullible to be able to commit such acts? Do people engage in deep self-reflection to consider the reasons for believing what they do? No, they *still* proclaim that it is right to believe things without reason, and they call it the virtue of *faith*. They dismiss every single religious crime in history as being caused by insane or misguided people, and continue to preach that everyone should believe even harder in the “right” way. The ability to think rationally is the first thing religion takes from people, and it is the first thing they must regain to know real goodness.

Again, religion is the same problem as culture, but it goes a step further in that it appears to be supported by a greater and unsurpassable power. When people are considering their values, culture offers what others have defined to be desirable and religion offers something to be taken as unquestionably desirable. When people are looking for meaning and support in life, culture offers validation, purpose, comfort, and camaraderie through the approval of others and religion offers the same through the approval of supernatural forces. People that conform to or deviate from cultural norms receive secular praise or sanctions. People that conform to or deviate from religious requirements (supposedly) get blessings or punishments that go beyond the grave.

Some would like to argue that even if religions were baseless, they are justified by various benefits such as spiritual support in times of need, rules of living that help society, and friendship among believers. All of these advantages are superficial at best. If a religion is not actually real (meaning its premise about the existence of a supernatural force is false), then any spiritual comfort it provides is caused by nothing outside the believer’s own mind. Mislabeling internal strength as external strength is not beneficial. Further, if a religion is not actually real, the morality based on it is not necessarily reasonable to live by and it creates an unnecessary identity barrier among people.

**Living with Others**

**Group Dynamics:**

Although I have argued for the ability of individuals to have their own values and against the necessity of culture and religion to define morality, I have said very little about how people should actually behave. If there was only one person in the world, Ethics would be pretty easy. That person could simply do whatever he thought would make life best to him and there would be no other sentient life to judge his actions and respond to them. But when other people do exist, things are more complicated. The consequences of our actions depend on how *other* people act as well. There are billions of people in the world. How should we act among others to make things go well to us?

**Reciprocity:**

If some strangers were playing soccer and their ball was kicked far out of bounds where you were, you would probably throw it back. Why? It is little trouble to you compared to if they had to chase after the ball, and in the same situation you would like them to do the same for you. Even someone who does not care about others would be shortsighted to refuse because life would be more difficult to him if people did not perform such courtesies. Reciprocity is a system in which people behave in certain ways and expect like responses. If everyone performs such small favors, everyone will overall gain more benefit. If everyone did what was best to them in the short term, everyone would lose in the long term.

Throughout most human civilizations, there have been ethical teachings about reciprocity. Many of them rely on some variation of a rule to treat others as you would like to be treated. While this is a good rule in many situations, it is also full of problems. Who counts as others? Other humans? Why not animals? What if there is a large difference in the way you and the other person want to be treated? What if there is a large difference in the way you and the other person deserve to be treated? Should a person refuse the notion of retribution and give aid to those that continually try to destroy him? No, it is usually better to treat others how they deserve to be treated and in ways that conform to beneficial systems of reciprocity. When you do so, you focus your effort on helping those that support your values and punishing those that work against your values. Otherwise, you may waste effort on things that are bad or indifferent to you and you have no control over others treating you badly.

**Government:**

When many people live together, there is usually a person or group that acts as a leader. There is no conflict with individual values as long as the leadership acts in ways that are good to the people it represents. For example, I support having a government that enforces justice, maintains safety for its citizens against external harm, protects the political freedoms of its citizens, and does projects with serious public benefit that individuals generally cannot organize competently or fairly. I do not support governments that force citizens to give effort to projects that the citizens do not desire. I do not support governments that punish people for doing things that are not directly harmful to other people. I do not support governments that censor information or operate in secret.

Other people might want different things. When there are millions of people, it is impossible to satisfy everyone. Still, some policies will make most people happy and productive. Some policies will make people complain, argue, protest, disobey, steal, riot, kill, or go to war.

**Conclusion**

I hope that others can read this and know the same peace I have. It is the peace that comes with self-awareness and self-worth. It is the peace that comes with knowing true value, purpose, and identity. It is the peace that comes with knowing what is right no matter who agrees or disagrees. It is the peace that comes with knowing how to make life go well without appealing to magic. There are billions of people that are separated from this kind of peace. To find it, all they need is knowledge. They need to know that goodness and purpose do not exist somewhere in space apart from them. They need to understand that the values of cultures and religions often do not correspond to positive results in reality. All they need is realization.