

The philosophy of values*

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Although some germs of the modern “philosophy” or “theory of values” may also be detected among the philosophers and moralists of past ages, this philosophy presents itself today as distinct from those earlier systems on account of two fundamental characteristics, which some of its more recent exponents and supporters have not sufficiently taken into account.

The first of these characteristics lies in the distinction between *evaluation and belief*, which this theory posits more clearly than had formerly been done, and which constitutes the principal reason for the existence of a “theory of values” as distinct from a “theory of knowledge”.

The second characteristic is that the theory of values presents itself as a *general* theory of human choices or preferences, both moral and immoral, whether noble and elevated or low and ignoble, a theory, that is, of the laws that govern all our choices indiscriminately; furthermore it is characterised by the contribution made to its development by the practitioners of that science which was called “pure economics”.

1. Everyone recognises the difference between *belief* in the existence of an object – or in its possession of certain qualities – and its *evaluation*, the appraisal, that is, of its desirability, opportuneness, goodness, of whether it is worth being sought after or actuated in this or that particular circumstance. What does this difference consist in? The best way to characterise it is to observe that, in evaluating an object we do not make, properly speaking, any *assertion concerning the object itself*, but rather we acknowledge or describe special emotional states (whether these be desire or revulsion, love or hatred, approval or disapproval), or special tendencies to act in specified ways, which the object, or rather our beliefs or judgements in relation to the object and

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its qualities, arouse *in us*. These emotional states are not beliefs, nor are they in any way reducible to beliefs (Brentano). The importance of distinguishing them from beliefs depends, in my view, on the fact that, when we express a belief, we are always – either implicitly or explicitly – affirming the possibility or the impossibility of further experiences, different from the belief itself, and the occurrence or non-occurrence of these experiences is for us the criterion of the *truth* or *falsity* of the belief itself; these emotional states or tendencies to act, on the contrary, do not represent in themselves any expectancy about or prediction of facts other than themselves, and as such they are not susceptible of truth or falsity.

A certain difficulty in this regard springs from the fact that the simple observation or description on our part of these emotional states constitutes in its turn a judgement or an assertion, which common sense recognizes as occasionally susceptible of error or falsity. This may be explained by considering that in such cases what we perceive as wrong is our belief that we are, or are not, experiencing certain emotional states or tendencies to action: in the same manner we may be under the illusion that there exists within us a specific *belief* regarding, for example, the firmness of our convictions – we may *believe that we believe* while in fact we do not believe, etc. Thus, we often speak of “false or apparent enthusiasm”, or of “illusory benevolence or pity”, and so forth, without by this in any way implying that such states of mind are beliefs contradicted by experience, but rather that our *beliefs that we are experiencing them* are or may be contradicted by the occurrence or non occurrence of certain facts, which constitute for us the symptom or proof of these states of mind.

From what precedes it follows that it will never be possible, solely through a chain of simple beliefs or judgements, to attain any form of evaluation, unless we add to the beliefs themselves an element of evaluation, which is in no way reducible. Expressed in logical terms, this means that in any syllogism, at the conclusion of which there figures a proposition expressing an evaluation (the assertion, that is, that something is desirable, opportune, good, etc.), at least one of the premises must express an evaluation. Observation of facts and reasoning, be this inductive or deductive, can only lead us to *foresee* the results of the way we may or may not behave and to determine the suitable *means* to lead us to this or that objective. The conclusions we reach by these means may all be stated as follows: *if one wishes, or does not wish, that a certain thing may take place, one has to act in such and such a way*. No effort of dialectical alchemy may lead, solely on the strength of these means to conclusions such as the following: *one wishes, or desires, or one has to wish or desire, that such and such a thing may happen* (Vailati). This impossibility of resolving, through the enunciation of simple truths, ultimate divergencies of interest, aspiration, and aim – in other

words of resolving, through knowledge, the so-called “problem of Value” – should not be viewed as a purely temporary inadequacy in our cognitions, or attributed to some difficulty that could be surmounted at some further stage of intellectual progress. To accuse science, or scientists (as well as philosophy and philosophers) of being impotent in this regard, is just slightly less absurd than it would be to attribute to a certain painter’s lack of skill the fact that the light from a lamp in one of his paintings fails to illuminate the dark room in which the painting hangs.

And yet men, both philosophers and non-philosophers, have often illuded themselves, and indeed continue to do so, that it may somehow be possible to overcome this difficulty.

Victims of this misconception are those who believe that by calling it “natural” or “in conformity with nature”, or by taking advantage of the double meaning (scientific and normative) of the word *law*, they are giving morality a more solid basis; also deceived are the utilitarians when they believe they may justify certain norms of conduct by referring to a determination of the aims of life that is in some way “objective”, in that it does not imply something more than simple judgements or beliefs, and does not exceed the scope of intelligence or encroach on the area of “will” or “human free will”. This mistaken conception is also held by those “Rationalists” who use the term “Reason” indiscriminately to indicate both the faculty of distinguishing the true from the false and the faculty through which we posit the norms that are to govern our conduct; it even affects many of the exponents of the modern theory of values, in that they speak of “objective” or “absolute” values, as if these were independent of any choice or preference, be this specific to the speaker or general to all men. All these efforts betray the unconscious tendency to search for some justification of an “external” nature, notwithstanding the previous (more or less clear) theoretical admissions, and to forget that every process of *justification* must inevitably come to something that appears desirable in itself, without being in its turn “justified” by factual observations of any kind whatsoever (since from a painted nail you cannot hang anything except a painted chain).¹

2. Economic science, moving out of the more restricted field that had initially been assigned to it, has recently become increasingly abstract and general, to the point that no form of choice or preference is any longer excluded from its consideration. Nevertheless, the more restricted and concrete field of

¹ See G. Vailati, *Sulla portata logica della classificazione dei fatti mentali proposta dal prof F. Brentano*, in *Rivista filosofica*, gennaio-febbraio 1901. See also, especially in relation to the ideas I develop below, my *Disarmonie economiche e disarmonie morali* [now in *Scritti di Mario Calderoni*, vol. 1: 285-344].

the early economists was itself particularly suited to certain observations and discoveries which would have been much more difficult to make in the field of “morality” proper.

There is, observably, in the moral world, no phenomenon as visible and palpable, as it were, as what in the economic world is known as *the price of goods measured in money*; money, by reducing the value that things have or acquire to a common unit of measurement, allows us to keep track, with a certain approximation, of the variations that take place in the tastes, needs, demands and aspirations of men. This fact allowed economists to establish the existence of certain laws, which would otherwise have probably remained unknown to them if they had from the very start carried out their research in a wider field, but which nevertheless need not be applied exclusively to those of our choices that may, strictly speaking, be termed economic. Some of the laws according to which prices on the financial and commercial markets are formed or vary are in a certain sense nothing more than the *mirror* in which the more general laws governing grander and more mysterious markets are reflected – albeit on a smaller scale – or become clearly visible. It was much more difficult to perceive and specify these more general laws in those other markets, on account of the greater complexity of the data and the fact that they are less accessible to observation and experiment.

One in particular of these laws appears especially relevant and has long escaped the attention of moral philosophers; this is called by economists the law of “comparative marginal utility”. Economists were early on forced to take note of the fact that it was impossible to properly explain phenomena of value as long as only the generic and total utility or desirability of things were taken into account, neglecting the actual quantity of the things that we already have or may have at our disposal without the need for any further effort. What determines the value of water is not the utility of water itself for life, but the utility of a further dose of water added to the supply of water we already have, as well as the sacrifices we would have to make to obtain this further dose. This explains why water, though indispensable to existence, has no value on the market, while diamonds, which have very small intrinsic utility, have enormous value. The utility, or desirability, which this additional dose of any given good has, and which is measured by the sacrifices we are willing to make in order to obtain it, is what economists have called the “comparative marginal utility” of the good itself.

Now this principle is valid not only for our “economic” choices, but also for our “moral” choices. Moral norms (those, that is, which are not simple tautologies or definitions, such as “do good”, or “do your duty” – which, when they do not imply any reference to “external” criteria of good or duty,

such as the divine command or the rules which are actually enforced within a specific society, tell us nothing except that we must do... what we must do) are the expression, not of the total and generic desirability of the actions or the classes of actions which are envisaged in these moral norms, but of their *comparative marginal desirability*, of the desirability, that is, of a further increase in the number of these actions, compared to the desirability of other actions which would have to be given up in order to carry them out. This explains how, for example, those actions dictated by the individual instincts of self-preservation and the reproduction of the species, although essential to both individual and social life, and to the attainment of even our most exalted aims, are not regarded as virtuous actions or even envisaged in moral codes. This is because, far from requiring encouragement, they require to be reined in, as men are excessively inclined rather than disinclined to perform these actions and in order to do so are ready to forego the performance of other functions that are *marginally* and *comparatively* (albeit not *entirely*) more desirable. Thus altruism, for example, is a virtue whose value closely depends on the excessive quantity of selfish people. The value, in other words, of given categories of actions is closely connected to, and is liable to vary in proportion with, the number of actions that men would spontaneously tend to carry out, independently of the power exerted over them by moral commands and the sanctions attached to them by individual or collective opinion. Any alteration in the character or in the average level of moral education, either in an individual or in a society, which had the effect of rendering less necessary or less urgent the stimuli offered by the said individual's or the said society's moral conscience would tend to produce, in the correspondent moral evaluations, variations that are less notable, as they are less rapid, than those which we observe taking place in the prices of industrial products as a result of the scarcity or abundance of raw materials, or, for example, thanks to some technical improvement in the manufacturing process.

Translated from the Italian by Sylvia Greenup

