

Valuation as a Social Process

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In a large view of the matter valuation is nothing less than the selective process in the mental-social life of man: all values are in some sense survival values and have a bearing on the onward tendency of things. They indicate significance with reference to some sort of a crisis, and are factors in guiding the behavior of some sort of organism. The idea might easily be extended to lower forms of life and made to embrace all the psychical aspects of selection; we shall be content, however, to consider some of its human applications.

The manner in which a certain object develops value for a man in a particular situation is a matter of the commonest experience: at every instant we are passing from one situation to another and the objects about us are taking on new values accordingly. If I wish to drive a nail I look at everything within reach with reference to its hammer-value, and if the monkey-wrench has more of this than any other object available I reach for it, its function increases, it survives, it is the fit, is a growing factor in life. And men, nations, doctrines, what you will, wax and wane by analogous acts of selection.

The essential things in the conception of value are, then, a human organism (not necessarily a person) a situation and an object; the last having properties that have an influence on the behavior of the organism in view of the situation. The organism is, of course, the heart of the whole matter. We are interested primarily in that because it is a system of life, and in values because they mould its growth. The various values acting on the organism are ever being integrated by the latter (as by a man when he "makes up his mind") and the situation is met by an act of selection, which is a step in growth, leading on to new situations and values.

Valuation includes the history that lies back of values, that antecedent process of growth and struggle by which any object of thought or sentiment comes to have more or less power over choice and action. If, for example, diamonds, the paintings of Corot, the dogmas of Christian Science, the idea of brotherhood, the attainment of the SouthPole, the services of a physician, have power, in various ways and degrees, over human behavior, it is because there has been a previous mental and social process out of which these objects have emerged with a certain weight for certain mental situations.

The organism which the idea of value implies, the life which is the heart of the process, about which values center may be personal or it may be impersonal: a doctrine, an institution, a movement, any thing which lives and grows, gives rise to a special system of values having reference to that growth, and these values are real powers in life whether persons are aware of or interested in them or not; the growth of language, for example, of myth, of forms of art, works on to important issues with little or no conscious participation on our part. In general there are as many centers of value as there are phases of life.

The various classifications of value are based in one way or another on that of the objects, organisms or situations which the general idea of value involves. Thus, taking the point of view of the object, we speak of grain-values, stock-values, the values of books, of pictures, of doctrines, of men. Evidently, however, these are indeterminate unless we bring in the organism and the situation to define them. A book has various kinds of value, as literary and pecuniary, and these again may be different for different persons or groups.

As regards the forms of human life to which values are to be referred, it seems to me of primary importance to make a distinction which I will call that between human-nature values and institutional values.

The first are those which may be traced without great difficulty to phases of universal human nature. The organism for which they have weight is simply man in those comparatively permanent aspects which we are accustomed to speak of as human nature, and to contrast with the shifting institutions that are built upon it. The objects possessing such values differ greatly from age to age, but the tests which are applied to them are fundamentally much the same, because the organism from which they spring is much the same. A bright color, a harmonious sound, have a value for all men,

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and we may reckon all the more universal forms of beauty, those which men of any age and culture may appreciate through merely becoming familiar with them, as human-nature values. Such values are as various as human nature itself and may be differentiated and classified in a hundred ways. There are some in which particular senses are the conspicuous factors, as auditory and gustatory values. Others spring from the social sentiments, like the values of social self-feeling which underlie conformity, and the values of love, fear, ambition, honor and loyalty. Closely related to these are the more universal religious and moral values, which, however, are usually entangled with institutional values of a more transient and special character. The same may be said of scientific, philosophical and ethical values, and great achievement in any of these fields depends mainly on the creation of values which are such for human nature, and not merely for some transient institutional point of view.

The second sort of values are those which must be ascribed to an institutional system of some sort. Human nature enters into them but is so transformed in its operation by the system that we regard the latter as their source, and are justified in doing so by the fact that social organisms have a growth and values that cannot, practically, be explained from the standpoint of general human nature. The distinction is obvious enough if we take a clear instance of it, like the distinction between religious and ecclesiastical values. Such general traits of religious psychology as are treated in William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, correspond to values that we may call values of human nature; the values established in the Roman Catholic Church are a very different matter, though human nature certainly enters into them. In the same way there are special values for every sort of institutional development—legal values, political values, military values, university values, and so on. All technical values come under this head. Thus in every art there are not only human-nature values in the shape of phases of beauty open to men at large, but technical values, springing from the special history and methods of the art, which only the expert can appreciate..

Pecuniary values should, I think, be reckoned in this second class, for reasons which I shall not attempt to give at present.

This distinction, as I have remarked, rests upon the fact that there are forms of social life having a distinct organic growth, involving distinct needs and values, which cannot be understood by direct reference to universal human nature and the conditions that immediately influence it. I am aware that it may be difficult to apply to particular cases. It resembles most psychological distinctions in offering no sharp dividing line, being simply a question of the amount and definiteness of social tradition and structure involved. All human values are more or less mediated by transient social conditions: they might, perhaps, be arranged in a scale as to the degree in which they are so mediated; some, like the taste for salt, comparatively little, others, like the taste for poetry, a great deal. In dealing with the latter kind we come to a point on the scale where the social antecedents take on such definite form and development as to constitute a distinct organism which must be studied as such before we can understand the value situation. In moral values, for example, there are some, like those of loyalty, kindness and courage, which spring quite directly from universal conditions and may be regarded as human-nature values; others, like the obligation to go to church on Sunday, are evidently institutional. I need hardly add that human and institutional values often conflict, or that reform consists largely in readjusting them to each other. Nor need I discuss in detail the familiar process by which human-nature values, seeking realization through a complex social system, are led to take on organization and an institutional character which carries them far away from human-nature and in time calls for a reassertion of the latter; or just how this reassertion takes place on the initiative of individuals and small groups. Any one may see such cycles in the history of the Christian church, or of any other institution he may prefer to study.

It is noteworthy, also, that there are words that may be understood in either a human-nature or an institutional sense, and so are ambiguous with reference to this distinction. For example educational value might be a real human value, or it might refer to tests of a special and technical sort, and "religious" often means ecclesiastical.

The various human-nature and institutional values of a given object differ among themselves as the phases of the human mind itself differ: that is, however marked the differences, the values are after all expressions of a common organic life. There is no clean-cut separation among them and at times they merge indistinguishably one into another. An organic mental-social life has for one of its phases an organic system of values. For example the aesthetic and moral values may seem quite unconnected, as in the case of a man with a "fair outside" but a bad character, and yet we feel that there is something beautiful about perfect goodness and something good about perfect beauty. It is agreed, I believe, that the best literature and art are moral, not, perhaps, by intention, but because

the two kinds of value are related and tend to coincide in their completeness. Alongside of these we may put truth-value, and say of the three that they are phases of the highest form of human judgment which often become indistinguishable.

The institutional values are also parts of the same mental-social system, distinguished by their derivation from a special social organism. They merge into the human-nature values, as I have suggested, and unless the two are in opposition it may be hard to distinguish between them. An institution, however, seldom or never corresponds so closely to a phase of human nature that the institutional values and the immediately human values on the whole coincide. An idea, in becoming institutional, merges itself with the whole traditional structure of society, taking the past upon its shoulders, and loses much of the breadth and spontaneity of our more immediate life. There are no institutions that express adequately the inner need for beauty, truth, righteousness and religion as human nature requires them at a given time: no church, for example, ever was or can be wholly christian.

It is apparent that the same object may have many kinds of value, perhaps all of those that I have mentioned. It is conceivable that man may turn all phases of his life towards any object and appraise it differently for each phase. Consider, for instance, an animal like the ox, of immemorial interest to the human race. It may be regarded as beautiful or ugly, may arouse the various emotions, as love, fear or anger, may give rise to moral and philosophical questions, may be the object of religious feeling, as in India, and have a value for the senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. It has also, especially among the pastoral peoples, notable institutional values; plays a large part in law, ceremony and worship, and, in our own tradition, has an eponymous relation to pecuniary institutions.

Since values are a phase of the public mind, of the same general nature as public opinion; they vary as that does with the time, the group and the special situation. Every nation or epoch has its more or less peculiar value system, made up of related parts: any one can see that the values of the Middle Ages were very different from our own: they are a part of the ethos, the mores, or whatever you choose to call the collective state of mind.⁽¹⁾ Each individual, also, has a system of values of his own which is a differentiated member of the system of the group. And these various group and individual aspects hang together in such a way that no one aspect can be explained except by reference to the whole out of which it grows. You can hardly understand how a man feels about religion, for example, unless you understand also how he feels about his industrial position and about other matters in which he is deeply concerned; you must, so far as may be, grasp his life as a whole. And you will hardly do this unless you grasp also the social medium in which he lives. Any searching study of any sort of values must be the study of an organic social life.

The process that generates value is mental but not ordinarily conscious; it works by suggestion, influence and the competition and survival of ideas; but all this is constantly going on in and through us without our knowing it. I may be wholly unaware of the genesis or even the existence of values which live in my mind and guide my daily course: indeed this is rather the rule than the exception. The common phrase "I have come to feel differently about it" expresses well enough the way in which values usually change. The psychology of the matter is intricate, involving the influence of repetition, of subtle associations of ideas, of the prestige of personalities, giving weight to their example, and the like; but of all this we commonly know nothing. The idea of punishment after death, for example, has been fading for a generation past; its value for conduct has mostly gone; yet few have been aware of its passing and fewer still can tell how this has come about. This trait of the growth of values is of course well understood in the art of advertising, which aims, first of all, to give an idea weight in the subconscious processes, to familiarize it by repetition, to accredit it by pleasing or imposing associations, to insinuate it somehow into the current of thought without giving choice a chance to pass upon it at all.

If the simpler phases of valuation, those that relate to the personal aims of the individual, are usually subconscious, much more is this true of the larger phases which relate to the development of complex impersonal wholes. It is quite true that there are "great social values whose motivating power directs the activities of nations, of great industries, of literary and artistic 'schools,' of churches and other social organizations, as well as the daily lives of every man and woman impelling them in paths which no individual man foresaw or purposed."⁽²⁾ Nor is there anything mysterious about this: it is simply one aspect of the fact that the activities, even the existence, of the forms of social life are not necessarily or usually objects of consciousness to those involved in them. Every one must see that this is true as regards the past, and there is no reason to suppose that the present is different. Without doubt we are taking part in institutional movements of which we know

nothing, and which remain for the future historian or sociologists to discover, just as the organic growth of language, of myth and the like, which went on in the minds of our remote predecessors, has been brought to light by the philologists and ethnologists of our own day. Most of the difficulty that we have in understanding statements of the sort just quoted arises from our not having assimilated fully the modern discovery that reflective consciousness embraces only a small part of life.

Values imply an act of selection, which may also be unconscious as well as conscious. Selection is the critical activity in which the organism turns one way or another under the pull of values; but we often do not know that, as individuals, we are in such a crisis, and still less do we know it for the groups and institutions of which we are a part. And while values may be altered more or less in the crisis nothing stands still they yet exist antecedently to it, very much as the military power of a nation exists before it is tested in war, or the "strength" of a presidential candidate before the campaign opens.

Like all phases of the human mind valuation may be regarded either in the individual or in the collective, or public, aspect; these two, of course, being aspects merely, which all phases of value, human-nature or institutional, present. Public valuation is the process viewed in a large way, as it goes on in the general mind, in its actual complexity of growth. In studying it one looks for broad features, with no special regard to persons. Private valuation is the same thing observed working itself out in the individual mind; it is a particular phase of the collective process that for various reasons may have an interest of its own. The distinction is the same as that between public and private opinion, the one being a collective, the other a particular view of a common whole.

Of these phases public valuation is for many purposes the more important. It is the real thing, the big thing, in which other phases of value find their relation and significance. In the widest sense it embraces the genesis, competition and organization of particular values; you aim to see the value movement as a living and various whole, of which all particular values and kinds of value are members. It is a real drama, with continual conflicts, crises and dénouements. It may be too large to grasp satisfactorily, but at least we should recognize that nothing less affords an adequate basis for understanding the past or predicting the future. If we consider the valuation of particular objects of any sort, such as, let us say, the program of socialism, the works of Bernard Shaw, or Mr. Roosevelt's leadership; or of such staples of the stock market as wheat or New York Central shares; we may see that the position of these objects can be understood only with reference to the larger drama of valuation in which they have their parts: particular prices and judgments are not enough, we must see the interworking and tendency of the whole. "The play's the thing" and the function of the object in the play.

Next to this, if we must be content with a cross section, is the dynamic situation, the state of the play at a given time, made up of many cooperating and conflicting factors from the interworking of which the future must emerge.

I suppose, for example, that it is the ability to grasp the course or state of value in this large way that distinguishes the financier from the mere speculator, the statesman from the mere politician, or the competent critic of literature or art from the mere reviewer. Indeed it is apt to be what distinguishes the capable man from the incapable in any field. It may be said in general that the power to grasp process, to see the drama of values, is the height of the practical. It is what we all have to do in the real work of life, and the man who can do it has breadth, caliber, general capacity, can take responsibility, and does not require some one else to show him what to do.

Private valuation is a particular phase of public valuation, and one cannot be understood without the other. The individual in forming his special estimates, no matter how peculiar they may be, is working with material he gets from others' suggestions and impressions that come from the mental currents of his time and from the general stream of history. This material he works up in his own way, always at least a little different from that of any one else and sometimes a great deal. In proportion to the importance of these differences he exerts a special influence upon values in the general movement of thought. The tendency to ignore exceptional individuals, and consider only groups, is a serious error. The non-conformer, though he stand alone, is often the most significant fact in the situation, and may prove to be that one who, with God, is a majority.

Private valuation, then, stands in no opposition to public valuation; it is, even in the extremes of non-conformity, a phase of the same process. The idea of an essential opposition between the two can arise only when public valuation is, wrongly, identified with value conventions or institutions. With these private valuation may easily be at variance.

Of course this large view of the process, which I call public valuation, should by no means be confused with institutional valuation. The latter is that part of the process whose explanation must be sought in those special tendencies of institutional life which often depart so widely from the simpler workings of human nature. Institutional valuation has its public and individual aspects like any other social phenomenon. The good churchman, in expressing the views of the church, may be expressing himself as truly as he does the institution; but it may be that his self is so institutionized as not to express human nature.

It is not uncommon, however, to think of public value, or, as it is usually called, social value,⁽³⁾ as that which is fixed by some institution, or other formal process. There is something in this left over from those mechanical theories of society that could not see any unity in human life except this unity took a mechanical *forma contract*, a creed, a government, or the like. The public or social must, then, be the institutional, the conventional, and this was set over against the individual, who was thought of as becoming social only by some such combination. I trust that I need not linger to refute this outworn idea.

The institutions, we may note in this connection, usually have rather definite and precise methods for the appraisal of values in accordance with their own organic needs. In the state, for example, we have ancient institutions of choice, which include elaborate methods of electing or appointing persons, as well as legislative, judicial and scientific authorities for passing upon ideas. The church has its tests of membership, its creeds, scriptures, sacraments, penances, hierarchy of saints and dignitaries, and the like, all of which serve as standards of value. The army has an analogous system. On the institutional side of art we have exhibitions with medals, prize competitions, election to academies and the verdict of trained critics: in science much the same, with more emphasis on titles and academic chairs. You will find something of the same sort in every well organized traditional structure. We have it in the universities, not only in the official working of the institution, but in the fraternities, athletic associations and the like.

It is also noteworthy that institutional valuation is nearly always the function of a special class. This is obviously the case with the institutions mentioned, and it is equally true, though perhaps less obviously, with pecuniary valuation.

The application of these principles to the latter I hope to take up upon another occasion.⁽⁴⁾

1. The human-nature values, of course, vary much less than the institutional values. Thus fashions vary infinitely, but conformity, the human nature basis of allegiance to fashion, remains much the same.
2. B. M. Anderson, Jr., *Social Value*, p. 116.
3. I prefer the former term in such connections because the use of "social" to denote collective aspects, in antithesis to "individual," perpetuates the traditional fallacy that the individual is not social.
4. A paper dealing with some phases of pecuniary valuation will appear in the *American Journal of Sociology* for January, 1913.

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