

TRADITIONS AS MORAL ANCHOR IN AN AGE OF CRITERIONLESS RELATIVISM

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Summary

This chapter examines the grounding of value theory by the two leading schools of moral praxis - traditional Marxism, whose onto-axiological framework is explained as inadequate in principle, and MacIntyre's state-of-the-art Virtue Ethics, which is shown to lack the universal moral ground it seeks. Class morality, practices of excellence, character virtues, moral narratives, and human powers are one by one shown to entail evil outcomes if not accountable to life-value standards.

5.1. The De-Grounding of Philosophy

As explained in the prior chapters, schools of moral theory since the turn of the twentieth century have been dominated by meta-ethics without moral substance. Fine-grained arguments about the nature of ought-claims and taxonomy of received theories have been central. In recent decades, anti-foundationalist and postmodern perspectives have been more fashionable, but whatever the mainstream currents, all have eschewed or denied any universal ground of value.

In short, a deep pattern of moral de-grounding has developed across schools - not only across the analytic-continental divide of Western philosophy, but as a zeitgeist of global cosmopolitan culture.

5.1.1. Religious Fundamentalist Shift at the Same Time

On the mass level, economic, ethnic and religious fundamentalisms have mushroomed to fill the moral vacuum with unexamined certitudes in place of sophisticated emptiness. “Culture wars” pitting these trends against one another have become endemic in our era - not only Judaic-Christian versus Islamic and religious versus secular, but global-market versus any alternative.

5.1.2. Money Sequence Rule beneath Conscious Moral Bearings

This actually ruling onto-axiology is not questioned in the media or graduate schools, but overrides as a totalizing system of private money-capital and commodity cycles expanding across borders as the vehicles of its universalization. Although these private financial and commodity circuits increasingly govern the globe with no purpose beyond their own growth, public policy and value theory assume the regulating money sequence as a necessary given.

In this situation, the question of how to live - the classical problem of philosophy since Socrates in the West and Confucius in the East - dissolves into the issue of ‘how to compete in the global market’.

5.2. Practice-based Ethics: From Marxism to Single-Issue Politics

Practice-based ethics seeks to re-link with people’s moral concerns. At the most socially challenging, traditional Marxism seeks to transform the ruling social order from money-capitalist to communist-worker ownership relations. Yet since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, the choral view has been that ‘Marxism is dead’. In axiological profile, the once-Marxian or socialist opposition has undergone a diaspora into anti-war fronts, feminist and gay movements in and out of the academy, green social politics, philosophical communitarianism, and so on.

In all, we can best understand this sea-change as a normative shift from class struggle and socialist choice to single-issue ethics and movements and ethics which do not challenge the ruling money-sequence system. As analysis explains in *The Global Crisis of Values*, it governs from behind as a regulating value syntax, not open to alternative.

Its meaning is straightforward but not questioned - to add ever more value to self and society by more money-sequencing via more commodities for sale to more members of the global consumer class. Thus whatever ecological or other meltdown results, the response is in terms of this value system itself, however absurd - for example, more transnational trade to solve the impoverishment of 40% of the world, or profitable new markets in carbon-pollution credits to reverse climate destabilization. Deeper value bearings in ecological and social life support systems themselves cannot be recognized from within this regulating logic of value meaning.

5.2.1. Marxism and Morality

An implicit Marxian morality has been almost alone in confronting this ruling value system with an oppositional practice, but itself avoids the language of value or ethics. Moving beneath rampant ideological distortions of its meaning, the organizing principle(s) of this powerful doctrine at the level of human action may be defined in one sentence: Whatever scientifically promotes the interests of the proletarian class and its revolutionary mission to transform society to communism is good, and whatever retards it is bad. For this view, economic-class position normally determines which side one takes, but revolution, it is believed, is inevitable in any case.

Thus working class action in accordance with the requirements of productive force development is the principal concern in acting for better rather than worse. The inner moral meaning identified here is unique and unprecedented. Its defining features systematically distinguish it from agent-relative (individual) and meta-ethics - that is, mainstream analysis - on three levels: (1) its grounding of obligations in social structure and productive development, (2) its class agency of good action and (3) its purpose of revolutionizing rather than presupposing the world's capitalist value system.

5.2.2. Class-Bound Morality

McMurtry (1978, 1981) develops Marx's implicit ethical principles using Marx's own immense corpus as a textual basis. He seeks to decode the implications of Marx's position for what his class-based analysis leaves out - the individual-agent morality in which received normative theory is alone interested.

Yet it is clear that Marx himself explicitly dismisses morality and moral theory as mere "ideology" behind which lurk "bourgeois interests" or, more generally, "ruling class interests". Morality and moral theory for this view are a kind of cover-story rationalization which philosophers perfect as a reigning system of illusion.

5.2.2.1. Universalizability of Moral Principle as an Onto-Axiological Requirement

What is not considered by his view, however, is that the class content of ruling moralities and the universalizability requirement of any authentically moral position - one that is applicable to everyone in all situations - are in contradiction. If the doctrine is class-biased, it cannot in principle be a universal or true ethic.

On the other hand, Marx thought the proletariat's class interests were ultimately the

interests of all, and so this is his implicit answer to this onto-axiological problem. Yet this is not an answer which takes into account the essence of any conscious ethic as distinguished from a sectarian program - intention and action in accordance with a principle of good which is universalizable across all individuals and groups. This is a concern that did not bother Marx. From his standpoint, class position determines or (in the workers' case) should determine what people decide.

“Methodological collectivism” is the subsequent term of art for this idea, although this too misses the point of the universalizability requirement of authentically ethical principles. Without it, we can never achieve an ethic that holds across different cultures and interests.

5.2.3. Methodological Individualism or Collectivism: A False Dilemma

As to whether “methodological individualism” or “methodological collectivism”, self or class analysis is to be followed, this poses a false dilemma. Marx was unquestionably a methodological collectivist in analysis, essentially dismissing individual freedom as an issue within class-divided society; while mainstream ethics and moral philosophy repudiate this position in principle as a sinister error.

Both sides perform an either-or reduction, assuming one view or the other is true, but not both. This underlying logic of exclusive disjunction governs across schools of thought from the ancients on. In life-value onto-axiology, the resolving position is that both individual and collective forms of agency and analysis are essential to understanding: and for both, the universalizability of ethical principles is what distinguishes them from mere local mores or special-interest demands. It is just this universalizability condition of a true ethic which is most challenging to fulfill – to identify a regulating principle of life which is good for all across time, not just one group or a majority within a restricted space-time.

Marx's historicism ruled out such a possibility: although he does continually imply a meta-ethical principle, that it is always good for a society to develop its productive forces. Nonetheless he sees this development as inevitable not chosen - what necessitates revolutions once productive forces have outgrown ownership relations. In one way or another, then, Marx repudiates moral philosophy and ethics in method and substance. Moral positions, for Marx, are merely ideological, claimed universal only to validate them, and determined by the ruling class mode of production.

5.3. The Over-Stated Principle of Ruling-Class Determination of Society's Morality

Marx seems right to claim that in fact historical moralities have expressed the collective interests of the ruling-class owners of society's means of production (whether in a slave, feudal, capitalist or Asiatic modes of production). More exactly, the dominant moral codes and theories of historical societies have been systematically partial to ruling-class interests insofar as their effective demands always conform to and never contradict the reigning structure of control of a society's means of life reproduction. This principle is not rigorously formulated by Marx and Marxists, but spells out the confirmable

meaning of the controversial doctrine of the ruling-class determination of a society's moral order and ideological forms.

Yet it does not follow from the sectarian ruling moralities of historical societies or even the class determination of their justifying theories that moral principles in themselves are false and distorted. This is a non-sequitur which blinkers out the possibility of a life-coherent ethic which is universalizable across individuals and classes.

5.3.1. Impartial Life-Value Morality: The Marxian Gap

Redundant distortion of a society's moral order and ideas by ruling-class interests does not mean that a supra-class morality is impossible because such moral positions have long existed - like the moral doctrine of universal equality propounded since Mo Tzu (479-438 BCE).

When Marxism implies that any morality or ethic at all is a "mask for class interests", it overreaches its claims of class determination. As we have seen, life-value onto-axiology rules out any such partiality in principle by its defining requirement that only coherently inclusive life interests are valid. This is the universal ethic which is in part anticipated by the motto "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs", but Marx's reiteration of this principle (originally from Charles Fourier) moves beyond his own historical-materialist argument. He does not derive this principle from proletarian-class interests, nor from productive-force determination. Nor can he. No such moral principle can be deduced from them. This is the missing normative core of Marx's theory.

5.3.2. Recognizing Missing Choice Spaces and Avoiding Oversimplifications

We need also here to distinguish between the truth of a theory and the interests of those who benefit from it. It could be a true theory (like the mechanical theory of steam power) and still benefit one class's interests much more than others by its implementation. It is, therefore, mistaken to think that even a theory in the interests of ruling owners is necessarily biased.

More deeply, ruling class interests however powerful may not determine a society's regulating moral principles in the long run. Society's deciding moral choice can go against these ruling interests - as with the abolition of slavery, limitless working days and child labor in Marx's nineteenth century itself - all life-value gains in society's moral order. This capacity of a society's value system to evolve beyond the dominant class interests of the day is of ultimate importance. That Marx's revolution-bound theory paid little heed to such onto-axiological evolution is a defining major limit of his position. No oversight could be more significant. This analysis explains why in *The Lost Social Subject: Evaluating The Rules By Which We Live*.

5.4. Value Theory Completeness: Towards Unlimited Validity

This brings us to an ultimate challenge to any general theory of value, including Marx's. Analysis must distinguish between whether a theory of value covers only one or some

domains of value - true only up to a limit – and one which coherently covers all domains. A general theory of value to be true in the strong sense must have unlimited validity, and there is no question that Marxian theory does not have this explanatory power, or pretend to it e.g. why a sunset is beautiful, or how to comprehend personal mortality.

5.4.1. Beyond Marxism: A Value Theory for All People and Domains

Many theories have claimed a universal value position, but so far we have seen that none achieves it. Typically, value theories are partial both in their conformity to the ruling value system and in their coverage of only some value domains. In contrast, the Primary Axiom of Value, which is explained in depth in the next chapter, formally defines such a principle to apply across individuals, societies and domains with no limit of validity.

5.4.2. The Limits of the Labor Theory of Value

Marx does conceive of a value theory at the highest level of generality - “the labor theory of value”, a general theory of value he inherits from classical Political Economy and its first proponent, the moral philosopher Adam Smith.

Yet this theory of value is in principle incapable of subsuming very central domains of value. Ecological value and natural beauty, for example, are excluded a-priori, and the ultimate value fields of inner life investigated in the coming chapters do not exist for it.

5.4.3. From Labor-Value to Life-Value Theory

That life value reaches far beyond what human labor can produce is not comprehended by the Marxian value theory. One can certainly agree that labor-value is utterly essential, but know its profound limits. This is why life-value theory both includes what Marx one-sidedly excludes (natural and inner fields of life value), while also ruling out all any labor which does not produce or help to produce life means (labor to produce non-enabling objects). Marx’s labor theory of value blocks out both of these very fundamental value distinctions..

Whether one is pro-or-anti Marxian in politics, his value theory is radically inadequate. It is for this reason in part that social movements and systems in Marx’s name have been life-value insensitive and one-dimensionally economic in agenda.

5.5. A Grounded Post-Marxian Value Theory: Internal vs. External Goods

Another onto-ethic which is anchored in practice and community, but in a traditional rather than revolutionary direction is Virtue Ethics. In Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981), this major school of normative philosophy is developed in the very directions that other contemporary ethics and normative theories fail to offer. It is morally substantive, practice-based and culture-critical. Reasoned at a high level of sophistication and wide grounding in how people live and believe they ought to live, MacIntyre’s ethical theory reaches back to Aristotle, and seeks to provide a ground to

moral and value judgment across historical time.

Confronting what almost all of his predecessors and peers have averted their eyes from, MacIntyre's argument is critically alert to a corruption of values in the contemporary epoch: namely, the pervasive structuring of people's motivation and action by extrinsic rewards in place of the "internal goods" of human practices and excellence at them. "Consumerism" is a well-known term for this syndrome, and MacIntyre seeks to penetrate its value-system core.

5.5.1. Anatomy of the Basic Value Theory

In his distinction between "external" and "internal goods" lies the defined ground of MacIntyre's "unitary core concept" of value. The organizing argument and explanation of this positive concept of worth is found in a central section of his study (pp.175-240), which is organized by the following inner logic of value analysis.

5.5.1.1. Internal and External Goods

External goods" are goods such as "prestige, status, power and money" or, in a word, "worldly success", which are won or sought as rewards or payoffs of activities.

"Internal goods", in direct contrast, are goods internal to practices such as physics, art, medicine, athletic games, and philosophy which are enjoyed within these activities as goods in themselves.

For example, a child whose reason to play chess is to win candy seeks an external good. A child who finds goods specific to chess in trying to excel at it has discovered internal goods.

5.5.2. The Global Market Order as Value System of Competing for External Goods

External goods, MacIntyre argues, are the goods pursued by the modern individual in the liberal market. We may explicate the meaning here at the social-structural level which moral philosophy avoids. As with the indiscriminate child, external goods like money and commodities alone matter. Prices within market competition decide all values there are. In MacIntyre's terms, a competition for 'external goods', money and commodities, defines this value system.

5.5.3. Virtue Ethics: Traditions, Practices and Excellences as Internal Goods

Internal goods, in direct contrast to external goods, are intrinsic to complex, traditional practices, and are achieved by "the pursuit of excellence in these practices" in terms of which the virtues and character must be defined and explained. The moral tradition within which MacIntyre's value theory fits as its contemporary exemplar is called "virtue ethics"; or, in its concern with the relational fabric of social forms of life, communitarianism.

5.5.4. The Unseen Limits of the Theory

The first problem is that there are many internal goods which are not found in received practices and pursuits of excellence - like the enjoyment of a sunset. Moreover, what are conceived as the internal goods of practices may be not be goods at all, but life-destructive bads - as we see ahead. The value theory is thus too narrow and too broad at once. Most deeply, it validates institutionalized evils not seen, as explained in more depth from Section 5.9 on.

5.6. The Rise of the Story and the fall of Truth

The core concept of value in MacIntyre's vision is a "practice", that in terms of which "goods" and "virtues" are understood.

Yet who is the moral agency accountable for the practices s/he is a participant in? The answer is unclear. The practices are morally prior to those who practice them. What then is the moral subject who enters this and that practice? MacIntyre's answer is that the "narrative unity of a human life" is the subject unity across the practices s/he performs. This is the overarching framework of value meaning within which practices are pursued by persons, and provide the moral content of their lives - their 'life stories'.

5.6.1. Is Life Really a Story?

Let us pause for reflection on this abiding notion of life as a story in which the unity of life and character of a person - or of a society - lies in this narrative unfolding of meaning and value. The 'story' as the unifying framework of people's lives - and, by extension, nations themselves - is the organizing idea.

5.6.2. Universalization of the Story Model

Today, postmodern and anti-foundationalist philosophers go further than MacIntyre. They say that even theories of physics are "stories" - a conceptualization which has spread wide in the Anglo-American world since its prominence in Richard Rorty's *The Mirror of Nature* (1979) and *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1987).

5.6.3. Rejection of Truth Follows

When everything that is organized into a unified meaning is made into a 'story', the distinctions between truth and falsehood, fact and of fiction, have no evident hold. MacIntyre does not resolve this problem, or even raise it. He is not so radical as Rorty and others in totalization of the story model, but it follows from it that even what is predictively confirmed by experimental evidence, as in the laws of physics, is but another 'story' from another perspective. Within this framework of understanding, one story is as good as another. "Meta-narratives" which universalize one story are thus bad. The entailment is that truth is dropped as a concept or issue.

For postmodernism, individual preferences and interpretations of value disperse as an irreducible plurality of perspectives and meanings or 'stories' where only difference

remains - a philosophical school to which we will return.

5.6.4. The Tidal Shift from Objective Foundations to Stories

MacIntyre never examines these implications of the narrative model of unifying explanation and meaning. He offers this framework of unification to account for what binds the diverse events and practices of a person as one life. Yet the pervasion of the story model in other philosophies and ways of understanding calls out for careful examination of its implications.

There is a long trend involved - unraveling prior foundations to perspectives with no ultimate ground of accountability. Not only postmodernists have led here. The 'anti-foundationalist' movement in which scientific and positivist theories have been explanatorily transformed into "paradigms" and, more radically, "stories", has sedimented into a near dominant outlook. It has been differently argued in a wide range of forms, and has also been very popular among graduate students and political science as well as literary theory.

Even within philosophy of science itself, Thomas Kuhn (1922 -) and, more frontally, Paul Feyerabend (1924-94) - have argued in such works as *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn, 1962) and *Against Method* (Feyerabend,1988) towards varieties of radically anti-foundationalism and relativity of knowledge claims to the scientific community in which they occur. Feyerabend has argued that the structures of science are like games which people play better and worse with no objective truth shown independent of the game.

5.6.5. The Story Model Reflects a Growing Sea-Shift to Egoic Subjectivism

The upshot of this many-sided movement, beginning with early break-outs like Ludwig Fleck's insider classic *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (1929), and carried most prominently by post-1970 literary postmodernism, has been a sea-change in philosophical fashion and roots. In the recent three decades, 'the story' has increasingly replaced the truth - philosophy's objective since the ancients - as the fashion in determining meaning.

On the face of it, his position develops a traditionalist position of Aristotle-Aquinas pedigree for whom objective practices, standards and virtues are humanity's proper value anchor. MacIntyre's reworking of the structure of human life into the form of a "narrative unity" is, however, unintentionally revealing of the philosophical period he writes through. Since he is most of all concerned to restore traditional standards of virtue and excellence to moral discourse and understanding amidst the "criterionless drift" of contemporary thought, his movement to the narrative as that which binds together a moral life is very striking. Unlike the soul of the Catholic tradition with which he is affiliated, a story is a human artifact which may invent as its author pleases without accountability to fact. The problem in story-telling of what Freud referred to as "His Majesty the Ego" is simply blinkered out.

5.6.6. Relativist Zeitgeist

MacIntyre's silent shift from the traditional Christian concept of an ultimate and eternal soul as the ultimate ground of the person to a "narrative of a life" tells much of our era. A zeitgeist of relativism has emerged by which he displaces even the soul by a story construction.

This is the undecoded meaning of "the death of God" - the death of foundational values themselves. We will return to the self-contradictory nature of this generic philosophical position ahead. In philosophical overview, the long-term disintegration of traditional value bases begins with Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) and Marx's *Capital* (1867), and is made explicit by Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). Darwin's work unmoors human conceptions from a divinely created natural order; Marx's work challenges assumptions of a naturally free and just capitalist market system; and Nietzsche's works mock the very idea of morality as absurd. The unraveling of value grounds is the inner meaning of our age.

5.7. The Unseen Moral Imperative: A Value-Ground beneath Stories to Evaluate Them

In indication of the macro trend away from any underlying moral ground, the world's most distinguished standard bearer of virtue ethics adopts the story-line as the unifying framework of moral meaning. A recognizable example of where it can lead moral life useful here.

Suppose the bonding story is of a nation as a supreme power, a story which unifies the purposes and actions of its people to act out as their moral identity in war. The people find their value anchor within this story as the ultimate meaning of their lives, and are so bound until they are no more. This 'story of a people' is familiar across cultures and ages, perhaps never more than now. There seems to be a near-instinctive demand for a binding story for people to make sense of themselves and, MacIntyre is most of all clear, to motivate their excellence at practices. This is a meta-structure of human thought which goes back to the ancient epics and legends of warriors across cultures, and to original people's fire stories before that. MacIntyre's virtue ethics and traditionalist communitarian ground stand for a very deep-seated and common way of thinking about our values and moral anchor.

The unasked question of the bonding narrative of identity is, what story and practice?

5.7.1. A Bonding Story Requires Life-Ground Accountability

Much can go very wrong without people knowing it if their unifying story and practice are not tested by some deeper value than being heroic against others inside their stories. If the stories they tell themselves lack coherence with and accountability to wider objective life requirements, they are life-blind to this extent. Without a more ultimate value foundation, the unifying story and its identifying practice are cut loose from any limits on heroic self conceptions by destruction of adversaries inside the narrative. Ethnic and national stories have, in fact, been murderously megalomaniac in the main -

as individual narratives without the same eco-genocidal force.

With no deeper ground or boundaries of restraint to which a story and its practices are responsible, the “moral narrative” may be a narcissist dream at deadly cost to what is not valorized by it. With no anchor or compass of life value to steer by, the story people tell themselves can include God blessing its destruction of other peoples and lording it over those who remain – from Canaan to Iraq. More deeply still, a people or peoples can despoil the earth itself in their narrative of “power over Nature” and “global development”.

5.7.2. The Center of the Story as a Hero

MacIntyre as others following the story paradigm never discern these deep-structural dangers. Yet reason needs to recognize the deep fault line not seen, especially when conceived as a moral narrative. At bottom, the story paradigm has no limiting distinction between truth and falsehood, or between good and bad beyond itself. If the empire or the self tells the story with itself as the central character or hero - the terms are equated - then opposition becomes the villain by the logic of plot structure. What resource in a narrative unity is there for self-correction if no deeper moral ground exists than this?

If reality intervenes to refute the ruling story with growing disasters, how is it related to as fact if it does not fit the story? In our own era still unfolding, for example, the story line of the people who are “the last best hope of mankind” does not change even as life support systems collapse under the practices and excellences its moral narrative declares as ‘our way of life’.

5.8. Defining Traditional Practices and Their Excellences as Value Ground

This meta-problem is not considered by MacIntyre or the larger story-loving community. In the case of his argument, however, traditional practices provide the core of moral meaning. Can this grounding resolve the problem?

5.8.1. Objective, Criterial Bonding across Generations by Practices of Excellence

In MacIntyre’s richly articulated conception, practices constitute the living body of any “moral tradition” through the progressive “excellence” at them which they cultivate, and by the “central bond” of the relationships, authority and law they embody. Any civilized community, he argues, is properly so bonded and so developed by its practices.

Thus in this virtue ethics, there are objective practices and excellences which provide the criterial substance lacking in other story models of meaning and value.

5.8.2. Evolving Practices as the Substantively Unifying Idea of Values

Objective traditional practices and evolving excellences at them are the core of this ethical framework. It is in terms of their goods, it is argued, that the good life is found.

A practice is exactly defined by MacIntyre in the following central statement of his value theory:

By a practice I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (p. 175)

Thus “throwing a football with skill”, “bricklaying” and “planting turnips” are not practices, but “the game of football”, “architecture” and “farming” are, as well as “politics in the Aristotelian sense” (ie., excellence of governance in achieving the well-being of the body politic).

5.8.3. Testing the Value of Practices as a Moral Guide to Our Lives

Two very important general claims here will not be challenged, but accepted as well demonstrated: that internal goods rather than external goods provide the values worth pursuing, and that external goods posed or sought as end-in-themselves corrupt these practices.

Yet is this a sufficient guide to the good life?

5.8.3.1. The Universalizability Criterion of Value

Moral philosophers often talk about the test of universalizability of any ultimate value claim, what was discussed above with Marx’s class ethic. This criterion, we may recall, formally derives from Kant’s categorical imperative: “to always will the maxim of your action as a universal law”.

Here we may pose another form of the universalizability test to MacIntyre’s core central value of human life by a simple question: Are there important goods or values which are not found in human practices? Do they, that is, have a universal reach which includes all values?

A still stronger question to ask of this or any general theory of value is: are there goods wholly outside or even opposite in nature to the goods of practices?

If the answer to either of these questions is yes, then practices cannot be a sufficient value guide and may badly mislead us. The same tests, of course, can be given to any value theory at all.

5.9. Life and Light: Fields of Life Value beyond Excellence at Practices

Let us consider a description of value by the philosopher David Wiggins in a presentation to the British Academy 1976 entitled “Truth, invention and the meaning of life”.

“A man comes at dead of night to a hotel in a place where he has never been before. In the morning he stumbles out from his darkened room and, following the scent of coffee out of doors, he finds a sunlit terrace looking out across a valley onto a range of blue mountains in the half-distance. The sight of them - a veritable vale of Tempe - entrances him. In marveling at the valley and mountains he thinks only how overwhelmingly beautiful they are. The value of the state depends on the value attributed to the object.” (Wiggins' emphasis)

5.9.1. Nature's Beauty Independent of Human Excellence

Wiggins' last italicized sentence is not proven, and has in any case been shown as false. There are objective values that are not dependent on anyone's attribution to them - including beauty, as we saw in Section 4.12. The nature of objective values in general has been explained in Section 3.13. The point here, however, is that there need be no practice involved in the profound experience of natural beauty, whether one takes a projectionist view of values (as Wiggins does) or not (as life-value onto-axiology).

5.9.2. Practices of Excellence Are Rehearsable

A property of practices is that they must be practiced to be good at them. Practicing is rehearsal, and the more the practice the better the likelihood of excellence in it.

The good internal to the activity of beholding the beauty of nature or fields of light, in contrast, can be experienced as sublime independent of any rehearsal. The good is physically given, and the relationship to it does not demand projection of the beholder. Rather it requires a laying open to it. The subject enjoying the good only opens to what is there.

5.9.3. Another Realm of Good

If we now consult the definitive account of practices, we may reiterate all its criteria and find all are entirely inapplicable to this experience of natural beauty. That is, the value of the entrancing mountain view requires no “socially established co-operative activity”. It involves no human endeavor to “achieve standards of excellence”. And it seeks no “systematic extension of human powers or conception”.

The sublime beauty of the light and mountains points to a realm of good not dependent on any human practice or even projection.

5.9.4. How Even Non-Interfering Human Practices and Nature's Beauty May Conflict

It is not only a question of the intrinsic value falling beyond the reach and understanding of a rule-governed practice whose excellence is internal to it. The value of a human practice on the one hand, and deep experience of natural beauty, on the other hand, can easily conflict - not in the obvious sense of the practice, like logging, harming natural habitat and growth by cutting it down, but by a more subtle route.

Consider for example a student in the practice of philosophy, a paradigm of highly evolved traditional practice with over 25 centuries of exemplars extending excellence at it. The young philosopher is returning from the university library walking across an ancient old growth park.

The mind is busy with contending arguments, possibly unseen technical oversights, directions of analysis and theoretical integration, textual grounds and exegetical problematics, new connections of principle - - - in short, with all the internalized critique and dialectic of the practice of philosophy. He is devoted to its ends and goals, trying to live up to its standards of excellence, and concerned above all to make some contribution which can in some way “extend the powers and conceptions of the field”.

Yet although a person may be immersed in a paradigmatic practice in the deepest sense of its meaning, even in humanity’s oldest art of knowledge and wisdom, another horizon of value remains unseen that connects him to a more immense value whole.

5.9.5. The Life-Ground Becoming Conscious of Itself

The student of philosophy is suddenly overwhelmed by what he has been blind to - the boundless field of life and light opening infinitely beyond the practice, the life-ground conscious of itself through the person’s awareness of it. An earlier Section, 4.12 explains the inner logic of what is experienced as beauty. Here the laying open of consciousness to what is there is the moment to spell out - when the fields of life and light are directly revealed without mediation by anything else. With this undivided infinite, language can only point. What is opened to by the philosopher can only be suggested by what it includes - the richly blooming green of leaves and the rivuleted wood of trees reflecting the late day’s rays in a dazzling vision of pristine light and growth with the boundless whole implicate in each moment of it.

5.9.6. Value Choice: To Open or Close to the Life Ground and Its Range of Possibility

This opening and closing of consciousness to what is fully there is not ineffable in value. Cognitive science may have no place for it, but it can be axiologically understood. Its degrees of possibility range from background awareness to the epiphany of a lived infinitude. We explore this range of life possibility in the next chapter, but note now that the same material reality is there whether blinkered out or experienced as sublime.

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Biographical Sketch

John McMurtry holds his B.A. and M.A. from the University of Toronto, Canada and his Ph.D from the University of London, England, and has been Professor of Philosophy at the University of Guelph for over 25 years and University Professor Emeritus since 2005. He is an elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and his many articles, chapters, books and interviews have been internationally published and translated.