



Henryk Elzenberg

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On the concepts of value and duty

Excerpt from the essay

The words *value* and *valuable* are used – as a more detailed examination reveals – in two completely different senses. In one of them, a “valuable object” is an object that corresponds to someone’s desires or needs, or more generally to “desires, needs, tendencies, aspirations, abilities” perhaps even “the conditions of existence and duration” of someone or something; this extended interpretation is the one we find in E. Goblot’s *Logic of Value Judgements*.¹ In the first instance, it is the value of the kind of correspondence between the nature of the thing being evaluated and the desires or needs of the moment (commonly referred to as “the ability to satisfy them”); in the second, it is the somewhat vague correspondence between the same nature and the equally vague “nature” of some other object. Thus, for example, power has value for an ambitious person, science for an engineer and for technology itself, food for every living being, but also “the right interval for someone with a trained musical ear” (Goblot’s example), and even – in the broadest interpretation – dry air for crystals that would disintegrate in the presence of moisture. Value in this sense is relative by definition; it is always a value for someone or something, and if it is for someone, it does not mean “in someone’s eyes”, “in someone’s belief”, but whether for someone or for something, it always indicates a certain adaptation, a certain usefulness.

¹ E. Goblot, *La logique de jugements des valeur*, Paris 1927.

If the term *utilitarian* could be freed from its hedonistic connotations, it would be the most convenient term for describing value understood in this way; in fact, it cannot be avoided. Other terms have been tried: for example, J. Laird, in his *Idea of Value*,² speaks of “elective” values, i.e., values “by choice”. Despite the various nuances that this concept can take on (Laird’s point of view, for example, is not entirely identical to that of Goblots), it is, after all, a concept on which it does not seem too difficult to reach agreement in principle.

This is not the case with the second meaning of the word *value*, which must be clearly distinguished from the first. Centuries ago, the author of *Letters to Lucilius* had this in mind when (LXXI, 33) he distinguished and contrasted two categories of “good” things: those that have *pretium* (are ‘valuable’) and those that have *dignitas* (“dignity”); adding that we do not attribute “dignity” to what is *necessarium* (‘necessary’) or *in diem utile* (“useful for the moment”). Have we managed, since Seneca’s time, to formulate this contrast more precisely? The words *perfection* or *nobility*, like the word *dignitas*, can only serve as a preliminary orientation, and it remains a matter of pure terminology when Laird, fearing the ambiguities inherent in the traditional term, attempts to speak of *excellence* – something like “illustriousness” – instead of “perfection”.

In Polish, perhaps the best way to describe this would be “szacowność” (“respectability”); however, the best purely technical term – emotionally neutral and unbiased – would probably be “perfect value”. However we express it, one thing is clear: judgements about perfection – whether dignity, respectability, or perfect value – are certainly not the same as judgements about utilitarian or elective value. When we speak, in general terms, of the “superiority” of someone or something – a dog over an earthworm, a human over a dog, a civilized human over an uncivilized one, “spirit” over “matter,” the eternal over the transient, the pleasure of reading a good poem over the pleasure of drinking a good cherry liqueur – we are employing precisely this ineffective, non-utilitarian concept.

And now we arrive at the following claim: perfect values are more important than utilitarian values, “More important” in at least two ways, which we will now explain.

First of all: perfect values are not, by definition, “relative” in the same sense that utilitarian values are relative. Are they relative in the second sense already mentioned above – i.e. that a thing can be valu-

² J. Laird, *The Idea of Value*, Cambridge 1929.

able, respectable, perfect, or noble only in someone's opinion or feeling, and may, without the possibility of resolving the dispute, not be so in someone else's opinion or feeling? That is already a problem. The author of these remarks, based on what are probably not entirely superficial arguments of others and his own, thinks that they are not. Their double absoluteness would constitute a certain primary advantage.

The second will take us further, and it consists in the fact that between the perfect value and that which is most authoritative *de iure* for human conduct, which we call "duty" or "obligation", a relationship exists that clearly does not exist between the latter concept and the concept of utilitarian value. A value based on the satisfaction of needs or desires will never in itself justify any duty: for needs and desires are sometimes contradictory, and if we accept that one should be satisfied, then the other, which is contrary to it, should not; that is, we cannot say, "it is necessary, so it should be". Judgements of perfect value, on the other hand, serve as a completely sufficient justification for judgements stating that "it should be so and so", that "it must be so".

A given ideal value, whether it can be realized or not, should in principle be realized. For now, this is only a theoretical obligation; however, if a conscious agent is found who is capable of actually realizing it, then for that agent (taking into account various real situational factors that complicate the matter) a concrete obligation arises, in time and place, to actually implement the desired state of affairs. Therefore, if we disregard the situational factors mentioned only in passing here, which are obviously very important in practice, human behaviour (*de iure*, of course) is entirely subject to the norms resulting from the fact that perfect values do exist and are binding. And this is also the main advantage of perfect values over elective ones; in the event of a conflict, they are not equal partners; perfect values prevail *de iure*. Therefore, anyone who has created or accepted the concept of perfect value will consider it disproportionately "higher" and "more significant" than elective value. One may even be inclined to reserve the honourable title of "value" exclusively for it. This is also the meaning of the word *value* in the title of this communication, and it will continue to be used in this sense whenever we use it without additional qualifiers.³

³ In the further part of the essay, I attempted to demonstrate that "valuable" can be analysed as meaning "such as it should be". But – among other less serious objections – in the same text I made the following argument: if one does not rely on the concept of value as primary, one cannot explain why things should be one way rather than another. Duty would fall "from the sky"; the imperative

“to be this or that” would be completely groundless. This prompted me to significantly modify the view I presented in this work and which I later held for a long time. It is not possible to describe the changes that have taken place here; my view has become much more complicated.

Reports from Meetings of the Warsaw Scientific Society,
1935. Section II. – Own translation and partial adaptation
of the French original: *Les idées de valeur et d’obligation*.