

Value, Morality, and Ethics

Dustin M. Feigerle
College of Arts & Science

What is the nature, origin, and ontological status of what we call 'value'? This article argues that value does not exist objectively, but is a purely non-objective phenomenon. Most importantly, I seek to clarify the concept of value and change the orientation of value toward the individual by considering Mackie, Ross, Spinoza, Hobbes, and recent theories regarding group selection. Finally, I conclude by asserting that any form of "greater good" must rest on and be considered at the level of the individual.

I. Introduction

When I discussed the nature of value, I observed that value is nothing inherent in goods and that it is not a property of goods. But neither is value an independent thing. There is no reason why a good may not have value to one economizing individual but no value to another individual under different circumstances. The measure of value is entirely subjective in nature...

– Carl Menger, *Principles of Political Economy* (1871)

The word “value” is problematically vague. Most traditional definitions for the meanings of value are predominantly financial in nature. Throughout the history of economics, various attempts have been made to develop theories of value (for goods) based on such criteria as worth in exchange or worth in use. There are certain problems, however, in using exchangeability or usefulness as criteria to measure value, not the least of which is the difficulty in finding a common unit in which to measure value. Money does not work, not only because the value of money itself fluctuates, but because the value of goods in terms of money is itself relative. Various attempts have been made, by Adam Smith, David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, and Karl Marx, among others, to develop a labor-cost theory of value, which typically use the disutility of labor, or the cost of labor to the worker, as a universal constant by which to measure value. This criterion depends, however, on so many institutional and psychological factors—such as training, aptitude, personal habits, and preference—that this measure does not seem to work, even when speaking in purely financial terms. How, then, can one measure the true value of a good? The problem is, in fact, unsolvable: economic value is “entirely subjective in nature...”

I begin with this economic discussion of value in order to illustrate a specific case of the general type of problem encountered when dealing with the subject of “value.” The type of value of interest here is a much more esoteric type of value which might be called *metaphysical value*. “Metaphysical” means existing distinct from the physical world; something metaphysical is, by its very nature, not directly accessible to empirical analysis or explanation. Other words which could be used to describe such value are *absolute*, *universal*, *containing formal reality*, or *objective*. Just as in our economic example, we would want to understand the nature of and even measure such value, were it

to exist. For that we would need standards, as J.L. Mackie writes, “Given any sufficiently determinate standards, it will be an objective issue, a matter of truth and falsehood, how well any particular specimen measures up to those standards” (1977, 129). As in our economic example, assuming such standards did exist, a unit of measurement would also be necessary. We can see from further reflection that a method would also be needed to do the measuring. These standards, units, and methods, however, do not exist.

Because the literature discussing such criteria and their foundations spans many volumes and centuries, this project does not allow for a full discussion of these issues. I find it important for this paper, however, to take a position on the nature of values: my position is based on J.L. Mackie’s (1977) assertion that “there are no objective values” (122). This includes moral values. This claim does not rest solely on epistemological problems, or even on problems involved in finding an adequate method of measurement, but rather on the impossibilities encountered when attempting to find a standard upon which such so-called *metaphysical values* might rest. There exists no evidence of such a standard, nor any need to posit such a standard. This paper is written, then, from a subjectivist point of view with reference to value: i.e. nothing is valuable in itself. Value exists solely as a psychological phenomenon; for value to exist, it needs a conscious entity doing the evaluation, even if that value is subconsciously experienced. Consciousness, then, is the locus of all value, with value varying as to the specific nature of the experiencing being.¹

Mackie outlines several important arguments for a subjective view of value and, hence, moral value. Two strong arguments he employs are the “argument from relativity” and the “argument from queerness” (Mackie 1977, 136-140). According to Mackie (1977), the argument from relativity “has as its premises the well-known variation in moral codes from one society to another” which “seems to reflect people’s adherence to and participation in different ways of life” (136). The patterns of activity and valuation observed in various cultures differ markedly in relation to a culture’s history and environment, which points to value judgments (insofar as there is variation) as being contingent and not objective. Still, Mackie admits, there is a counterargument to this position which holds that even if superficial cultural practices differ, they rest on and are simply manifestations of an underlying, objective moral code. This places restrictions, on what such a code could be, were one to exist.

The argument from queerness is more striking, and contains both a metaphysical and an epistemological component. The metaphysical side of the argument holds that “if there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe.” The corresponding epistemological argument holds that “if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else” (Mackie 1977 137). It is very difficult to imagine how objective morality could be woven into the fabric of the universe, separate from any evaluation. In reference to the epistemological question of how one could sense metaphysical values, were they to exist, Mackie further asserts: “a special sort of intuition is a lame answer, but it is the one to which the clearheaded objectivist is compelled to resort” (Mackie 1977, 138). This intuition represents the only possible epistemological access to value. This intuition can be emotional, rational, or some combination of the two. For many moral realists, the emotions (or conscience) provide a sort of sixth sense by which we recognize absolute right and wrong; for rationalists such as Kant, on the other hand, the moral law (categorical imperative) rests on the non-contradictory status of potentially universal moral claims. Both the argument from relativity and the argument from queerness make it difficult to fathom the nature—and even the existence—of objective values.

¹ Inter-subjectivity *is not* objectivity, but merely agreement to set interpersonal values and goals in reference to similar perspectives.

These epistemological issues can become quite complex. *Once we recognize the nonexistence of objective values, however, we can easily sidestep the complex epistemological issues involved in being able to detect such values, which takes its most clearly pronounced form in the meta-ethical question: How can we know the moral law?* I hold that there is no need to delve further into this sphere, however, for objective values do not exist. To support the claim that such metaphysical values do not exist, and that value is only an experienced state of individuals, an explanation still must be given regarding the origin of false yet seemingly ubiquitous beliefs regarding the objective status of values. As we shall see, the common belief in objective values (including moral values) results from misinterpretations of psychological, social, and emotive phenomena.

Mackie provides an excellent description of how these misinterpretations arose out of evolved, linguistic patterns of objectification. Mackie's explanation of how the false common-sense belief in objective values initially arose from linguistic patterns of objectification is, perhaps, his most important point. Specifically, Mackie claims that "by suppressing any explicit reference to demands and making the imperatives categorical we facilitate conceptual moves from one such demand relation to another." Categorically using such words as 'good', 'must', 'ought', and 'should' is a mistake. Terms such as these "are traces of this pattern of objectification" by which the hypothetical reference of such terms has become categorical (Mackie 1977, 141). This is a form of the pathetic fallacy, or "the tendency to read our feelings into their objects" (140), which stems from the fact that "it is fairly easy to confuse the way in which a thing's desirability is indeed objective with its having in our sense objective value." As we can see, language has come to contain and perpetuate implicit commitments to and belief in objective, metaphysical values, particularly moral values, although values do not exist outside of subjective experience.

Confusion obviously remains (even in the academic community) as to what, exactly, this might mean. Let us continue by clarifying what is meant by moral realism: moral realism is the view that actions are of positive or negative value in and of themselves, separate from any perspective. This is equivalent to saying that morally worthy actions are those actions which conduce toward the fulfillment or attainment of objective non-moral values. Moral values, as we can see, are directly related to values in general, in that whatever we hold to be of value provides the foundation for those actions which we consider moral and immoral: those actions which reinforce or support our more general value claims are considered morally worthy or unworthy. Morality, it becomes clear, is merely an action-oriented species of value. As Steven Ross (2004) describes moral realism:

Morality purports to do a certain task. It seeks to order or structure competitive or cooperative relations among people in light of some fact deemed central about us. There are at least several interestingly different ways to do this, and several interestingly different facts about persons a theory could reasonably take up and worry about (our rationality, our capacity for pleasure and pain, our capacity to instantiate some fully formed life, and so forth), but not just any fact will do, and not just any rule will be an example of ordering relations between us (Ross 2004, 417).

What this means is that we take certain parts of our essence to be of value (rationality, pleasure or pain, etc.), and structure moral life relative to those value(s) we deem central. Ross (2004) goes on to identify his position as "global provincial moral realism" (420), by which he means a belief in the existence of morality (moral realism) as relative to the wants and needs (provincial) of the human species as a whole (global). There are certain facts about human nature, he believes, which structure our desires in similar ways, giving rise to (for the most part) globally inter-subjective agreements regarding the optimal way of life—at least in certain obvious cases such as Thou Shalt Not Kill. I

do agree with him that this is the case, although I deny that these optimal ways of living are objectively moral. Ross (2004) himself is not sure, as his conclusion clearly shows:

All we can ask for is that these [our] wants, at their most elemental, be specified in ways that are so tied to a minimal conception of what we are that to turn away from them is to risk incoherence. And to those for whom this is just not enough, then I guess there is no moral realism (421).

Ross (2004) essentially admits that no metaphysical universals exist, arguing for a restricted definition of “moral realism” which amounts to a high degree of inter-subjectivity based on similar essences, or a “global provincial moral realism.” This is not, however, what people mean when they use the word *moral* in its ordinary usage: in its common usage, the words moral and immoral contain an inherent metaphysical component—in large part stemming from religion—which cannot be overlooked or eliminated. People *want* to be moral realists, for they fear the consequences of completely denying the existence of objective morality; they are used to speaking in a certain way about right and wrong, moral and immoral, and feel uncomfortable about giving up their implicit metaphysical commitments, if only out of linguistic habit.

To clear up this confusion, which I take to constitute a large portion of the debate regarding not merely moral realism, but value realism in general, I wish to introduce a distinction between *morality* and *ethics*. Since *morality* clearly contains an implied metaphysical component, and no metaphysical values exist, then *morality* (with all that the word commonly entails) does not exist. Of course, the belief in morality (as well as the belief in metaphysical values) exists objectively, but this belief is—according to this definition of morality—objectively false. Ross’s criteria cannot be enough for anybody. We will shift our focus from the empty concept of morality to the richer, truer concept of *ethics*, which is the science of how to live well according to our natures and in relation to other beings. This recognition has significant ramifications for other terms we use such as *rights*, *responsibilities*, and *obligations*, which similarly do not exist in any metaphysical context, and are entirely ethical and legal phenomena.

Ethical judgments are made upon the basis of an organism’s nature and desires. Each organism, based on its nature, contains a certain telos, or driving purpose, to which its values correspond insofar as these beings are conscious. Value is intrinsic only insofar as a conscious being experiences its evolved urges toward fulfilling its telos. The values themselves need not necessarily be consciously apprehended, for valuing beings see the world as through an evaluative lens. Interestingly, proponents of environmental expansionism often claim that even non-conscious beings such as plants contain a telos and, hence, have intrinsic value. I reject this position on the grounds that value must be *experienced*. Plant growth does not properly represent a valuing telos, for plants have no nervous system and, therefore, do not desire to fulfill their telos: plant growth is a mere biochemical process, void of experience. Creatures consider those things to be good, or of value, which tend toward the fulfillment of their telos; those things to be bad, or of negative value, which interfere or complicate this fulfillment; and those things to be neither good nor bad which do not affect this goal in any way. From the nature of value as existing *only for experience*, we can see that each being’s telos determines how it values, regardless of whether or not it is aware of its evaluations. Valuing exists implicitly in experience, even when not consciously recognized as such. Furthermore, this value is a creation, not a true understanding of the world as distinct from experience.

So what we have, then, is a world with innumerable and infinitely complex physical, chemical, and biological processes occurring, some of which produce the experience of consciousness. Consciousness, furthermore, admits of degree, in that more highly-developed

organisms (i.e. dolphins, pigs, etc.) exist as the locus of greater degrees of intrinsic value-ability: insofar as these organisms are conscious, their inherent teleological set carries within it the determination of their value set. Furthermore, the more self-conscious these beings are, the more they are aware of their values and goals. Organisms for the most part act according to desire, emotion, and instinct, and have not developed complicated linguistic (or other types of) representational systems enabling them to analyze and plan the most effective ways in which to fulfill their desires. Human consciousness in particular has—through an accelerated process of cultural evolution—developed representational systems which allow it to model the world (including itself) to increasing degrees of accurateness and complexity. It is the unique ability of humans, then, to be self-conscious—that is, to cultivate an understanding of their values and goals—and, hence, to identify which values and goals are essential to them.

II. Spinoza's Theory of the Emotions

We can build upon this foundation by considering how Baruch Spinoza developed a naturalistic doctrine of man's essence, especially in his *Ethics* (1677). Spinoza recognized as early as the mid-seventeenth century that there is no good or bad, save relative to the judgment of valuing beings. Expounding on this observation, Spinoza develops the idea of *conatus*, or “the actual essence of the thing itself” (108). More specifically, a being's *conatus*, or essence, is exactly its natural strivings.

Now, for Spinoza, everything has such a *conatus*; even physical objects such as a table or a chair possess their own particular *conatus*. Perhaps we could think of this striving for such objects as existent, insofar as the physical, electric, and gravitational forces acting on each other to hold the various particles in the form of a chair and preserve the chair's properties, but this striving occurs without consciousness, and therefore without valuation. Like plant growth, this does not represent a value-generating *telos* or *conatus*, in contrast to the value-generating character of conscious experience. For this reason, I will be looking solely at the *conatus* of conscious beings.

Looking at the desires and values of certain types of creatures allows us to infer inductively a creature's *conatus* with reference to the type of being it is. Once this inductive step explaining the source of value has been made, we can better know what life suits that creature's *conatus*. In order to recognize and identify the *conatus* of any given conscious entity, we must analyze what that entity values and, hence, what it considers good and bad. Because of the difficulties surrounding an investigation of interior mental states such as desire and value, however, looking at a creature's *behavior* proves most fruitful for attaining this knowledge and helping us fulfill that *conatus*.

Through observation, we can come to understand the *conatus* of most creatures with relative ease. For homo-sapiens, however, it is much more complex. Let us begin by seeing how Spinoza conceptualized man's *conatus*. Just as for other creatures, a driving urge operates in man to live and act in accordance with his nature. In striving to preserve and fulfill this essence, however, man becomes affected by the objects and occurrences of the world. These influences cause emotions to arise in man, which are as great in number as there are causes of these emotions. Each different object of influence causes a distinct emotion to arise in man, which can be seen as corrective urges meant to keep man's strivings in line with his/her *conatus*. Because, however, all possibilities become realized according to Spinoza, there are an infinite number of emotions; it is impossible to develop a complete understanding of all the emotions. Spinoza (1677) does the best he can, systematically defining these infinite emotions, making the claim that “all emotions are related to desire, pleasure, or pain” (138), a point from which he begins building a model of human emotions in order to increase pleasure and reduce pain.

To understand Spinoza's model, let us first look at his definitions of the emotions in order to determine exactly what he means by desire, pleasure, and pain. Spinoza (1677) defines *desire* as "appetite accompanied by consciousness of itself, and [that] appetite is the very essence of man in so far as his essence is determined to such actions as contribute to his preservation" Furthermore, he states that desire is "the very essence of man in so far as his essence is conceived as determined to any action from any given affection of itself" (141) and that "desire is the very essence of man; that is, the conatus whereby man endeavors to persist in his own being" (163). It becomes quite clear, then, that desire is equivalent to man's conatus, or essence. Desire is the engine, or driving force within man, and includes appetite, will, desire, and urges of all types (141).

To understand what Spinoza means by *pleasure* and *pain*, as well as how this relates to man's essence, we must understand pleasure and pain according to Spinoza's own definitions. Spinoza (1677) defines *pleasure* as "man's transition from a state of less perfection to a state of greater perfection," and *pain*, vice versa, as "man's transition from a state of greater perfection to a state of less perfection." But what, then, does Spinoza mean by 'perfection'? The first thing to realize is that, for Spinoza, there is no perfection or imperfection considered solely in themselves. What we recognize as perfection and imperfection in our daily lives is merely the relative state of similar kinds of beings: perfection and imperfection exist only relative to a conatus, or to the essence of specific things. A thing is more perfect, then, the more it lives in accordance with its nature, and less perfect, the less it does so. Other words Spinoza uses to describe this are virtuousness, or (when referring to intellectual love of God/Nature) blessedness. *Pleasure* and *pain* refer, respectively, to an enhanced and decreased capability of a being to live in harmony with its conatus or, in other words, to fulfill its desires.

Spinoza develops a much more detailed account of specific emotions, defining them all in terms of desire, pleasure, or pain, which he identifies as the fundamental, primary emotions. For example, love and hatred become, respectively, pleasure and pain which are "accompanied by the idea of an external cause" (142). Similarly, inclination and aversion are pleasure and pain, respectively, which are "accompanied by the idea of a thing which is indirectly the cause of the pleasure" (143). Other sets of emotions such as hope and fear, confidence and despair, approbation and indignation, over esteem and disparagement, etc. are similar structures resting upon pleasure and pain. Gratitude, benevolence, anger, revenge, and cruelty, likewise all rest on desire. In Spinoza's view, furthermore, all human emotions occur only contextually and for consciousness.

Although it would be easy to progress further in detailing Spinoza's definitions of the emotions, as Spinoza himself says, it is sufficient "to understand the common properties of the emotions and the mind so as to determine the nature and the extent of the mind's power in controlling and checking the emotions" (138). Instead, we will try to give an account of how, by using emotional concepts, Spinoza's system makes possible man's "controlling and checking [of] the emotions." Understanding the emotions includes understanding the forces causing those emotions. The greater one's general understanding, then, the more power one's mind has over—that is, the more resistant is one's mind to—outside, influencing forces, and the less passive is one's experience. An understanding of the emotions themselves is requisite for being able to recognize the forces acting on man. This is why Spinoza spends a substantial portion of his *Ethics* describing the nature of the emotions in general, separate from specific causes, for he hopes that those who read his *Ethics* will obtain tools which help man to notice, understand, and better process each emotion in its own specific, idiosyncratic context.

Insofar as humans are unaware of the causes of their emotions, says Spinoza, they are influenced by forces outside of their understanding and, hence, are negatively affected. On the other hand, insofar as humans come to understand the causes of these emotions, this understanding

allows them to more effectively fulfill their true natures. Naming these states *passive* and *active*, respectively, Spinoza writes:

By emotion (affectus) I understand the affections of the body by which the body's power of activity is increased or diminished, assisted or checked, together with the ideas of these affections. Thus, if we can be the adequate cause of one of these affections, then by emotion I understand activity, otherwise passivity. (103)

Emotions, then, are causal forces which influence the body's "power of activity," by which Spinoza means the tendency of the body to act in a rational manner according to its own nature or, in other words, to act in a manner beneficial to itself. The less awareness that person has of the causes of his/her emotions, then more passive a person is, and therefore the more often the person will act in a manner contrary to his/her nature. Only after a person has developed a system for cognizing the emotions can that person recognize the passions as they are occurring and have power over them. Conceptual understanding of one's emotions and their causes is necessary to avoid passive states: awareness of our emotions and their origins helps us more effectively reach fulfillment.

We will break off here in describing Spinoza's system in order to consolidate our gains. Emotions, all specific forms of the primary emotions desire, pleasure, and pain, functionally help humans (and at this basic level, other creatures as well) fulfill their evolved and inherited conatus. We must learn to understand and be aware of our emotions rationally in large part because acting impulsively can have particularly painful consequences when considered in the context not of the individual, but of societies. Finally, it is important to note that Spinoza held rational man to be man's most beneficial ally, an assertion which has profound implications not only for how man behaves, but also—as we shall see—for the very development of man's conatus.

III. The Makings of a Social Animal

Let us now analyze how introducing the others into the mix alters our view of man. People band together and form groups largely because there is strength in numbers. As Hobbes writes in his *Leviathan* (1651), the natural state of man is a state of war, in which people band together to enhance their chances of survival:

The final cause, end, or design of men, (who naturally love liberty and dominion over others,) in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves, (in which we see them live in commonwealths), is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby; that is to say, of getting themselves out from that miserable condition of war, which is necessarily consequent (as hath been shown), to, the natural passions of men, when there is no visible power to keep them in awe, and tie them by fear of punishment to the performance of their covenants (649).

Although the validity of Hobbes' claim that men love "dominion over others" is questionable (at least considering domination as an end in itself, and not a means to other ends such as exploitation), the gist of his position is clear and accurate. Forming alliances, or commonwealths, has many advantages. Besides the sheer strength of numbers necessary for survival against neighboring groups, cooperation also provides the foundations for division of labor and of knowledge, which tend to enhance overall productivity and quality of life. Without providing an exhaustive list, it suffices to say that the gains from cooperation are varied and quite real. Because it

is difficult to form societies in which people do not act against the good of the group for personal gain, general agreements regarding rules of conduct are needed, which must also somehow be enforceable if they are to carry any weight.² Customs usually perform this function.

Customs of this sort admit of two forms: norms and laws. Norms, or the non-codified habits regulating behavior in societies, usually form first, and are especially visible in smaller groups. Laws could be considered a set of formalized norms meant to prevent unwanted deviation from society's interests. Furthermore, laws typically emerge out of social norms as societies grow. The growth of customs and cultural practices at their origins are, so to speak, bottom-up and not top-down. War, hegemony, and imperialism (for example, the present day's capitalistic, cultural imperialism) certainly operate in the reverse direction. Because people are not infinitely rational, but possess a significant emotional component, these customs (especially norms) are often regulated solely by emotion—rather than an elaborate cost-benefit economic analysis—and are typically accompanied by inherited, ingrained cultural beliefs. These beliefs are formed in childhood, primarily as a result of mimicry and linguistic development; both the physical practices and the language of peoples manifest the beliefs of their culture.

It can still be said, however, that insofar as people's actions are not determined by a consideration of the consequences (for themselves or for others), but rather from a feeling of "right/moral" or "wrong/immoral," these acts, as well as judgments made about the acts of others, are a product of one's inherited cultural values. Since laws simply cannot cover the breadth of human activity in all its detail, non-formalized norms remain as a sort of social glue binding people together, and function through such institutions as religion, education, family, etc. The more one deviates from accepted cultural practices—both informal and formal—the more negative reinforcement from society one typically receives, with punishments ranging from, say, a disapproving glance for walking on the wrong side of the sidewalk, even death for homicide.³

Societies are able to survive, then, only because people at an early age become inculcated with a certain cultural ideology. At least initially, this ideology functions primarily affectively, and not through rationally calculated expectations of negative consequences (either legal or social). We can see a certain conservative principle at work here, in which the inability to foresee all consequences of one's actions results in informal, general rules-of-thumb shaping behavior. Of course, the categories of formalized, codified laws and of informal norms often blend and overlap, so that laws often work according to this conservative principle and people act in accordance with the law not simply to avoid consequences. Finally, these implicitly evaluative cultural practices operate primarily without reflection and can be considered a form of cultural gene, or "meme," a term Richard Dawkins coined in *The Selfish Gene* (1976).⁴

Cultural evolution has outstripped biological evolution in pace: whereas it takes biological evolution thousands or millions of years to exhibit substantial effects, the cultural evolution observed in humans in the past few centuries alone—since the enlightenment and industrial

² Incidentally, the lack of consequences is a significant problem for moral realists. Moral realists assume that a morally wrong action is wrong in and of itself, even if it will never be punished or even recognized. This description of actions as 'wrong' is empty and without force as long as there are no consequences for 'wrong' actions. It is a practical virtue of the belief that it deters behavior which would otherwise go unpunished, but an ontological weakness in that the belief simply lacks true meaning.

³ As we can see, the actions and beliefs of individuals are shaped to an enormous extent, both formally and informally, by the society in which they are raised. Before moving on to discuss group selection and psychoanalysis, it is instructive to briefly discuss cultural relativity, particularly with regard to man's biologically evolved conatus. It is true that cultures across the world practice different customs, which poses the question of which traits, if any, are common to mankind? Do human beings truly share a conatus and, if so, how much of one do they share? How much are their strivings identical? The answer depends on what view one takes of human nature. If one holds that the greater part of man are his biologically evolved needs for food, water, shelter, and love, then the human conatus is fairly uniform throughout. If one believes that meeting these needs merely provides the foundation for the expression of our *true* natures, say in social life, hobbies, art, or literature, then human beings are truly very different and unique creatures.

⁴ Richard Dawkins' treatment of memes is arguably responsible for the extension of evolutionary theory from biology to the psychology or, in other words, for the founding of evolutionary psychology.

revolution—have produced more drastic changes than have perhaps ever been observed according to traditional Darwinian evolution. It is because of this cultural evolution that, today, considering man's *conatus* as biological and the sole source of man's values proves inherently reductive: the human race is unique in that its cultural practices often demand a renunciation of fulfillment of personal desires for the good of the group, whether this renunciation is consciously chosen or habitual in nature.

A theoretical trend has emerged toward increasing determinism regarding the “choices” man makes to live peaceably within society: the tendency to be social animals is rarely a conscious choice. This last line of thought—that societal well-being rests upon individual renunciation of desire—follows the traditions of several notable intellectuals, including Sigmund Freud, who applied psychoanalysis to cultures in his *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930). More recently, Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson have posed the question of a social consciousness in the context of group selection and the evolution of psychological altruism, which is discussed in the following section.

IV. Group Selection and Social Consciousness

Sober and Wilson, in *Unto Others: the Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (1998), put forth a compelling case for the evolution of psychological altruism. By psychological altruism, we mean actions in which one knowingly and willingly sacrifices personal gain for the welfare of others. Although it has been known in evolutionary theory for quite some time that altruism toward genealogically related individuals (particularly toward one's children) generally exists as a function of relatedness—the closer the genealogical relatedness, the higher the level of altruism predicted—altruism within groups of essentially unrelated individuals has been difficult to explain. *Unto Others* attempts this task by appealing to group selection, which was a taboo subject in evolutionary psychology for about thirty years until the 1990's. The first part of the book puts forth a model of group selection that allows for the evolution of altruism on a strictly biological level, and is a prerequisite for the viability of the book's second section, which explains how group selection gets expressed psychologically. Ultimately, Sober and Wilson put forth a theory of multilevel selection, or a pluralistic model under which selection operates at various levels of the biological hierarchy, including (but not necessarily limited to) genes, individuals, families, and groups.

According to Sober and Wilson's biological model; “genealogical relatedness is not required for group selection to be a strong evolutionary force” (134). In addition, “individuals belong to the same group because of their interactions,” not the degree of relatedness (92). The emotional impetus for humans (and other types of animals) to form groups has at its historical basis the evolutionary advantage of cooperation; it is precisely for this reason that groups do not have to be familial groups in order to develop altruistic affinities for each other. This constitutes a supplement to Dawkins' conception that the only form of selection operates at the level of individual genes and memes—on the biological and cultural levels, respectively. I assume the accuracy of this biological model of group selection, taking it as an important methodological presupposition.

The theory of group selection remains largely uninformative without an explication of the psychological principles enabling it to function. The theory holds that certain psychological tendencies, states, and norms have developed that both support and express group selection. Our emotions, particularly our ability to empathize, are seen under this theory as evolved *proximate mechanisms*, or the medium through which nature influences our conduct. An example of a proximate mechanism would be the fear of being ostracized from or punished by society if one does not follow social norms, which “function largely to make human groups function as adaptive units, even when their members are not closely related” (173). By looking at how our emotions affect and

are conditioned by our evolutionary success, then, we can gain insight into the causes and nature not only of our actions, but also of ourselves.

We should consider the implications of group selection as put forth by Sober and Wilson. Assuming the biological model to be accurate, there is an innate biological tendency in mankind toward in-group solidarity.⁵ This tendency operates as a sort of foundation, or substrate, onto which specific cultural loyalties become mapped; whereas some components of our natures are directly and unalterably inherited biologically, group solidarity operates in a highly flexible manner which tends to preserve the individual by causing an affiliation with a stronger group. We can see how altruism functions as an extension of Hobbes' individualistic thought, but with the addition of bio-culturally evolved proximate mechanisms to aid in cooperation. This cooperation increases within-group survival rates at the price of individual sacrifice for the good of the group.

An extremely interesting and pertinent question implied by this theory is the question of *whether or not a "social consciousness" is merely metaphorical*. At first glance, this might seem to be an absurd idea. Isn't a "socially conscious" person—one who has cultivated a social consciousness—merely a term we employ to describe individuals who are aware of the issues facing the societies in which they live? Yes, but we can also mean something more when we speak of a "social consciousness." Instead, we often mean the overall tendency of social systems to *act* as though they are conscious beings—to react to stimuli and other social systems as if in the process of fulfilling their conatus. As far back as the ancient Greeks, city-states were described, by analogy to humans, as a body with distinct parts of society comprising the various organs. The question remains, however, is this only analogous or metaphorical? Because value exists only as it is consciously experienced, were the answer to this question found to be affirmative, it would have profound implications for how we view our ability to value.

When we combine modern neuroscience and research into artificial intelligence with Sober and Wilson's theory, we realize that the existence of an actually conscious, self-aware social consciousness is, in fact, a possibility. The experience of our consciousness—so far as we know—arises somehow from the biochemical processes in our brain. Potassium, calcium, and sodium ions (among others) are released into the synaptic channels between our neurons, creating connections which, when taken as a whole, somehow gives rise to the emergent property of our consciousness. We know that, when certain areas of the brain become damaged, various mental faculties will be affected; when the frontal lobe is damaged, for example, it usually causes serious and lasting alterations in our personalities. We have learned that certain evolved, interactive processes in complex systems give rise to the experience of consciousness. From the beginnings of biological evolution, small molecules have gathered together with other small molecules, creating larger molecules such as DNA. Certain forms of marine algae developed, followed by other forms of plant life, the first land animals, and then humans. It is not implausible, then, that the next "phase" in evolution is occurring as we speak in the form of self-conscious societies with the inherent capacity for valuing. Perhaps we could think of the internet as analogous to development of increasingly efficient synaptic connections within this social 'superbrain.' When taken to an extreme, one could even consider ecosystems as self-conscious or, as with the Gaia theory, the earth itself. The limiting case of such a view would be a sort of pantheism,⁶ in which the entire universe is self-conscious, with infinite grades of self-consciousness burgeoning within. For now, let us stick with a "social consciousness." Sober and Wilson's theory of multilevel selection allows for evolution to

⁵ Although the theory also predicts corresponding out-group hostility, this is not the primary subject under consideration at the moment. Rather, this inquiry is intended to open discussion of a social consciousness.

⁶ This would, by the way, be highly consistent with Spinoza's naturalistic, monistic metaphysics.

operate at various levels of the biological hierarchy, with altruism being the linking factor in what might be the next phase of evolution—group selection.

It is exceedingly difficult to *know* definitively whether or not a self-aware “social consciousness” exists. I suspect that this implicit possibility is a major source of belief in god/s, greater meaning, or higher powers. If, in fact, such a consciousness does exist, it is difficult to know what this would mean for our values. Would we have any sort of call to value the progression of this evolution? Insofar as each level possesses a consciousness, then, it would also possess an innate ability and tendency to value. So long as we wish to equate ability to value with ability to be a locus of meaning, then the greater the level of consciousness, the more meaning would be found within it. If, then, our considered, ultimate goal is to create a world as rife with meaning as possible, then our values and strivings would obviously have the furtherance of this evolutionary process as its goal or, in other words, the greater good of the emerging next level of consciousness.

If, on the other hand, we assume that there is no literally self-aware social consciousness, then we must accept that, although memes such as altruism and other proximate mechanisms tending toward cooperation have evolved, societal values do not give rise to any sort of greater value. In this case, group selection and the development of social systems preserving the group would only be valuable to an extent equal to the sum total value-ability of each independently conscious being involved; in other words, in terms of value the whole would not be greater than the sum of its parts. In this case, if our considered, ultimate goal is to create a world as rife with meaning as possible, then the focus must be on how a “social consciousness”—considered as an abstraction—can improve individual lives. These two views imply vast differences in how we value—do we value the society for the sake of the “greater good”, or the society for the sake of individual welfare? I think it an accurate description to say that the only way to think of and pursue the greater good is by keeping in mind the primary goal of individual welfare. The greater good cannot emerge without the individual parts of which it is composed; the healthier and better-functioning are the individuals, the stronger is the emergent whole.

With the help of Mackie and Ross, we have determined that metaphysical values and moral realism do not exist. Rather, values are present only within the experience of conscious beings. Following Spinoza, we recognize that the essence of the human and original source of value is desire. Ultimately, humans live for the fulfillment of desires and, admittedly, for the fulfillment of their own desires. There is nothing ‘wrong’ with this in any sense; it is entirely natural. On Hobbes’ social contract model, people band together to preserve their lives and better satisfy their desires. Under Sober and Wilson’s multi-tier selection model, humans have evolved in such a way that this social contract is not entirely formal. Instead, evolved emotions (proximate mechanisms) cause humans to sacrifice personal satisfaction of desires in order to protect group integrity, and not always in a manner which recompenses that individual for their sacrifice.

With the help of these theorists, I have shown that human values are shaped by the society in which they live, for the most part in an unconscious manner. These societal values can direct natural biological desires in specific pathways, or, when they conflict with biological desires, instantiate themselves through uncomfortable emotions such as shame, guilt, and feelings of obligation. By recognizing the source of these emotions in the context of our nature as both egoistic and altruistic, we can learn to live more fulfilling lives by attending to this dual character of our experience. Living ethically—living well—means that each individual considers for themselves how best to achieve a balance between egoism and altruism within the context of their idiosyncratic social role.

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Dustin M. Feigerle is a fourth-year student majoring in Philosophy and German Studies in the College of Arts & Science. A native of Knoxville, Tennessee, he is the recipient of Harold Stirling Vanderbilt and National Merit Scholarships and has been consistently honored on the Dean's List. His academic studies are highlighted by receipt of the Department of German Language and Literature's Phillip H. Rhein Memorial Prize and study abroad experiences in London and Germany. After graduation as a member of Phi Beta Kappa with Honors in Philosophy and High Honors in German Studies, Feigerle will pursue a master's degree in the Department of Philosophy at Tufts University.