We often refer to values and ascribe value properties. We refer to injustice and the sublime and say of one thing that it is valuable or of an action that it is evil. Or so it seems. But perhaps there are no values. If nihilism about values (sometimes called “axiological nihilism”) is correct, then there are no tragedies, no murders, no sacrifices, no injustice, no costs, no goods, no evils, no vices, no ugly films, no mediocrity, no heroes, no geniuses, no saints and no heroic deeds. “And a good thing, too,” say some. But of course they should not say this if axiological nihilism is correct. For then nothing is a good thing. Nihilism about values occupies one end of the spectrum of possible views about value (Mackie [1986: 15–41] argues for axiological nihilism about what he calls “objective” values). At the other end of the spectrum there is the view that there are values and objects which have positive and negative values; many of these values are what they seem to be, if experience and ordinary language are any guide, that is, monadic properties of their bearers which are not relative to persons or other animate creatures (Hartmann 1932). Another possibility is that nihilism is false but values are not what they seem to be. Perhaps a murder is just a type of action which is frowned on or is the object of other negative attitudes.

To understand and evaluate axiological nihilism and alternatives to it we should consider the internal structure of (what seems to be) the world of values and value properties and of closely related properties (the first to third sections below), the nature of the bearers of value properties (fourth section), and the relation between value properties and, for example, natural properties (fifth).

Values and value properties

Some objects, we say, have a positive value, others have a negative value, some are neither positively valuable nor disvaluable (they are axiologically indifferent), and some are more valuable than others. Some objects are valuable for you, some are disvaluable for me, some are more valuable for me than for you. If we compare these properties and relations with properties and relations such as ugliness, evil, elegance and being more unjust, then we may say that the former are “thin” properties and relations, and the latter “thick” properties and relations. The thick properties have more “content” than the thin ones. What is the relation between the two?
On one view, being ugly is a determine of the determinable property of being disvaluable. The property of being ugly stands to the property of being disvaluable as the property of being red to the property of being coloured. Similarly, the relation of being more unjust than which holds between two actions, agents or situations is a determine of the relation of being more disvaluable than.

Axiological properties and relations, thin and thick, are often said to divide into the intrinsic ones and the extrinsic ones. A pleasure sensation is intrinsically valuable, pain is intrinsically disvaluable. A pleasure sensation is also intrinsically valuable for its bearer. Sam’s family mansion is intrinsically valuable for him but it is also extrinsically valuable for him – it is worth a lot of money. Intuitively, the value of an object is extrinsic if the source of its value is not to be found within the object and intrinsic if this is not the case. But the distinction between intrinsicalness and extrinsicalness is as difficult to characterise precisely here as elsewhere in metaphysics (see Chapter 26, “Intrinsic and Extrinsic Properties”).

The sublime and injustice are values. If a symphony is sublime or an act unjust, then they exemplify value properties. Values stand to value properties much as numbers stand to number properties and colours to colour properties. In the case of each couple we may ask who wears the trousers: the values (numbers, colours) or the property of being valuable (being equinumerous, being red)? A common view has it that the properties of being good or beautiful are metaphysically more fundamental than Beauty or the Good, for example because values can be constructed out of, are abstractions from, value properties.

Values, like numbers and colours, stand in internal relations to each other. One such internal relation is the relation of axiological height or importance: justice is a higher value than charm, grace is perhaps just as high a value as elegance. These relations are internal relations because their terms must stand in these relations to one another. More contestable examples of internal relations between values are the claims that the vital values of health or life are higher or more important than the values of pleasure or well-being (a claim made by Nietzsche and denied by some utilitarians). Do all values stand in relations of height to one another? Not if some values are incommensurable – for example, the ideal of the English gentleman and that of the Japanese Bushido.

Suppose that the value of generosity is higher than that of pleasure. Does anything follow from such a claim about the relation between the value of one act of generosity and the value of several lifetimes of pleasure? If one thinks that a negative answer must be given to this and similar questions, then one may wonder what the content of claims to the effect that one value is lower than another could possibly be.

**Normative properties**

We may say of a particular action performed by Sam that it is elegant or evil, that he ought not to be doing what he is doing, that it is the right thing to do, that he is obliged to do it, that it is his duty, that he has a right to act as he does, or that it is virtuous. The different properties we ascribe in this way belong to one very large family which, for want of a better word, we may call normative properties. This family comprises value
properties, the deontic property of oughtness, the properties of rightness and wrongness and the properties corresponding to the different vices (foolishness, cowardice) and virtues (wisdom, courage).

What are the differences between the members of the family of normative properties? What are their interrelations?

One type of value relation, as we have seen, is comparative: an object is more valuable than another object, or more valuable for someone than some other object; one deed is more shameful or unjust than another deed. Similarly, some people are more vicious than others. But, it is sometimes claimed, right and wrong, oughtness and obligatoriness do not admit of degrees. Thus Hume says that “right, and obligation admit not of degrees” (Treatise, Bk 3, pt 2, §6).

One difference between values and virtues, on one hand, and the other normative properties, on the other hand, is the variety of the former and the monotony of the latter. One taxonomy of values and value properties distinguishes sensory values, the pleasant and the unpleasant; vital values such as the values of health and life; aesthetic values such as the comic, the ugly, charm, elegance, the ridiculous and dumpiness; cognitive values such as the values of knowledge, truth, consistency and justification; the value of the right, to which we appeal to evaluate positive laws; the values of justice and freedom; the value of the holy and the ethical values of goodness and evil (Scheler 1973; cf. Hartmann 1932: Vol. 2). Similarly, there are many ethical and intellectual virtues and vices (courage, tolerance, temperance, vanity; clarity, thoroughness, narrow-mindedness). Do oughts and obligations exhibit a similar variety? There are different types of ought – for example, ethical, prudential, epistemic, linguistic, political and conventional oughts. That is not to say that “ought” is ambiguous. Nor is it obvious that the property of oughtness is a determinable property which can be specified in different ways. And whatever we say about how the variety of ought should be understood, this variety is less than that of values. Indeed we may think that all types of normative properties other than thick value properties and the properties corresponding to the different virtues and vices are thin properties.

Theories of ethics typically differ in the relative importance they attach to the different members of the family of normative properties. In Kantian accounts what we ought (not) to do (“the moral law”) figures more prominently than in virtue ethics. In some utilitarian accounts of ethics the values of happiness, well-being or desire-satisfaction occupy centre stage. In phenomenological ethics, as in some utilitarian and consequentialist theories, values and value properties are taken to be more fundamental than other normative properties. On one view of virtues and vices, being virtuous and vicious are just value properties. But many accounts of ethical virtues do not make any such claim. They simply say that virtues are goods and vices are evils.

Goods come in many kinds. There are material goods such as land and immaterial goods, for example epistemic goods such as an education or a piece of information. Many goods form the object of economic exchanges. To be a good is to be a good for someone. Sam’s generosity, like his health, is a good for Sam and for some of his friends. What is the relation between goods and values? One answer is that an object is a good for someone only if it is valuable or valuable for him.
Values and other normative properties

What is the relation between values and oughts? Consider

(1) Justice is valuable
(2) It ought to be the case that (justice is realised)

(2) employs the functorial “ought,” which takes a sentence to yield a sentence. This is not the only type of ought. “Ought” frequently takes a predicate to make a more complex predicate, as in

(3) Sam ought to keep his promises
(4) Arguments ought to be valid

The “ought” in (2) and (4) is an ought to be. The “ought” in (3) is an ought to do. One view about the relation between (1) and (2) asserts both

(5) (1) iff (2)

and

(6) If (1) and (2), then (2) because (1).

(6) is an instance of the view that values ground oughts. (Leibniz, for example, defines what is permitted or allowed as what it is possible for a good man to do.) Another view is that (1) and (2) mean the same thing, express the very same proposition. Then (6) must be rejected. Another view reverses the direction of explanation in (6) and asserts that

(7) If (1) and (2), then (1) because (2).

This is an instance of the view that oughts ground values. Finally, there is the view that the use of the functorial ought is a fatal step in logic (Geach 1991), life and philosophy (Prichard 1912), the sort of expression only a politician would employ (Sidgwick called “ought to be” the political ought).

The bearers of value properties

Bearers of value properties seem to come in two kinds: they are either objects or states of affairs. A particular feeling of pleasure or a material good is valuable, and it is disvaluable that the state of affairs that Sam is unhappy obtains. On one view of states of affairs these are the sorts of things which contain properties and which either obtain or do not obtain. Then a state of affairs which obtains is a fact. (According to an alternative view a fact is just a true proposition.) Some philosophers think that the only
bearers of value properties are obtaining states of affairs, that is, facts (Lemos 1994: 20–31). One argument to this conclusion begins with the claim that whenever value seems to be exemplified by an object, it is the exemplification of some non-axiological property by the object which makes it the case that value is exemplified. Then, the argument goes, what is valuable is the fact that an object exemplifies some non-axiological property: the fact that Sam exemplifies the property of feeling pain is what is disvaluable, not his feeling pain. To evaluate this claim we need to look in more detail at the theory of properties and at the connexion between axiological and non-axiological properties. But we may already note the apparent implausibility of the view that only facts can be the bearers of some ethical and many aesthetic value-properties.

Suppose Sam is ugly, and that what makes Sam ugly is certain features of his face. Is the fact that Sam exemplifies these features ugly? It is disvaluable, has a negative value, but is clearly not ugly. Facts, unlike objects, are never ugly or beautiful or graceful. Consider the ethical property of being evil and its opposite, (ethical) goodness. In many philosophical and non-philosophical traditions the bearers of these two properties are said to be persons. Of course, if a person is evil he is evil because of certain properties he has. But it is the person who is evil. If Sam is evil and evil because of a lifetime of cruelty, then it is certainly a bad thing that he has lived the way he has, but this fact is not evil.

**Value properties and natural properties**

What is the relation between value-properties and non-normative properties? Natural properties are one type of non-normative property. But what is a natural property? The properties appealed to by the best natural science is a popular answer. It is a striking fact that textbooks of cosmology and geology never need to ascribe value properties to anything. But Max Weber’s famous assertion that the sciences are by nature value-free has been challenged (Putnam 2002). Poincaré thought that elegance was part and parcel of mathematics. Boltzmann remarked that elegance was a matter he preferred to leave to his tailor. The historian, it is sometimes claimed, has to evaluate. Psychologists and sociologists certainly ascribe evaluations to people. But such ascriptions do not commit one to the claim that anything has a value.

One distinction between value properties and natural properties has to do with what we might call the ontological status of these properties. One view of the ontological status of properties has it that properties are bearer-specific. On this view, if Sam is sad and Mary is sad, then Sam’s property of being sad is numerically distinct from Mary’s property of being sad. According to the main rival view, if Sam is sad and Mary is sad, then there is one property of being sad which each of them exemplifies. In other words, the property of being sad is not bearer-specific. (Bearer-specific properties are sometimes called “particularised properties” or “tropes” (see Chapter 28, “Particulars”).) Friends of bearer-specific properties sometimes claim that these are parts of their bearers. Friends of the view that properties are not bearer-specific sometimes call them “universals.”

There is a third view – some properties are bearer-specific and some are not. For example, a philosopher might think that psychological properties are bearer-specific
but that the properties of numbers are not bearer-specific. Another example of the third view about the ontological status of properties is the claim that natural properties but not value-properties are bearer-specific. In one of the earliest and most influential contributions to twentieth century value-theory, G. E. Moore writes as follows:

Can we imagine “good” as existing by itself in time, and not merely as a property of some natural object? For myself, I cannot so imagine it, whereas with the greater number of properties of objects – those which I call the natural properties – their existence does seem to me to be independent of the existence of those objects. They are, in fact, rather parts of which the object is made up than mere predicates which attach to it. If they were all taken away, no object would be left, not even a bare substance; for they are in themselves substantial and give to the object all the substance that it has. But this is not so with good (Moore 1966: 41; my italics)

Hochberg argues that Moore, in this passage and elsewhere, is thinking of natural properties as bearer-specific particulars which constitute their natural bearers, and of value properties as universals: “Goodness would not then be construed in terms of simple particulars like this yellowness. Rather, goodness is a bona fide universal. This may be the simple but striking difference between natural and non-natural properties. Only nonnatural properties are universals” (Hochberg 1969: 99).

That there is a gap between natural properties and value-properties is one of a series of claims made by Hume about the relation between natural and normative properties. Hume argues that we cannot deduce from matters of fact that some action is vicious or that one ought to do something (Hume, Treatise, Bk 3, §1, para. 1). Similarly, he says, it does not follow from the fact that an object has certain natural, spatial properties that it is beautiful.

Does the exemplification of natural properties imply that value-properties are exemplified? A large family of affirmative answers to this question makes extensive use of the relations of identity, reduction and supervenience, each of which has been understood in different ways (Jackson 1998). Thus it is sometimes argued that value-properties just are natural properties or relations, that, e.g., to be valuable is just to be the object of positive emotions and desires (which are taken to be natural properties and relations). Metaphysicians appeal to identity, supervenience and reduction, not only to specify the relation between natural properties and normative properties, but also to understand the relation between natural or physical properties, on the one hand, and psychological properties or colour properties, on the other hand (see Chapter 49, “Supervenience, Reductionism and Emergence”). But there are two accounts of the relation between natural properties and normative properties which are specific to these two families of properties. The first is the theory of normative necessity, the second is an account of value called “neo-sentimentalism.”

To understand the first theory it is useful to consider one way of unpacking the intuition that there is a large gap between natural properties and value-properties. Suppose someone knows all the natural e.g. neurophysiological facts about feelings of
pleasure and pain, knows everything there is to know about the nature of pleasure and pain. Does he thereby know that pain is a bad thing and pleasure a good thing? Is it part of the nature of pain to be a bad thing? Suppose someone knows all the natural facts about what goes on when \( x \) deliberately inflicts pain on \( y \) for fun. Does he thereby know that actions of this kind are evil? To give a negative answer to these and similar questions is to accept that it is not part of the nature of any natural object to exemplify any value-property. But Socrates necessarily exemplifies the property of being a man in virtue of his essence or identity. And whatever is coloured is necessarily extended in virtue of the nature of colour. Necessity which flows from essence in this way is what Kit Fine calls *metaphysical necessity* (Fine 1994).

If the exemplification of natural properties does not metaphysically necessitate the exemplification of value properties, one possibility is that natural and normative properties are connected by a distinct type of necessitation. According to Fine (2005) normative necessity does this job. Normative necessity is not rooted in the natures or essences of natural or any other objects. It is a type of *de dicto* necessity, unlike metaphysical necessity, which is *de re*. Friends of normative necessity include Sören Hallén (1954: Ch. 6), Husserl and Moore (Moore 1922). Moore’s distinction between two types of necessity is the direct descendant of his distinction, described above, between the exemplification of value-properties and the inherence of natural properties (Hochberg 1969: 124).

Fine gives different examples of normative necessity from the family of normative properties: the badness of pain; the wrongness of war, if the pacifist is right; the connexion between making a promise and being obliged to keep it. Another possible example is one connexion between means and ends. Suppose \( x \) wants to \( F \) and only \( G \)-ing will ensure that \( Fx \). Does it follow that \( x \) ought to want to \( G \)? If so, then it is the non-normative facts about \( x \)’s desires and options which normatively necessitate the fact that \( x \) ought to want to \( G \).

Are these examples equally plausible examples of normative necessity? It is sometimes claimed that if \( x \) promises to \( F \), then he is obliged or bound to \( F \) in virtue of the nature of promises. But then the necessitation is metaphysical, not normative. Even if the fullest grasp of the nature of pain does not involve the information that it is a bad thing, surely one who grasps what it is to be a promise must grasp that to promise is to incur an obligation. Perhaps the difference, if there is one, between the pain-badness case and the promise-obligation case is due to the fact that pain is a natural, psychological item, whereas promises belong to the category of social objects. For on some views of social objects, these have “deontic powers” built into them. Perhaps, too, the view that the promise–obligation connexion is an example of normative necessity overlooks the distinction between obligations and ethical duties. The obligations created by promises are not ethical duties for such obligations, unlike ethical duties, can be transferred from one person to another.

Suppose we grant that exemplification of natural properties normatively necessitates the exemplification of value-properties and so does this without any help from the essence of what exemplifies the natural properties or from the essence of these properties. What sort of connection, we might then ask, holds between properties within the
normative sphere? Perhaps metaphysical necessitation is all we need once we have, so
to speak, crossed the gap between natural facts and values with the help of normative
necessity. If values are the most fundamental type of normative property, then perhaps
war is wrong in virtue of its disvalue. Perhaps the ethical duty to keep one's promises
holds in virtue of the nature of the obligations incurred by promising. Here are examples
of what such a view might entail for three claims often made about connexions within
the normative sphere. (1) If pro-attitudes towards what is valuable (admiration of
courage) are themselves valuable, then this is the case in virtue of the nature of the
pro-attitudes and of the values of the objects of these attitudes. (2) The utilitarian-
consequentialist claim that what makes an action right is the value of the happiness or
well-being produced by the consequences of this action should be understood to claim
that rightness is metaphysically necessitated by psychological states and their values in
virtue of the nature of these states and of their values. (3) We can also give a more
precise formulation of a choice noted above – the choice between the view that values
ground oughts, if anything does, and the view that oughts ground values, if anything
does. The first view should add that values ground oughts in virtue of the nature of
values. The second view should add that oughts ground values in virtue of the nature of
ought. Which of the two views should be preferred? Consider the shamefulness (injustice)
of some state of affairs. It seems plausible to say that such a state of affairs ought not to
obtain because it is shameful (unjust) and that this is the case because of the nature of
shamefulness (injustice).

The second account of the relation between natural properties and normative
properties which is specific to these two families of properties is a popular theory of
value which goes back to Brentano and Herbart and is now often called “the buck-
passing theory” or “neo-sentimentalism”: for an object to be valuable is just for it to be
the case that some affective pro-attitude towards the object and its non-axiological
properties is justified or appropriate (Scanlon 1998; Mulligan 1998; Rabinowicz and
Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004; Dancy 2005; d’Arms and Jacobsen 2006). Neo-sentimen-
talism is not always understood as an account of the metaphysics of value. But if we do
so understand it, then the value of an object is analysed in terms of (a) the non-axiological
properties of the object; (b) psychological properties and relations; and (c) justi-
fication. But justification is often held to be at least partially constituted by deontic properties.
For example, one might think that for x to have a reason to F is for it to be the case that
he may F, that this is permitted. But then the neo-sentimentalist analysis of value
avoids circularity only if deontic norms and values differ in nature. And the analysis is
committed to the claim that deontic norms are more fundamental than values.

Values and formal properties

We noted that “oughts” can take both sentences (to make sentences) and predicates (to
make predicates). In the former case, “ought,” or more precisely “It ought to be the case
that,” is a functor. Functorial expressions express formal concepts. One part of logic,
deontic logic, studies the relations between the deontic functors. Similarly, as we have
seen, there are axiological functors, thin:
• It is valuable that \( p \)
• It is more valuable that \( p \) than that \( q \)
• It is more valuable for \( x \) that \( p \) than that \( q \),

and thick,

• It is just/unjust/shameful/sad/unfortunate/… that \( p \)

Suppose that to each axiological functor there corresponds an axiological property. If the bearers of value are always states of affairs, then value properties are always formal properties. Although functoriality is sufficient for formality, it is not necessary. The property of being a whole and the relation of numerical difference are formal but not functorial. Thus if some bearers of value (for example, as suggested above, the bearers of ethical and aesthetic values) are objects, it might be the case that the non-functorial value properties of such objects are formal properties.

What is the relation between thin and thick value properties? One tempting view is that the thick values of facts can be resolved into thin values together with non-normative properties. A similar claim can be made about the thick value properties of objects. Let us consider the latter claim first. The shamefulness of a deed might be understood as made up of its disvalue and various natural properties of the deed or its being such that it tends to trigger shame reactions. Similarly, the injustice of an action might be broken down into its disvalue and its being a case in which equally needy people are treated unequally or its being such that it tends to trigger reactions of indignation. Whether or not one thinks that views of this type are correct for some or all thick value properties of objects, there is some reason for thinking that they cannot work for thick value properties of states of affairs. States of affairs have no natural properties. Their only properties are formal: they obtain, they do not obtain, they are possible, probable and so on. Thus if we want to decompose the thick value of a fact into a thin value and something else the latter should not be any property but a relation, for example, an intentional relation. We might say that the shamefulness of a fact consists in its being disvaluable and its tendency to trigger shame. And we might say of the injustice of a situation that it consists in its disvalue and its tendency to trigger indignation. One objection to this suggestion comes from the philosophy of emotions: shame cannot contribute to determining what shamefulness is, for shame is a reaction to (apparent) shamefulness; indignation cannot contribute to determining what injustice is, for indignation is a reaction to (apparent) injustice.

The assumption that axiological functors correspond to properties (have properties as their semantic values) may be rejected. Perhaps axiological functors, like the functor of negation (“It is not the case that …”), have no semantic values. Then if the only bearers of value are facts, axiological nihilism is true. But it is sometimes claimed that, for example, the truth functor (“It is true that …”) expresses a concept and corresponds to a property, the truth property. Perhaps the same is true of axiological functors. Finally, the assumption that the thin property of being disvaluable is always a determinable property may be rejected. Some facts, perhaps the fact that Sam suffers, may be brutally
disvaluable, they are not disvaluable in any particular way. But if the disvalue of some facts is not a determinable property we may think that the disvalue of facts is never a determinable property.

If some types of value are formal properties, this has one interesting consequence for naturalism. Let us say that metaphysical naturalism broadly conceived comprehends (a) axiological nihilism; (b) the view that the valuable is part of the natural; and (c) the view that value reduces to or supervenes on the natural. Then the project of naturalising value turns out to be very unlike the project of naturalising the mind (for example qualia) or colours and much more like the project of naturalising arithmetic, logical grammar or logic.

References


Further reading

VALUES